

KEEP OUR PRODUCE FRESH, LOCAL & PERSONAL!



Infinity Foods, based in Brighton, offers a peek into the world of cooperatives. This much loved shop, cafe & bakery helps local businesses thrive, strengthens community bonds and has a whole host of happy workers within its walls!

Infinity Foods has been a workers' co-operative since 1979. Today our workforce is close to 100, having evolved from a small university stall to becoming the Southeast's leading wholefoods company.

what is a workers' co-operative?

Simply defined, it is a business both owned and run democratically by its workers, with no outside shareholders or owners. This creates a more motivated and unified workforce where everyone feels involved in the successful running of the business. Each member has a vote and can give input via regular member meetings. Infinity is fully democratic and has no top-down management system.

The first recorded cooperatives were in the 18th century, such as the Fenwick Weavers, a consumer cooperative owned by its customers for their mutual benefit. The Rochdale Equitable Pioneers were set up in 1844 to provide local people with pure and affordable food. This group defined the key aspects of how cooperatives work and from this grew the modern movement. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) outlines the current cooperative principles which include; voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, education, training & information and concern for community.

Our co-op members share a set of values. Self responsibility is high on our priorities – all members are expected to self-manage, as well as work together cooperatively. This requires a great deal of initiative, hard work, and trust. Other values include democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. We gauge the success of the business not only in terms of profit, but also through environmental and social responsibility, plus the level of active involvement within our local community.

supporting the community

Infinity Foods is committed to the local community on many levels. We are ideally placed to respond to specific customer demands, such as specialized diets. Our close work with local farmers, growers

and producers supports the local economy and helps customers (and us!) to reduce our carbon footprint. We strive to keep packaging to a minimum for our (all organic!) fruit and veg.

A proportion of the annual shop profit is donated to a variety of charities supporting both environmental and social causes. These are selected by member votes. Last year we supported Stopover and Sussex Beacon amongst others. Also, in store we have a 'tasting table', which is regularly used by local charities, such as Sussex Wildlife Trust and Sussex Pet Rescue, to raise awareness and funds. The more we engage with other worthwhile causes, the greater our connection with the world beyond our four walls. In every aspect of our day to day running, we try to look at the bigger picture. As a local business, we decided to divert advertising funds towards sponsoring and supporting community projects. Recently, we donated funds to some local primary schools' for fruit & vegetable growing projects and we also helped a local transition group purchase fruit trees for a community allotment. And, each year we sponsor the Brighton Seedy Sunday, the country's first community seed swap!

waste nothing and trade fairly

Back in the shop, we're always keeping busy. Organic bread is baked daily on site by our craftsman bakers. The smell is divine! When we have surplus bread in the shop, it is donated to a local homeless shelter. Nothing is wasted. Infinity Foods also has a wholesale arm which has international community reach through developing and encouraging fairtrade links. In a wider sense, fair trade defines all that we do here at Infinity. We strongly believe in fair and honest trading. We will continue to support the community and each other as we grow. These principles are stamped firmly in our every endeavour!



Rural Retailing

Going beyond the usual farm produce, **Chrissie Hammond** looks at how the rural regions step forward to also sell their crafts and wares.



A country lass, born and bred, I feel it is my duty to reveal some of the secrets of rural retailing. From flowers to furniture, I am continually amazed at the superb bounty which lies at my doorstep. Rural retailing, as I like to call it, is definitely on the up. Thanks in part to the credit crunch, more and more budding entrepreneurs are setting up new stalls. Why not make a day of it, scouring the countryside to do your shopping? It's great for the whole family, with honesty boxes in abundance and hospitality abound.

all you could wish for

Living on the borders of three counties, I am constantly heartened by the fullness of locally available produce and I'm not talking of the supermarkets or big brand outlets. I am referring to the immense number of entrepreneurs who set up daily outside their front doors selling their wares. Within a short distance and throughout the year, I can shop for almost anything ranging from asparagus to zucchinis. We are surrounded by fresh fowl for sale such as chicken, pheasant, pigeon, and duck (sorry Donald!) In fact, a mountain of mouth watering goodies to suit all purses can be found. Or perhaps your preferred dish is a little more scaled down? What about a tantalising trout to tickle your fancy?

