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Eating Well

In Oregon, Thinking Local

By MARIAN BURROS

SIX years ago "organic" was the next big thing in grocery shopping, but the term has begun to lose its luster. It has been co-opted by agribusiness, which has succeeded in watering down the restrictions of the definition. Today "local" and "sustainable" are the new culinary buzzwords.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the six New Seasons markets in and around Portland, Ore. At New Seasons, "homegrown" is not only the coin of the realm, it's the heavily promoted mantra.

Considering how eating has changed over the years, stores like New Seasons were almost inevitable. First came the tiny natural food stores and the local farmers' markets selling organically grown food. They marked the beginning of an interest in artisanal foods and in the desire for quality and a sustainable environment. Restaurants followed, and now schools and colleges have joined the movement as a way to get their students to eat more healthfully while supporting local farmers and food processors.

"I think there is a gathering sense that organic and local are not the same," said Michael Pollan, the author of a forthcoming book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," and a frequent contributor to The New York Times Magazine. "Buying national organic products does very little for the local economy. Local food chains are very, very important. Organic has important values having to do with pesticides and how land is treated, but now that it is industrialized, buying organic doesn't necessarily support living in a place that still has farmers consuming less energy."

He added: "Moving organic food across the country uses just as much energy as conventional. I think this is becoming more important."

Kristen Crittenden, a technical writer for Cascade Microtech, is the quintessential New Seasons shopper. "It's nice to know where our food is coming from because you know how it was raised," she said. "It makes you feel good about supporting your local farmer and your local fishing industry."

These services come at a price. "I feel at times it's a little more expensive than it has to be," said Justin Miller, a mediator, public radio fund-raiser and New Seasons customer.

Brian Rohter, chief executive of New Seasons and one of its three founders, says the company conducts monthly surveys and has found that its pricing does not vary more than 3 percent either way when compared to national chains, including Whole Foods.

The company's definition of homegrown is food grown, caught or processed in its region, the northwest, including Northern California. Locally grown items carry yellow shelf tags. Of the 30,000 items on each store's shelves, 8,142, or 27 percent, have yellow tags. The company, which was founded in 2000, sells conventional items like Oreos and Velveeta, but about 75 percent of its inventory is either natural or organic.

All produce and meats carry country-of-origin labeling. Because the milk is local, none of it is ultrapasteurized.

Staff members make frequent visits to farms, ranches, dairies and farmers' markets, looking for new products. And farmers who sell to the chain can deliver directly to the stores without going through a central distribution warehouse.

The opportunity to sell locally has kept some area ranchers from going out of business in Oregon and nearby states. Doc and Connie Hatfield, who founded the Country Natural Beef cooperative in 1986, said the co-op now has 70 ranchers, who raise beef on a vegetarian diet free of hormones, antibiotics and genetically modified feed.

"Nineteen years ago we were going broke," Mr. Hatfield said. "Now we are paying income taxes."

Mr. Hatfield was just as pleased about an unexpected byproduct of selling locally: the bond forged between rural and urban residents.

"Most of the ranchers are rural, religious, conservative Republicans," Mr. Hatfield said. "And most of the customers are urban, secular, liberal Democrats. When it comes to healthy land, healthy food, healthy people and healthy diets, those tags mean nothing. Urbanites are just as concerned about open spaces and healthy rural communities as people who live there. When ranchers get to the city, they realize rural areas don't have a corner on values. I think that's what we are most excited about."

Locally raised meat is one of the things Mr. Miller said he liked best about New Seasons.

"I'm an omnivore, and the meat comes from nearby," he said. "Unlike a conventional market, where everything is packaged in plastic, this is more like an old-fashioned butcher, so I can talk to the guy and see what he thinks about the meat."

If there is any doubt about the impact purchasing locally has on nearby farms, the United States Department of Agriculture's agriculture census tells the story. In Oregon the number of farms has risen, from 26,753 in 1974 to 40,033 in 2002, the latest year for which figures are available.

The emphasis on local is not the only thing that distinguishes New Seasons from other chains. Its employees are given "get out of jail free" cards with the instructions to do anything a customer wants. Mr. Rohter said one young clerk opened 81 jars of mustard for a customer to taste. Then he went to his supervisor, handed the card to him and explained what happened.

Printed on the back of the card:

"Dear Supervisor: The holder of this card was, in their best judgment, doing whatever was necessary to make a happy customer. If you think they may have gone overboard, please take the following steps: 1. Thank them for giving great customer service. 2. Listen to the story about the events. 3. Offer feedback on how they might do it differently next time. 4. Thank them for giving great customer service."

"We never reprimand someone for helping a customer," Mr. Rohter said.

Phil Lempert, who identifies supermarket and consumer trends as the editor of Supermarketguru.com, praised the company.

"The New Seasons model is a brilliant concept because it brings back the days of food co-ops, the feeling of being closer to nature, to the food supply, to the neighborhood," he said. "What they are saying is, we are your store and we want to build a relationship with you. That lack of relationship has been the downfall of supermarkets.

"National and seminational chains are yesterday's news. There is no question people are willing to spend more on local just as they are on organic."

New Seasons's decisions about what it will and will not sell are based on a balance of its owners' standards and what its shoppers want. It does not sell cigarettes or farmed salmon, because, Mr. Rohter said, "some things are so obviously wrong."

Rather than ban certain endangered fish from their counters, the stores color-code them according to their sustainability: red means avoid. When I visited, the only fish with a red label was local red snapper. In an effort to persuade customers to make more sustainable choices, the company offers comparative fish tastings.

"We aren't trying to guilt-trip anyone," Mr. Rohter said. "We aren't the food police."

But the chain has stopped selling the Rockstar energy drink, and not because it is made with caffeine, sugar and corn syrup. Rockstar's chief executive is Russell Goldencloud Weiner, who developed the company with the help of his mother and his father, Michael Savage, the far-right talk radio host. Mr. Rohter said he made the decision because he vehemently opposes Mr. Savage's views. "We have a few products we choose to make a stand on to help influence the direction of our community," he said. Mr. Savage did not respond to a message left at his workplace and could not be reached at home.

Can people in other cities expect their own versions of New Seasons? Yes, Mr. Rohter said, but they will not be run by him or his company. "We give advice all the time," he said.

He said he and his partners, who have three more stores on the way, do not plan to open any beyond Portland's suburbs.

"I believe it would fundamentally change the way we do business," he said.