

Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY
Nelson, B.C. Canada

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Title: Co-operatives - Alternatives to Industrial Food: Part I - Retail and Distribution

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Jon Steinman: Welcome to this week's Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly one-hour exploration of how our food choices impact ourselves, our communities and the planet. The program is produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson British Columbia. My name's Jon Steinman and I'll be your host for the next hour.

I consider today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner to be rather special. The shock that can often accompany listening to a broadcast of this program can, understandably, leave some listeners feeling rather at a loss given the alternatives to the shocking stories behind our food can be rather difficult to find, if not non-existent. But just as, and if not *more* important, exposing the *alternatives* to industrial agriculture, industrial processing, industrial distribution and industrial retailing, is the core of what this program Deconstructing Dinner is all about. It's not enough for Canadians to be immersed in a sea of news media that only presents political drama, murder mysteries, imperial military action, and well, anything that instills fear. When our food system is seemingly spiraling out of the control of Canadian people, Canadian media needs now, more than ever, to provide Canadians with alternatives to the sustenance of our daily lives – our food.

The commercial media sector is fundamentally structured upon maximizing profits, so the quality of such programming is understandably shoddy, to say the least. Canada's beloved CBC, created as an alternative to such commercial interests, is, also, criticized by many to be suffering from an identity crisis. Just this month, Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, a well-established Canadian broadcasting watchdog group went public by asking itself if the CBC has lost its way, and responding to that, they indicate and I quote, "You bet it has. From dumbed-down news reporting to Hollywood imports to decimated local programming – this is not the CBC that our country so badly expects right now."

And here introduces today's topic and why today's broadcast is so special. This radio station, Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY, is, a co-operative, an alternative model of ownership and operation that challenges the dominant models through which commercial radio and the CBC is structured. Needless to say, it's exciting that on today's broadcast produced at a *co-operative radio station*; we will explore the co-operative model, and how such a model is being used to create more socially and environmentally responsible *food systems* across Canada.

On the show today we will visit with two co-operatives in British Columbia, one of which has been in operation for over 30 years, with the other having just been incorporated within the past year. The first co-operative to explore on today's broadcast will be the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative – a grocery retailer here in Nelson. And we will visit with Food Roots, a newly-established distributors co-operative operating in Victoria. This will mark part I of a series titled Co-operatives – Alternatives to Industrial Food.

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So how does a co-operative differ from a traditional business? Well most importantly, a co-operative is owned and democratically controlled by the people who use their services. A co-op is operated for the benefit of members and members have a say in decisions affecting the co-op. In the case of food, and right off the bat such a premise directly challenges many of the issues that Deconstructing Dinner explores on a weekly basis. For one, the dominant food system consists of businesses owned and controlled by a handful of investors and/or shareholders. These businesses are *not* democratically controlled by customers, and as a result, Canadians have little to no say in decisions that affect the food ending up on our dinner plates.

At the core of any co-operative is a set of 7 principles that help ensure the model retains the values that make co-operatives so important. And here are those 7 principles:

1. Open and voluntary membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for the community

The province of British Columbia has some of the most innovative cooperatives in the country, and the two co-operatives featured on today's broadcast are both located within the province. Over the course of this show and future shows on this topic, we will present these Canadian co-operative examples in such a way as to trace the dominant food chain, but in reverse. And so, in just a moment we will first explore the co-operative model as an alternative to *grocery retailing* in Canada. Moving *backwards*, we will then arrive at another co-op that is challenging the industrial food distribution system. And then, launching part II of this series in the next few weeks, we will move our way right to the source of our food, when we will take a look at a land co-operative just recently formed outside the British Columbia community of 100-mile House.

A reminder to listeners that today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner will be archived on our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner. More information on today's topic can also be found there.

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The pitfalls of the conventional Canadian grocery store are endless, and a look back at previous broadcasts of Deconstructing Dinner can easily confirm this. So, what alternatives exist that can allow Canadian communities to reclaim control of the food that is available to us? Well in 1975, a group of individuals and families created what is now, the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative, more commonly referred to in Nelson, British Columbia, as simply, the co-op. The store is one of only a handful of co-operative grocery stores in the country that promote more socially and environmentally responsible food choices. On the other hand there are, south of the border in the United States, countless examples of such stores. The Kootenay Country Store is, safe to say, the most successful co-operative grocery store in Canada, and its rapid growth is a testament to such success.