Of course it's not all meat, fish, fruit and fauna; you can even buy wool, locally and lovingly spun and, until recently, keeping a lamb or alpaca warm. If you prefer a different, more traditional, mode of keeping warm you can heat your abode with sustainably coppiced logs from just down the track. You could buy all your food locally if you wanted, with presents for the family and special occasions on top, and all whilst supporting the energetic enthusiasts who truly believe in and have a spiritual connection with their wares.

rural ranger

Bill Saunders recently spoke of this spiritual connection during an interview. It would be fair to say that Bill, a 'rural ranger' eighty seven years man and boy, is a true authority on the subject with over sixty years experience, growing and selling his prize winning chrysanthemums. "I used to enter the village competitions every year and sell my flowers throughout the season," remembers Bill. He won many an award for his efforts and it's not hard to see why. His bouquets are glorious, and will bring cheer to anywhere they bless with their beauty.

I asked Bill if he felt such stalls and honesty boxes were a service to the community and had he noticed a resurgence of people selling their goods in recent years? "Yes, most definitely" he replied, "it seems a lot more passers by are using these services as they tap into the growing market of providers along our leafy rural lanes."

a new era

Things are changing, as Bill mentioned, and the next generation of rural retailers are also conscious of bartering and even giving things away free as recycling becomes more and more important to us all. Recently, I stopped my old jalopy outside a house where a sign read 'free for the taking'... I couldn't believe my luck; a family member was moving and needed furniture, and quite fortuitously there stood a three piece suite, slightly battered granted, but I'd soon have it looking like new. It's all about giving and getting back.

Less waste, more community spirit, and a deeper understanding of what matters to the environment. All this in times when we are constantly hearing terms like 'credit crunch' and 'cut backs.' Perhaps there are lessons to be learnt from all this rural retailing? Why not try a more sedate approach to shopping? Treat the family to an alternative day out, supporting organic and local produce from your local countryside. From rural farms to the latest entrepreneur setting up outside Rose Cottage just up the lane, there are goods galore! And remember you are helping to revitalise an age old enterprise.

So next time you grab your shopping bag, tap into the true spirit of village life and try a spot of rural retailing.

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Food with a face

Reconnecting producers with consumers. **Will Bolton** discovers a rich and vibrant range of local growing initiatives.

Does receiving interest on a capital investment with a payment in cheese, wine or meat sound like a hair-brained idea? Perhaps you are someone itching to grow your own fruit and vegetables but do not have the space or time to do so. Either way, help is at hand. Over the past few years there has been a burgeoning interest by the British public wanting to grow or receive food from local sources. With the demand for allotment places far exceeding the number of allotments, producers and consumers are coming up with more inventive ways of growing and sourcing local food.

But why the sudden shift away from the convenience of buying food from your local supermarket? For some, it has to do with connecting with nature; for others it is a response to the concern over food miles and excess packaging. Certainly a raised awareness of Peak Oil and food sovereignty and the growing Transition Town movement have helped support these initiatives. Either way, the options available to both producers and consumers has never been so rich and vibrant. The idea of reconnecting producers with consumers emerged in the 1970s. In Japan, they developed a system called 'teikei' or 'food with a farmer's face on it' in response to the globalisation of the agricultural industry. Teikei relies on establishing an alternative distribution system whereby producers and consumers talk to get a deeper understanding of the part each other plays and they both provide labour and capital to support their own delivery system.

diversification

Although Farmers Markets and Veg Box Schemes have been around for some time, the diversification of food sourcing options, means there are now numerous alternatives available. Urban or rural, there is something for everyone. Inspired by the work of Lou Brown from Transition Towns Totnes in 2006, Gardenshare is an idea that matches people who have gardens but who do not fully utilise the space, with people who do not have the space but want to grow their own fruit and vegetables. Gardenshares are taking off in many towns across the UK and details of how to set up your own can be found on the Transition Town Totnes website (totnes.transitionnetwork.org/gardenshare). A scheme started by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Channel 4 called Landshare promises to expand this concept by taking to a national level, via an online website, the idea of community collaboration (landshare.channel4.com). Landowners, growers or helpers can register their interest in Landshare on the website and subsequently connect with people in their area who can provide what they are after.

