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BUSINESS

Sundance Natural Food Store
A New Age Enterprise

by Miriam Freifeld Reinhart

When Gavin McComas bought into Sundance in 1983, the store was on the verge of bankruptcy, vendors had not been paid, the rent was overdue, and "they were not doing much business, there was not much food on the shelves," he said.

Now, almost four years later, the store has been transformed. It has a good selection of organic fresh produce and other organic food as any store in the United States. In addition, it offers commercial produce bought as locally as possible, wines, vitamins, natural body care products, an enormous selection of bulk grains, beans, flours and oils, bulk herbs, a well-rounded selection of dairy products, all sorts of packaged and bottled food products without preservatives and other peculiar chemicals, and alternative magazines and cookbooks. In addition, the people working in the store are both helpful and knowledgeable about natural foods.

Gavin has a degree in comparative literature and a personal interest in natural foods (he is a vegetarian), but had no real business experience before buying Sundance. He did sell vitamins and negative ion generators, and worked at the Growers Market and the now defunct Peoples Coop. But "it seemed like a job that needed doing, and it looked like the right livelihood."

With an initial investment of \$40,000 Gavin was able to pay off all the creditors, buy new shelves and display cases, increase the inventory and install new computerized book-keeping and inventory systems. "We started doing some advertising and tried to regain the confidence of the community. Also prices had been too high. With all the good natural food

stores in town, it is a competitive marketplace. We have a very well-informed and intelligent customer base who know their foods and what they cost. It took a long time to regain people's confidence." In February, 1986 the store started to break even and had a profit in 1986 of \$36,600 on sales of \$2.2 million.

Last year's profit went into more remodeling, increased inventory, higher salaries, and health insurance for the 12 full-time employees (there are 35 employees altogether). This year they are projecting a 15 percent increase in sales.

However, "There are no hopes of getting rich. That is a major misconception—that just because we have a lot of volume and are so busy, we are making a lot of money. It is a lot of hard, complex work, with thousands of different products and dozens of different distributors. As the owner I cannot build it up, step back and take the profits. It is a labor of love for all of us—feeling good about the work we are doing, the service we are performing, the people we are working with."

The fresh produce department is the "crowning jewel" of the store. "The produce department is fanatical about putting out only the best, and doing it in a loving, caring way. They put heart, soul and body into that department." Sundance tries as much as possible to buy from local growers and distributors. "I am shocked sometimes to see how much fresher our produce is than in the large supermarkets. Their produce is usually centrally warehoused. Our produce cannot help but be fresher because of the shorter chain of distribution."

There are not many natural food stores that carry as many quality

wines as Sundance. Wine is a personal hobby of Gavin's and there is no way "I can justify it. It would be much smarter in terms of dollar turnover to put in packaged foods," he says. However, it can be justified as a good entree into the store for those people who are interested in quality wines but would not normally go into a natural foods store. "I feel very idealistic about the natural foods business, and I try to keep my messianic idealism in check. By having wine in the store people are exposed to natural foods who would not normally be exposed."

Gavin tries to have as "fair and conscientious a workplace as possible. Whether we are selling auto parts or food, the workplace is where we spend most of our time and we should make it an enjoyable experience and value it as a social unit. We don't have as many social units as we used to have. The family structure is not as strong as it once was. A lot of people look for and hopefully can find a sense of connectedness in the workplace, and a caring, fair work environment."

As the store has grown busier, stress has become a major issue, especially for the cashiers during rush hours. People are encouraged to take breaks in addition to their regular breaks. "I want people to feel free to bail out any time they want." In addition, a speaker was invited to talk about stress, and they have worked with a counselor to improve interpersonal relations and communication, "so that we can appreciate one another and realize that differences can be mutually enhancing."

Now that the store has been remodeled and the day-to-day business is running relatively smoothly, Sundance is doing more outreach. They recently sponsored a conference on food irradiation; they have a bulletin board and a research coordinator who deals with food-related issues; and they have started a newsletter in which they plan to have employee, customer and grower profiles and articles on food and health. They also continue to donate to various charitable, environmental and human rights causes.


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Lunch at Provati's

Last week's "Eat Beat" column in *What's Happening* mentioned that pasta and salad lunches at the new Provati Ristorante, Oakway Mall, average about \$8.

Chef Paula Scharf called us to say that a good lunch can be had for as little as \$5. A small salad served with another dish is only \$1.25, and many full meal salads are from \$3.50-\$5.95. Sorry if we misled folks on that one.

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