In just a short while we will hear the voices of some of the staff at the store, but first, we will hear from Abra Brynne, a long-time member of the Co-op since 1991, a former member of the staff, and currently, the president of the Co-op's board of directors. Abra was a guest on Deconstructing Dinner for our inaugural broadcast back in January 2006, and I invited her once again into our studios to tell us about this alternative model to grocery retailing in Canada. Our conversation began with how a co-op grocery store can benefit its members.

Abra Brynne: I have to admit that perhaps I'm a bit too much of a radical in my perspective around this but for me it's like supporting organic food. It's not about the individual benefit it's about the global benefit. The fact that by supporting a sustainable method of agriculture we're ensuring that food can continue to be produced on this poor planet we're abusing so much. And with a co-op for me it's about supporting a different business model that is about community ownership and community service because fundamentally co-ops come together when a group of people say we would like to work together collaboratively to meet our needs. And in this instance it was a group of people that wanted to something different around food.

So, for me the fundamental benefit of supporting the co-op is, personally for me it's about not supporting the other big business's that really foster an industrial food system on a global scale that I think is very unhealthy. So, even though some of the products might be the same between what Overwaitea and Safeway are now offering, which of course they didn't 10 years ago but they are now because it's popular amongst the consumers. It's still about ultimately a different business vision, a different business model, it's about accountability to the members not the shareholders, it's about values that aren't just economic, it's about community and sustainability and environmental justice not just the bottom line for your dang quarterly report.

Jon Steinman: One of the seven principles of a co-operative is democratic member control, and Abra explains how members at the Kootenay Country store cooperative exert such control.

Abra Brynne: At this point our co-op requires a one time membership fee of fifty dollars and you can pay it in five dollar chunks over a period of time and that is basically sort of the capital base to fund the co-op. The co-op is now going on 32 years old so of course those membership shares aren't quite so critical in perpetuating the co-op but when a co-op comes together those membership shares, whatever they might be, generally are really critical in terms of acquiring whatever assets they need in order to provide the services or goods that they came together around.

The Board of Directors of which I'm a member are elected by the members we stand for two year terms and anyone who is a paid up member of the co-op can stand for election on the board and then of course we as the board are accountable to the members. So we make efforts to communicate with them on a monthly basis through the news letter and encourage people to contact us by phone or e-mail or in person when we have a directors day and we spend time in the store talking to customers to let us know what their thoughts and priorities are if they have any issues or is they're happy with the co-op.

Jon Steinman: Further to our conversation Abra Brynne also added that there are well over 7,000 members of the co-operative, which in a community of 10,000 people is rather significant, but she did add that there are many members who live well outside the Nelson area and may shop at the Co-op perhaps once every year. But nevertheless, 85% of all sales at the Co-op are made to members, which, when compared to statistics of similar stores in the United States, far exceeds the average. Abra also added that the \$50 member share is returnable at any time a member wishes to cancel their membership.

Now what is certainly one of the most attractive benefits of being a member of a co-operative grocery store is that members share in the profits. And while profit-sharing differs among individual co-ops, the Kootenay Country Store co-operative in its previous year, returned about three quarters of a million dollars *back* to its members. And Abra Brynne explains some of the ways in which profits are returned to members.

Abra Brynne: Once a month there's a day in which every member can choose a day in which to do a member discount day and you get 10% off. Members also get, if they make a purchase over \$300, then they get 15% off. Every year when the co-op makes a profit the membership decides what they're going to do with it. The board makes a recommendation to the members who participate in the AGM and generally they say a set percentage of our profit goes straight back to the members. Some of that money also goes to the staff as a profit share initiative and that is about trying to ensure that our staff are adequately compensated so they too can afford to buy the goods and the yummy food that we have for sale at the co-op

Jon Steinman: Yet another important principle behind the functioning of a co-operative is Education, Training and Information. Educating the community and staff about food and food issues is central to the store's role within the community.

