

Starflower



Photos by Greg Gawlowski

Starflower Co., a worker-owned and controlled collective, sells and distributes natural foods throughout Oregon, Northern California, Idaho, and Washington. Recently big business started competing against them, buying out major food growers and packaging what Starflower sells in bulk.

Feminist collective is together, growing

By JULIE MORTON
Of the Emerald

About five years ago, a Eugene woman began selling herbs in small packages. She soon gained a partner and together they convinced a southern Oregon creamery to produce a rennetless (vegetarian) cheese. Borrowing money from friends and relatives and renting warehouse space, they began delivering wholesale natural herbs and cheeses.

Today, Starflower Co., a worker-owned and controlled feminist collective, is still wholesaling natural foods — to the tune of about \$2 million a year.

The herb side of the business has since split to become Starflower Botanicals, a separate or-

ganization and the cheese side of the business has added a few new cheeses.

Starflower regularly stocks 32 varieties of cheese, but can special order 29 others. Rennetless Raw Milk Cheddar, Rennetless Raw Milk Goat Cheddar, Emmen-thaler Swiss Gruyere and Havarti are a few of the regulars.

Cheeses are by no means the only products. Organically grown whole grains and flours, tofu, alfalfa, pumpkin and sesame seeds, cereals, oils, nuts, pasta, tamari (soy sauce), yeast and juices — and you guessed it, that's only the beginning.

Starflower buys international products. It sells and distributes in Oregon, Northern California, Idaho, Washington and Hawaii.

It's presently planning a move from its warehouse at 385 Lawrence St. to a newer, larger facility.

In fact, Starflower might seem like any other growing corporation if it weren't for its 20 women doing non-traditional work and its collective base.

"We have a commitment to supply food at the cheapest price we can and still stay in business," says John Damon, a Starflower truck driver. "We have a second commitment to provide as full a means of living to our workers as possible."

The 25 workers own the company. Monetary ownership comes through work. The longer someone works for Starflower, the larger his or her share. Control, however, is on an equal basis.



The company holds weekly meetings to make "collective" decisions. Day-to-day ordering can be done with a vote, according to Jenna Bisgyer, a company purchaser. However, stocking a new product or consenting to a newspaper interview requires discussion and worker approval. Company decisions often involve a juggling act.

"Ideally we buy from small farmers," Bisgyer says. "If we can buy whole crops, we do that."

"But in a business, it's sometimes hard to live up to collective ideals," Damon adds.

Starflower is sympathetic to small-scale local operations. But it has to buy in large quantities and often not only has to buy outside the area, but also from bigger businesses than it would like.

"Wheat-germ is a by-product of

milling wheat and in order to stock it, we have to buy from a large corporation," Bisgyer says.

"If we were a co-op warehouse, we'd be returning more to consumers," says Damon.

"However," he adds, "many co-op's are going out of business."

Business may win some decisions at Starflower, but "collective ideals" hold their own.

Recently Starflower sent a letter to Nestles Co., advising it that Nestles Jarsberg Cheese would no longer be stocked. "For several months we have been aware of the disastrous economic and social effects that the infant formulas you distribute have on third world countries..." the letter said.

The company is careful about who it profits from and where that profit goes. Most of it goes back into the business. Workers take home about \$370 a month, according to Bisgyer. The company pays medical insurance, uniform expenses and child support. Workers are also given food that can't be sold — broken bags of grain and cheese with moldy edges.

And the workers work. "Right now we probably have the most labor-intensive warehouse on the West Coast. We do just about everything by hand," says Bisgyer. Due to wooden floors in Starflower's present warehouse, the workers can't even use forklifts.

Starflower is cautious about its success. The boom in natural foods is luring big business. Big business is buying out major food growers and packaging what Starflower sells in bulk, according to Bisgyer.

"We have a commitment to bulk foods. You can keep food cheaper that way," says Bisgyer. But Starflower is worried health and safety codes are going to be changed to discriminate against ready-to-eat bulk foods. Bisgyer says big business sets the standards — standards like calling ketchup made with honey "imitation ketchup," because everyone knows "real ketchup" is made with sugar.

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