





# Food: Takes 1,000 members to get co-op started, expert says

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their focus is on reinvesting in the co-op, so it can provide products and programming that cater to the needs and wants of each community. They also rely heavily on volunteers who are passionate about sustainability.

Organizers say educating people about what a co-op is may be one of their biggest challenges. That includes tearing down the common misconception that co-ops are exclusive, members-only places, when in fact, they're open to the public.

"I think that for a long time, people thought of co-ops, socially, as something that a bunch of hippies would go to. They didn't see it as a mainstream, viable thing," said Kelley Mathews of Green Tomato Grocery, which hopes to open in Batavia. "Now that there's a good, viable template out there, I think it's catching on, and you're going to see a lot more co-ops popping up."

### Taking root

Stuart Reid is the executive director of the Minnesota-based Food Co-op Initiative, which provides free services and advice to people trying to start a co-op. His group is working with co-op organizers in about 120 communities nationwide.

In recent years, Reid said, there has been a renewed interest in co-ops, which had a first wave in the U.S. in the late 1960s and 1970s. The reasons vary from increasing public awareness of food issues to people's desire to have more control in their community.

There's significant variety among suburbanites who want to start co-ops — from moms worried about what their children are being fed from the mainstream food supply to vegans or people with allergies who have a hard time finding food that fits in their diet.

"Then there's people like me," Brix said. "I care about all those same things, too, but my main driver is sustainability for our species."

About 70 co-ops have opened throughout the U.S. since the Food Co-op Initiative started eight years ago, Reid said. Overall, an estimated 350 co-ops exist nationwide.

In fact, they're a primary source of groceries in the St. Paul-Minneapolis area, with more than a dozen in those cities' limits, Reid said. Many are also popping up in Philadelphia, New England, the Pacific Northwest and San Francisco Bay Area.

While co-op distribution



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**Jerry Nash, co-founder of the Lombard-based Prairie Food Co-op, leads a meeting at the Elmhurst Public Library. Prairie Food is one of at least four suburban co-ops that are in the planning stages.**

generally follows population, Chicago is an exception.

Support has been quickly garnered for The Sugar Beet Co-Op, which plans to open next year in Oak Park. And the Dill Pickle Co-Op in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood has found success since opening in 2009. But the next closest co-op would likely be in Wisconsin or downstate Illinois.

### Off the ground

The capital to open a co-op is raised almost entirely within the community where it is located.

Reid said it typically takes about 1,000 individual owners to get one up and running. Many of them offer private loans in addition to the startup shares they all purchased to become owners.

Most co-ops lease space that already exists. Still, the cost to open a co-op's doors relates almost directly to square footage, with a moderately sized store containing 4,000 to 6,000 square feet of retail costing about \$1.5 million to open.

Reid encourages co-op organizers to pick a space that will meet demand instead of renting a small space just to save money and open earlier.

"Most of the ones who have failed have been very small co-ops. It just doesn't pencil out well," he said.

The time frame to open a co-op depends on how effective organizers are at recruiting the number of members they need to get started, Reid said. Often, it takes between three to five years.

All four suburban co-ops have received only positive feedback and support for their plans, organizers say.

Two of them already have more than 100 owners, and most of them are in the process of raising enough money to conduct a feasibility study, which will help narrow their options for a location.

"I'm kind of amazed. A year ago it just seemed like a dream that could have easily died on the vine," Brix said. "This train has left the station. It's not a matter of if, but when."

Co-op organizers have started hosting meet and greets to inform people about their mission. They also are educating people in unique ways. The Elgin-based Shared Harvest co-op, for example, has been regularly airing films about the modern food supply at community meetings.

"There's a ton of interest," said Jennifer Shroder, vice president of Shared Harvest. "It will be interesting to see how much interest pans out into financial support."

### Unique model

Mathews of Batavia's Green Tomato Grocery said the appeal of co-ops to many is their economic model of providing food and services that "puts people before profit."