Abra Brynne: The thing that I like about the co-op is that for me it has always been a business with a soul in a world of business that where few of them seem to have that anymore. So, the education that is done is because it's part of ultimately what a co-operative stands for it's because they feel that's its in need and a service they can offer to the members more than it is about pounding the pavement to get more members. To me that make it more genuine and I just like that it comes from that place. There's a lot of education that happens a lot of it is just one on one with consumers when they're in the store. Because a lot of people end up coming to a place that has alternative healthy and or organic foods when they have some sort of major event in their life which generally is a health crisis or a new baby and then they start to revisit the values that they have traditionally brought to their food choices and reconsider that maybe there's some others they need to prioritize. So, there's a lot of that one on one education that happens within the store. I know when I was still on staff I remember going to a seniors event and demonstrating about three different tofu dishes from desserts to savories to convince people that tofu was actually something edible in perhaps a group of people who wouldn't have necessarily considered eating it previously. There's also a lot of effort put into educating people about the nutritional benefits of eating healthier and how it can impact their day to day health and perhaps how much they have to participate in our sickness care system that we have.

Jon Steinman: And this is Deconstructing Dinner where we are currently listening to clips from my conversation with Abra Brynne, the president of the board of the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative – a member owned grocery store located in Nelson, British Columbia. And to iron out any confusion, this radio station Kootenay Co-op Radio, is not affiliated with the store.

In that last clip Abra described some of the methods used to educate customers; there is also a very conscious effort to educate the staff. At a recent meeting and event held for all staff at the store, the topic of food sovereignty and food security provided the backbone for the meeting. For any new listeners of Deconstructing Dinner, food sovereignty is the human right of all peoples and nations to grow food in ways that are culturally, ecologically and economically appropriate for them. Food security on the other hand is achieved when a community at all times has access to nutritious, safe, personally acceptable and culturally appropriate foods, produced in ways that are environmentally sound and socially just. Needless to say, such a staff meeting would arguably *never* exist at any other Canadian grocery store. And so I sat down with Jocelyn Carver, the Human Resources Director at the store and one of the organizers of this very unique staff meeting.

Jocelyn Carver: So, the staff meeting is a four-hour staff meeting, we have just over fifty staff. There were a few different parts to it the first was we started with a key note speech by Abra Brynne who is the local foodshed animator and the president of our board. And a former staff person. She addressed the idea of food sovereignty and food security and then we followed that with a brain storm about food sovereignty and food security and what we can do as individuals, as members of a cooperative, as staff people in a food cooperative and the co-op as a whole. So, we brain stormed we did that for about twenty

minutes and then we came together and shared those ideas and then we had the pleasure of meeting seven local suppliers, some farmers, some food processors, some bakers and that was really wonderful it was all a fantastic day but to really connect the people that supply the food to the people who promote the food and sell it to the community was really special. Then we had a wonderful meal it was a real feast from beginning to end it was completely locally supplied or processed so the people who made the soups and salads and the butter and the honey and the juice was all local, as in BC, as close as we could get it.

The thing I love about doing anything with co-op staff is that ideas start to realize themselves with almost a scary suddenness you know almost as soon as the meeting was finished projects started popping up around the co-op. So we're now helping to plan an event that will come in may that will bring co-ops together to really try and strengthen organizations that have a triple bottom line, social, environmental and financial and that really came out of the energy for organizing and bringing people together that in part happened at that staff meeting. We have earth day in April basically we're turning it into earth month and the focus is entirely going to be local which came from a number of staff suggestions and our marketing coordinator. So we'll really further a lot of things that we learned and the connections that we made at that staff meeting will go out to the whole membership and I know our buyer is... really it just has really energized her because I think a lot of people realize the amount of work that the co-op puts in to the cheques and balance system of our buying guidelines, what we'll take and why and when, it gives her energy to have that feedback and have people know what she's doing all the time. So, on an individual level, on an organizational level, on a cooperative level it feels like... and that's just a smattering that's just a tiny you know slice of the kind of energy that was created from that meeting, so, I don't have concerns that nothing will come of it my concern is that we'll burn ourselves out with the ideas that have come out from that and actualizing them.

Jon Steinman: And that was Jocelyn Carver – the Human Resources Director at the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative.

After becoming aware of such a unique staff meeting that would be a rare if not non-existent occurrence at a conventional grocery store, I was inclined to also speak to the staff at the Kootenay Co-op and hear how working in a co-operative grocery may differ from working in a conventional one. I took the time to visit the store and sit down with five staff members and they shared their thoughts with me.

