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# OZARK NATURAL FOODS

A local cooperative with a lot to celebrate this month – and the public is invited to join in!



Current Location in Fayetteville on North College Ave.

BY KARA ISHAM

On Oct. 4, Ozark Natural Foods in Fayetteville is hosting a 40th anniversary celebration at its location on College Avenue. The public is invited to come enjoy all-day food and family activities. The party will include fresh grilled local meats, kids' activities such as face painting and games, goody bags for shoppers and birthday cake. Many of the original founders will be on-hand for the celebration, and commemorative T-shirts will be sold.



Former Rock Street Location

Ozark Natural Foods is a locally owned consumer cooperative with a mission to provide its owners and the Northwest Arkansas community with natural and organic products that encourage healthy living and a sustainable planet. General manager Alysen Land said it is the genuine and committed relationships forged between the co-op and its owners and shoppers that have helped Ozark Natural Foods reach the 40th anniversary milestone.

"At Ozark Natural Foods, our owners and our shoppers are friends and neighbors," Land said. "For many of the owners, the co-op is more than a store where they buy their food; it is the community hub where they can socially interact with one another." The store carries locally grown produce, natural baby products, gluten-free and vegan dietary choices, grass-finished beef, fair-trade coffee, organic cotton clothing, sustainably produced gifts from around the world, natural health and beauty supplies and kitchenware for healthy cooking. The store also boasts the largest bulk food department in Arkansas, as well as a full-service deli and bakery that serves freshly prepared meals and caters.

The co-op vigorously stands behind its principle of being 100 percent certified organic and does not carry genetically modified foods in the store. Whenever possible, the store stocks locally grown produce. The co-op's marketing director, Alexa McGriff, said every product in the store is evaluated from a health perspective, with the co-op's owners dictating what products are sold. She said employees strive to make the customers feel as comfortable as possible during their shopping experience. Employees are encouraged to know as much as possible about all the products so they can answer questions. And shoppers are also encouraged to request products and give feedback on how to improve the store.

"It's all about eating healthier, because that will help [the customers] lead better lives," McGriff said. "For us, it's not a trend. It's our life."



Former Dickson Street Location

She said the employees all believe in the mission of the co-op. Many have worked in the store for years, with several being part of the team for 10 or more years. "It's definitely a place where people come and want to stay, believing in the principals."

Ozark Natural Foods began in October 1971 when 10 people met at a local house to discuss the idea of starting a member-run foods co-op. After a second meeting, the first bulk food order amounted to about \$200 and was placed by 25 dues-paying members. In the early days, food was stored in the enclosed back porch of a member. Gradually, the number of families involved and products ordered began to grow, so much so that an actual store was needed. Ozark Natural Foods

had locations on West Street, Rock Street and Dickson Street before moving to its current location at 1554 North College Ave. in November 2000. After a few shaky years financially, the co-op began to experience its largest growth ever.

Serving as Northwest Arkansas' only natural foods co-op, Ozark Natural Foods now has more than 8,200 owners and is a \$10 million a year business. For a commitment of \$20 a year for seven years, owners are entitled to extra discounts and voting rights for store by-laws and board members. Owners also receive patronage refund checks at the end of the year.

Land believes that Ozark Natural Foods' success proves that the co-op way works well, and that communities do not have to depend on corporate America. "A community can come together, neighbors can step forward, and we can take care of ourselves. When a community has direct ownership in the businesses they use, they hold those businesses to a higher standard," Land said. "At Ozark Natural Foods, we are driven not by a desire for riches, but a desire to improve the health and well-being of our community."

Looking to the future, Ozark Natural Foods personnel want to continue the focus on providing healthy, local food to Northwest Arkansas. McGriff said the group also wants to educate the community on the cooperative business model and work with the local school system more closely on getting healthy food options into the schools.



Staff Members at Dickson Street Location

Land said, with obesity and diabetes levels still on the rise, the co-op has barely begun to improve the health of our community. "There are thousands of families, right here in Northwest Arkansas that need to redefine the relationship they have with their food. At Ozark Natural Foods, that is what we do," Land said. "We have made such a positive impact in our first 40 years, I am excited about what the next 40 years will bring." ■



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