"We own the company," she said. "We vote on what its standards are going to be for service and for the products it acquires."

A co-op, she added, gives people on Main Street a way to do something as the economy continues to struggle.

"Every community is looking for a way to keep its wealth and resources in the neighborhood and that's one of the things a co-op does," she said.

That doesn't necessarily make the process easier though, Reid said.

"All co-ops getting started, they face far more competition than they did when they opened in the first wave," he said, adding that co-ops helped build the current organic and natural food market. "You have to be able to fill a need that isn't being met to be successful."

Organizers for suburban co-ops remain convinced there is a unique "need." While co-ops are "a little" like Whole Foods or Trader Joes, Shroder said, they stand out because they help locals — from in-state farmers to workers who will receive above-average pay.

Co-ops are at the forefront of genetically modified organism and organic labeling, and offer information about products, such as the farm it came from, that can't be found in other stores.

"The more educated people become, they become aware of the failings of our system as it stands and how this is really quite the answer to the problem," Shroder said.

Nash said she isn't too concerned about competing with grocery stores that already exist — especially in Lombard, where local grocer Mr. Z's recently shut down.

"I think co-ops are so unique and offer so many things you can't find in a chain store that will really set us apart," she said.

Now, as they start to reach monetary and ownership goals, the organizers for the suburban co-ops will need to think carefully about their next steps.

"In general, I think they're in a very good place for a successful store," Reid said. "So much of it depends on getting the right site. That's the other piece that can be difficult in an urban environment."

#### Local food co-ops

**Green Tomato Grocery**  
Location: Batavia  
Number of owners: 21  
Cost of share: \$100 (must purchase 2 to vote)  
Incorporated: March 2013  
Projected opening: 2016  
Website: www.greentomato.coop  
Contact: (630) 330-1218

**Next gathering:** 7 to 8:15 p.m. on Thursday, May 1, at Batavia city hall, 100 N. Island Ave. There will be a meet and greet reception followed by a co-op progress report and an opportunity to ask questions about the co-op. Organizers will also outline the workgroups that volunteers can join.

#### McHenry Co. Food Co-op

Location: McHenry County  
Number of owners: Shares available April 22  
Cost of share: \$100 (must purchase at least 2)  
Incorporated: March 2014  
Projected opening: 2015  
Website: foodforthought.vpweb.com  
Contact: (815) 315-1541

**Next gathering:** 7 to 9 p.m. on Tuesday, April 22, at Stage Left Cafe, 125 W. Van Buren St. in Woodstock. The group will be unveiling their name and new website. Guests will also have their first chance to buy a share and become an owner at the event. Committee members will be on hand to answer questions and cake will be served.

#### Prairie Food Co-op

Location: Lombard  
Number of owners: 142  
Cost of share: \$200  
Incorporated: February 2013  
Projected opening: 2016  
Website: www.prairiefood.coop  
Contact: (630) 599-1219

**Next gathering:** 6 p.m. Wednesday, May 14, at Vino Cellar Wine Bar, 141 W. St. Charles Road in Lombard. Meet with co-op owners and others who are interested in joining the co-op to learn more about the store, ownership and what you can do to help. Food and drinks will be available for purchase.

#### Shared Harvest

Location: Elgin  
Number of owners: 225  
Cost of share: \$100  
Incorporated: December 2012  
Projected opening: 2015  
Website: www.sharedharvest.coop  
Contact: (847) 873-9995

**Next gathering:** 7 to 9 p.m. on Thursday, April 24, at the Gail Borden Public Library, 270 N. Grove Ave. in Elgin. This is one of five events that are part of the co-op's Elgin Food Feast-ival film series. The film "What's On Your Plate?" will be shown. Young chefs will provide some healthy dishes to try and a panel of teens will discuss the Fox Valley food system.