Staff Members: “Staff have the chance I feel to give input on the policies so yeah I really feel a lot more like I'm part of making the co-op run rather than just coming in and working and doing what I'm told whereas if I don't like what I'm being told I have an opportunity to change that and to decide what I want the co-op to be like.”

“So what I like about working here, that I might not find if I was working in a conventional grocery store, is how I feel about what this place does and what I'm doing here. I like the ideals of profits being shared with the members of the co-op. I like the

idea that here its not like the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer but in fact if there is a profit at the end of the day its shared back to the members of the co-op as dividends.”

“Working at the co-op means giving back to the community and the environment. I’m working in an environment that supports the causes that I believe in and this is a reward that I could not get from working at a conventional grocery store.”

“I think we’re quite lucky because we’re still a fairly small store there’s sixty people who work here and we’re able to relate a lot more to the people that provide food to us which is I think the main important thing was seeing the products that they made with their own hands displayed in a such a way that you know you could really see that the labour and hard work was coming through the food and their words when they spoke, there’s passion there and that brings it home in terms of what they do and why they do it.”

“It’s not totally profit driven even though it is a for-profit business the staff are better paid and we have better benefits than other places that’s a big one and that probably mostly because If there was just one owner of the co-op they’d probably want all the money for themselves.”

“It’s really valuable to me and I’ve never felt that before in any other job is really feeling like having ownership of it.”

“I worked in an organic cooperative now for almost a year and in the past when I was in college I worked for four years in a conventional supermarket and I would say really the main things that I find that are different than a cooperative are the community’s really included and that there’s a whole relationship with its suppliers and its community that’s very special. And I think over the last 30 plus years that the co-op has been around that relationship’s been cultivated to a point where there’s really strong bonds with the suppliers the people that shop there and it makes you feel like a part of something special. And I think from that point of view that’s what really separates the co-op from a normal super market.”

“It supports the ethics and the integrity that the organic movement’s supposed to be about.”

“All of those things are thing that I can feel good about when I go to work or when I come home at the end of the day.”

Jon Steinman: And that was a selection of clips compiled during a visit with the staff of the Kootenay Country Store Cooperative in Nelson, British Columbia. The voices you just heard were those of Joy Farley, Anneka Rosch, Niels Petersen, Alana McConachy and Ben Morris.

As we continue today’s exploration of this alternative model to the dominant conventional Canadian grocery store, we also discover the social and environmental

responsibility that the Kootenay Co-op Store embraces on a daily basis. Given the support for local farming and local food is a critical step for Canadians to try and minimize our impact on climate change, the Kootenay Co-op creates close relationships with local farmers to ensure they are all able to make a living farming. And here we come back to Abra Brynne, the president of the store's board of directors.

Abra Brynne: I think probably the most important thing that the co-op does and I know that on behalf of the co-op while I was on staff I went to the farm meetings to learn their stories and needs and that connection and receptivity to what the farmers experiences is still very strong and particularly of course in the produce department. And so understanding that you can't turn around an order of a hundred bunches of parsley in 24 hours is an important thing for the retailer to understand because so many of them are used to just picking up the phone and ordering them and its already been en route from Mexico or wherever for however long so that communication the two way dialogue from the co-op to the farmers and from the farmers back to the co-op. It's also about educating the farmers that the customers as much as we might morally and ethically and environmentally support less than esthetically pleasing foods if the customers won't buy it than the co-op can only support it to a degree and a good consistency in packaging and appearance and quality is simply a necessity, having so many people coming in buying food.

The co-op is also a real pioneer in organizing an annual grower meeting, which is now being taken up by other organizations in which they understand what their grower needs are, what their supply need are for the full range of crops. And even broken down so there's things like juicing carrots and table carrots and bunching carrots and carrots in 2 lb bags and 5 lb bags and then all the local farmers who have either supplied them or are interested in supplying the co-op can attend that meeting and then negotiate amongst themselves for the agreement to grow that for the co-op for that particular season. The ideal scenario and we're all human of course so it doesn't always work out perfectly, but the ideal scenario is those present work collaboratively to share the growing agreement so that everybody has a chance to make a living or try a new crop. I've seen farmers at these meeting actually say well I can do kale until this time can you do the other part or could we split the volume for the months of May and June or something like that.