One leap up from Gardenshare and Landshare is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), a project supported by the Soil Association (www.soilassociation.org). Similar in many ways to the Japanese concept of 'Teikei', CSAs are considered a longer term financial investment where the risks are shared between

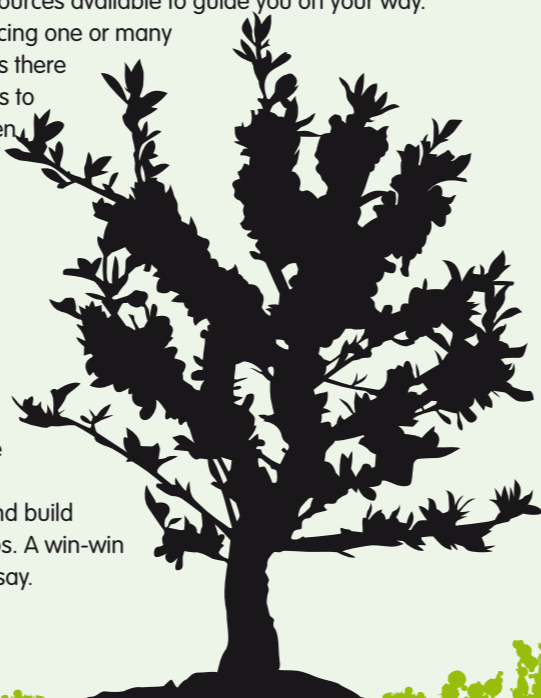
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the producer and the consumer. This partnership between farmers and the local community provides mutual benefits and reconnects people to the land where food is grown.

keeping it local

Futurefarms (www.futurefarms.org.uk) in Hampshire has been operating since 2004 and started in response to local concern over food miles. The co-operative's purpose is to grow food within the parish of Martin in Hampshire, for sale to the people who live there on a not-for-profit basis. By contrast, Wester Lawrenceton Farm in Forres, Scotland, manage an Ayrshire dairy herd. Members lend money against the value of the herd and are paid interest at a set rate in their tasty cheese. What goes well with cheese, if not wine? Sedlescombe Organic Vineyard in East Sussex runs a rent-a-vine scheme whereby members receive hefty discounts of the organic wines grown at the vineyard and can even help out with the harvest. Some meat to accompany your wine? Transition Matlock in Derbyshire are working with a local organic farm to establish a lamb CSA. In this initiative, members will learn all aspects of rearing sheep, from helping with lambing, hoof clipping and shearing as well as the management of grassland for sheep and in return receive a share of the meat produced.

The number and variety of CSA initiatives is growing month on month. Find a local veg box, help in the running of a farm or farm shop, sponsor an apple tree, rent a plot of land to grow vegetables, invest in farming 'shares' and receive interest in the form of cheese, milk, eggs or meat, there is something for everyone. But if an inspired idea takes hold that you want to develop, there are resources available to guide you on your way. Food aside, by embracing one or many of these local initiatives there are additional bonuses to consider. One of the ten principles of 'teikei' is the 'deepening of friendly relationships'. Working outdoors with local producers and members of your community will not only improve your health and peace of mind, but also provide opportunities to meet like-minded people and build unexpected friendships. A win-win situation some might say.



Re-connect to your food, the land and your local community

Find out how at www.soilassociation.org/csa.aspx

Information • Advice • Support • Website • Newsletters
Case Studies • Action Manual • Training • Networking