#### Films recommended by suburban co-op organizers

##### "Food for Change"

Focuses on the food co-op movement in the U.S., including the way they are strengthening communities and helping the local economy.

www.foodforchange.coop

##### "Forks Over Knives"

Examines whether degenerative diseases can be controlled or reversed by diets free of animal-based and processed foods.

www.forksoverknives.com

##### "Seeds of Freedom"

Charts the story of seed, including the impact the industrial agricultural system and genetically modified seeds have on communities around the world.

www.seedsoffreedom.info

##### "What's on Your Plate?"

Follows two 11-year-olds from New York City as they discover where their food comes from and learn more about sustainable food practices, including co-ops.

www.whatsonyourplateproject.org

# Images: Presentation is open to the public

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photographer Fred W. Pfingsten. After nearly a year's research and preparation, approximately 100 developed images will be debuted publicly during a reception at 6:30 p.m. today in the atrium of Conant High School, 700 E. Cougar Trail.

The Rev. Michael D. Pfingsten, Fred Pfingsten's great-grandson, discovered the glass-plate negatives in late 2012 while scanning more recent family photos.

Recognizing that many of the negatives involved St. Peter Lutheran Church in Schaumburg, the Rev. Pfingsten, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Harvard, passed them along to Doug Flett, a teacher at St. Peter School.

Flett told the Schaumburg Township Historical Society and Schaumburg Township District Library of the find, but neither had the resources to develop the approximately 120 glass plates.

Then Flett remembered Linda Patino-Goergen, an art and photography teacher at Conant. She continues to teach film photography, believing it to be a true fine-arts discipline in today's digital age.

After further researching the negatives, Patino-Goergen

and her photography club students used their skills and the school's darkroom to develop them.

Glass-plate photography replaced the use of metal plates in the 19th century and was the first technology that allowed multiple prints from the same shot, Patino-Goergen said. Glass plates were replaced only when the invention of plastic allowed for film.

Patino-Goergen was the perfect person to lead the project in more ways than one.

"I grew up in this area on a farm," she said. "This is personally meaningful to me."

Her mother is a personal friend of fellow Schaumburg native and local historian LaVonne Presley, who helped identify not only specific people in some of the photos, but the particular farming chores, equipment and even card games seen in the images.

The research of the developed images became a cross-curricular activity for Conant students through the involvement of social studies and history teacher Denise Mitchell.

Much help was provided by surviving correspondence between two of the original Pfingsten family members from the turn of the century, Mitchell said.

The historic importance of the images is obvious, she said.

"It's right at the time Schaumburg becomes a city," she said. "This is more of the transitional period from farms to houses."

The education and values of the evolving farming community can be seen through the images and in simple signs — like horses named after figures in the Spanish-American War, Mitchell said.

"This little Midwestern community is so connected to America in general," she said.

As well, the images are unique for their portrayal of day-to-day life in an age when having a portrait taken was a rare and expensive affair for most families. Fred Pfingsten, it appears, was ahead of his time.

The students involved in the project — most of whom graduated last year — found the discoveries eye-opening, Patino-Goergen said.

"I kept trying to tell them that it seems like a long time ago, but it really isn't," she said. "My grandmother was born in the 1890s and lived 100 years."

While the people Fred Pfingsten photographed appear proud of their prize-winning Holstein cow, tall farm silo or new potbelly stove from the Sears Roebuck catalog, the sense of community and common purpose among them is undeniable, Mitchell

said.

In fact, one of the biggest events photographed was Pfingsten's Sept. 3, 1903, nuptials to Emma Rohlwing — a near royal wedding by the standards of the time, joining together two families who've since lent their names to the area's roadways.

Everyone from what today is Schaumburg and Roselle were invited, and giant tents were set up in the farm fields.

Several members of the local community, including longtime residents now living at Friendship Village, have been specially invited to today's presentation of the photos. But the event is open to the public, too, and is expected to appeal to any photography or local history buffs, Patino-Goergen said.



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