Jon Steinman: Another way in which the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative has an impact on local food production, is through their support of individuals and businesses within the Nelson-area who are producing packaged and prepared foods. Walk into any chain grocery store and the deli section is filled with prepared foods made in bulk at centralized facilities. But in Nelson, small-scale processors of these foods are not only given a chance to create a local business, but the store even works with these businesses to help them succeed.

Abra Brynne: Beyond the produce I think the co-ops efforts at outreach to fledgling food business's in the area is really good. It's laudable in that we have a lot of fresh products in the deli for instance, as well as in every department of the store, including personal care. And a lot of those suppliers start out as very small cottage based industry or

business from supplying the co-op and then doing their market research kind of getting their feet wet with their particular product and developing it and then growing quite large and that includes something as enormous and widely available as Kathy Anne soap, which started with Kathy Anne making it in tuna cans from bee's wax and other products she bought at the co-op way back when, to the salsa that are in bulk. There's quite a few amazing products in the store that are made locally.

The deli has worked with a lot of the suppliers to encourage them to increase the quality of their individual ingredients. So, for instance one of the things that co-op is concerned about is genetically engineered crops and of course there's a number of ingredients that are commonly derived from foods that have been genetically engineered and so they try and encourage the suppliers to move into something that's cleaner and better and healthier. And to do that they provide them with information they provide them with an economic incentive by giving them discount on purchasing those goods through the co-op and just support them morally in making that choice.

Jon Steinman: The support of local farming and food production inherently has a positive social and economic impact on a local community, and most certainly reduces the environmental impact of a food system as well. Taking a look through the buying guidelines available on the store's website, one finds an impressive list of criteria that governs the products available in the store. Criteria that ensures minimal packaging, reusable packaging, recycled packaging and packaging that can, after it is used, be recycled. Preference is given to organic products, and those from animals raised humanely. Even the manufacturing processes are taken into consideration when choosing which products to stock in the store. Abra Brynne describes yet another feature of the store that minimizes the environmental impact of member's and customer's food choices.

Abra Brynne: In terms of trying to minimize environmental impact we have probably one of the best bulk sections in North America and it's long been one of my pet peeves and it's an area that we're trying to address in terms of education of having people bring their own packaging when they come and they get bulk products. The fact that it is prioritized and that there's such an enormous range of bulk products available from liquids to beans to grains and legumes is really I think it's very laudable, it's really important and that's one way to encourage people to help lessen the environmental impact of what they're purchasing. Which is not to say that a lot of those same products could be purchased already prepackaged but having them there... if we don't have them there of course then people can't make that choice.

Jon Steinman: When looking at the grocery retail sector of the Canadian food system, it is of course important to ask why there are not more co-operative grocery stores with such strong environmental and social goals. Ultimately, as Abra indicated to me, it is possible for *any* community in Canada to create such a store, and all that is required is creativity, vision and money pulled in from many individuals and businesses. The potential success of such a model is certainly evident when witnessing the staggering growth that has accompanied the Kootenay Country Store, but with such growth, comes barriers, and Abra shares some of the barriers the co-op is facing now and into the future.

Abra Brynne: I could get really philosophical or I could get very pragmatic and both are probably valid. On the pragmatic end this specific co-op is challenged by the fact that our growth rate is in the double digits and it makes it really challenging to maintain the level of service when the growth rate is so extreme. It's about having adequate staff, it's about having a computer system that's up to it, it's about having adequate space in the warehouse and we've long since run out of adequate space in the warehouse, the cooler and the freezer, never mind the staff room and all the offices. So we have been aggressively looking for a larger space and trying lots and lots of different creative alternatives for trying to address our space needs for quite some time. And because we do have a strong commitment, and this comes from our members as well, to stay in the downtown core that will continue to be a challenge unless something else comes up.

The commitment to staying in the downtown core is personally I think a really important one because Nelson is an anomaly, the co-op is not just an anomaly, but Nelson is an anomaly in North America in that it's the mall that is fairly dead and it is the downtown that is striving in terms of both business and culture and people and the tourist draw. To me that's really exciting and it's not a community that has to rely on the tourists for it's sustainability. But because it's such an amazing community we certainly do get a lot of visitors here. So, it's part of that commitment to a thriving downtown core which is about bringing the people together, its about having a store within walking distance and that are some of those values underneath that commitment.

Other challenges to the co-op, and we've been aware of this for many years back to when I was still on staff, it was pretty easy to see the writing on the wall that as natural foods, organic foods, became more and more popular that the big business would move in. And it started with something like Kettle Chips and Rice Dream and now its in a wide range of the same products that we carry and we were clear right from the start that we couldn't begin to compete on price it couldn't go there but that it was about the service the education and the commitment to our members that was going to be how we sort of kept alive and it seems from our growth rate that we've been successful with that.

I also think just more philosophically one of the challenges of the co-op is to... I don't think really it will be such a challenge but in this day and age where food and food politics have become so incredibly sexy and there isn't anyone in British Columbia that doesn't know about the 100 mile diet there isn't anyone who hasn't heard the terms like food localism, that there's a danger of having overly facile responses to that. And just a quick easy response that doesn't really address all of the systemic issues that have created an unsustainable world and an unsustainable food system. And so, I think as long as the co-op is able to adhere to its vision and mission of a sustainable community and a community based and community driven food based business that we will avoid that weakness. But I think that it's a big one that is going to continue to hit a lot of organizations who have a commitment to something more real and sustainable but when everyone's talking about a hundred mile diet which isn't necessarily a surface response or anything but the analysis the understanding needs to be deep. It's a crisis, the food system is, as far as I'm concerned.

Jon Steinman: And this is Deconstructing Dinner where we are focusing on the co-operative model as an alternative to the more conventional models through which the Canadian food system is structured. We've been listening to clips from my conversation with Abra Brynne, the president of the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative located in Nelson, British Columbia. In just a few minutes we will take a look at yet another co-operative that is challenging the industrial and conventional ways of *distributing* food, but first, here are some final comments from Abra Brynne.

Abra Brynne: In this day and age where we've all been brainwashed by the lowest price is the law, that horrible jingle from Zeller's however many years ago, and the over supply of big box stores and everybody having lost leaders pulling people into their stores to buy something really cheap. I think that it's so important for people to understand that there are so many important values besides economic. And yes we want to make sure everybody in our community has money has food that they don't go to bed hungry. But Canadians spend 9.3% of their disposable income of their household income on food and there's a lot of room for spending more money on food and we need to address the social justice issue of poverty and hunger and homelessness in our community but we also need to spend more money on food.

And part of the reasons we need to spend more money on food are in the values that the co-op expresses which is that those who produce food, whether they're farmers or whether they're someone in a kitchen working from dawn til dusk processing veggies to make a salsa or whatever that they get a living wage that they get fairly compensated for what it is they're producing so that's factored into the prices at the co-op. Also, we want the staff at the co-op to be treated fairly and humanly and so the co-op spends part of our overhead simply insuring that our staff have an adequate wage or at least the best attempt we can make at it and that they have a benefits package that helps support them as best as possible and so those factor into the cost of those products in the store. And I think that's really important and I think we do have to pay for those things because we can't expect to have staff in the store if they're not paid a decent wage and we can't expect to have farmers on the field and processors in their kitchens if we're not paying them they can't last they won't be around and we need them, so we have to pay for them. I think paying more for our food fundamentally supports the sustainability of the system and I really want my children and their children to be able to eat and I want them to be able to eat real good food long after I'm dead and so for me that's a big part of why I quite aggressively support the local farming community and the co-op because those are my sources of hope for that vision of a future.

soundbite

Jon Steinman: That was Abra Brynne, President of the Board of the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative, better known throughout the Nelson area as the Co-op. You can learn more about this successful alternative model to grocery retailing by visiting their website at kootenay.coop (and the spelling of that is k-o-o-t-e-n-a-y dot c-o-o-p).

You've been listening to Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly one-hour program produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. My name's Jon Steinman, and no this radio station is not part of the same co-operative food store just featured on the broadcast if there is any confusion there.

The title of today's show is Co-operatives – Alternatives to Industrial Food. As we often expose the ways in which the conventional food system increasingly operates at the expense of human, animal, and environmental health and well-being, today we are featuring an alternative model to such a system, whereby those who use the services of the business have a voice in its creation and operation. And this alternative is the co-operative model. This will be a series here on Deconstructing Dinner comprised of periodic broadcasts, and on part II of this series, we will learn about a model of agricultural *land ownership* based on this co-operative model.

More information on co-operatives in Canada will be available on the Deconstructing Dinner website - cjly.net/deconstructingdinner and this broadcast will also be archived there.

soundbite

Jon Steinman: The co-operative we just took a look at was a grocery retailer, one of only a few in the country that maintains a triple bottom line where people and the planet come before profit.

But for conventional and even co-operative retailers in Canada, the food system is structured in such a way that reliance on a *distributor* is essential to remain competitive. Now many conventional groceries operate their own centralized distribution systems, but independent distributors do not often maintain the same values that a retailer such as the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative maintains. Adding to this, the absence within Canada of any socially and environmentally responsible distributors effectively eliminates almost any possibility for small-scale farmers and processors to get their products into grocery stores. Essentially, Canada's food system does not support such small-scale businesses, but a newly formed co-operative in Victoria, British Columbia is getting ready to challenge the conventional distribution systems that control Canada's food.

Conceived through a partnership between a food security activist, a farmer and a retailer, FoodRoots is a new venture that is looking to become the link between the farmer the processor and you.

Deconstructing Dinner's Victoria correspondent Andrea Langlois sat down with Lee Fuge and Susan Tychie to learn more about this distributors co-operative.

But first, what is a distributor, well Lee Fuge briefly explains.

Lee Fuge: Well a distributor is one of the connectors between the field and the plate and plays the role of bringing in food from various producers and getting it out in a timely fashion through an efficient transportation system to the retail outlets.

Jon Steinman: When Lee Fuge co-founder of FoodRoots first arrived in Victoria, she quickly recognized that there was no infrastructure to get locally grown food to people, and this led her to look to the co-operative model as an ideal way to fill the gap. And here was when FoodRoots was conceived.

Lee Fuge: When I came to Victoria eleven years ago pretty well the first thing I noticed was there was no infrastructure for a small producers to get local products to the local market. And I had been involved at the retail end of natural foods for twenty some odd years; food is my passion I guess. And the other passion I have is for co-ops. I've been involved in co-op development for a long time, retail food co-ops mostly. I look at developing infrastructure for localized food system as being a cooperative effort and the co-op model seems to me to be the most appropriate model to do that for.

Jon Steinman: During the March 9th, 2006 broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, we met with four small-scale farmers and processors, all of whom had managed to get their products onto the shelves of a local chain retailer here in Nelson BC, but this, as was indicated, was a very rare opportunity that would almost never present itself to small-scale food businesses. And here's FoodRoot's Susan Tychie and Lee Fuge explaining where the industrial distribution and retailing system leaves small-scale food production.

Lee Fuge and Susan Tychie: Well it leaves them out of the loop in a way because people that are doing large scale retailing, it's very difficult for them to buy from a small grower, it's a lot of work for them, and therefore a lot of money to purchase from a small grower every week calling farmers or dealing with twelve individual farmers instead of one distributor that makes it difficult in terms of time and also in terms of invoicing and collecting receipts and payments, everything is twelve times as much as it would be if you were dealing with one group. A distributor is helpful in that respect because they can gather more quantities of food.

I'd also like to expand on that a bit. Most of the players at the retail end of conventional food particularly the larger chains and even some of the smaller chains have centralized buying desk, centralized warehousing, and they like to deal with similar scale operations because it does cut down on the amount of paperwork. And they can also have predictability of supply predictable standards to what the product looks like how it's packed how it's labeled and all that kind of thing. So, their individual systems aren't equipped to allow different stores within the system to work with local. Some large corporations do allow some degree of that but most of them prefer that people in their local stores buy through the regional or nation distribution system.

Jon Steinman: The FoodRoots distributors' co-operative is an entirely new model for Vancouver Island farmers to take advantage of. By consolidating foods from many

different growers and processors, the FoodRoots co-operative uses what are called PocketMarkets to then get that food to the public.

Lee Fuge and Susan Tychie: We don't have a distributor on the island that's focusing on distributing local product to the local community. So, I think that's a missing link in our local food chain right here on the island, it's really important I think to gather food and distribute it more directly to the consumer. How can we find local food where can we find local food?

Well it is a gap that's filled partly by farmer's markets, partly by farm-gate sales, partly by box home delivery programs. This is different in that we're hoping to work with some really small scale producers who are looking at getting into the local setting and it's meant as a way for them to get their foot in the door, if you like, and get their products whatever scale they're at into the local marketplace and we're hoping that that will encourage more people to start farming both in an urban and rural setting, the other aspect of it is the distribution vehicle we're using is called PocketMarket. The FoodRoots PocketMarkets are based in a community, whether it's an academic community or a geographic community and the idea is that we are bringing local foods from both the community itself and from the farmers in the region into a neighbourhood. Encouraging people to think more carefully about where their food's coming from talking to them about food security issues and connecting within the community to other community projects like community gardens and that sort of thing, so the PocketMarkets are community building pieces

Jon Steinman: Across the country we see many farmers pushed into having to find creative ways to market their products. Whether it be through agri-tourism, or value-adding, we also see many farmers spending at least a day a week at farmers markets. But farmers' markets take the farmer away from what otherwise could be a day of farming. FoodRoots was formed to address this concern, and Susan explains both the benefit to farmers and the cultural benefits of the PocketMarkets to communities.

Susan Tychie: Well it's a gathering place for people to not only access local food but to meet each other and potential for community events involvement in that respect. We also encourage community gardening backyard gardening wild crafting. We're hoping to do education around that depending on what the community is interested in. But what we do is work with local farmers, urban farmers, or farmers that want to come into the market, and work with them. If they're going to be bringing zucchini that week then we wouldn't bring it with us, so we're kind of playing a supporting role and nurturing and possibly seeding a market. Maybe not because I think the advantages of food groups is that we can do many markets during the week with local produce and the farmer can still be out working his field and hopefully visiting our markets once or twice during the season. So, we keep that connection that's really important to us to keep the connection between the farmer and the community so we'll work hard on that aspect as well.

Jon Steinman: Similar to the relationships that the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative fosters with *their* suppliers, FoodRoots also works with farmers to plan the season and ensure a diversity of crops are grown throughout the year.

Susan Tychie: Well basically we work with farmers and trying to predict what our needs are going to be which is hard this year because we don't now how many markets we're actually going to have. And I talk to farmers about what they want to plant what they like to grow and then just get a general idea so I know when the crops are coming in and just try and do a handshake contract deal with farmers. Everything of course is weather dependant, dependant on Mother Nature, but we all understand that. And just decide on a crop that they want to grow and here on the island we have a longer growing season, wonderfully long. There's some challenges around that in the shoulder seasons but we're certainly encouraging people to grow for the shoulder seasons. So, early spring crops, over wintering cabbage and cauliflower for the spring and then in the fall continuing to plant chard, lettuce, kale. I've had lettuce in December from farmers, so there's lots of variety there.

Jon Steinman: This is Deconstructing Dinner where we are learning of a newly formed distributors' co-operative in Victoria, British Columbia. FoodRoots has been created to offer a space for locally grown and processed foods to make their way to the public, a link that is often non-existent within a food system dominated by large conventional retailers and or large conventional distributors. FoodRoots promotes organic food grown and processed using more sustainable practices and the model really is one that could exist in any Canadian community.

The FoodRoots co-operative does intend on launching markets on the campuses of the University of Victoria and Camosun College, but for specific neighbourhoods wishing to get local food into their kitchens, FoodRoots has also created what are called Pocket Market tool kits.

Lee Fuge: One of the other advantages to the community is that through FoodRoots we're putting together what we're calling the PocketMarket tool kit and it's going to be a how to manual but it's also going to have a actual physical tool kit, which would be the tents, the tables, the scales, all of the equipment necessary to do a market. So, a community dealing with FoodRoots can have sort of an instant market spring up on a boulevard or on a piece of park land or wherever they choose. We can come and do the market for them or we can have someone in the community who's working with us run the market for the community. And what we're seeing certainly in Vic West, what happened was we started the first market through the Vic West Community Association in 2005, we had the Vic West Food Co-op running one tent and one farmer, and in 2006 we had three farmers so... the community tent was the seed of the market and that's what we're hoping will happen in other locations with FoodRoots that FoodRoots will inspire people to start thinking differently where their food comes from, the possibilities both for our rural and urban food production, and start looking at the different resources in the community and bringing them into the market.

Jon Steinman: More information on PocketMarkets can be found on the FoodRoots website at foodroots.ca.

As with any *alternative* model to the conventional food system in Canada there are, of course, barriers. In the case of FoodRoots, municipal bylaws are one of a number of hurdles needing to be overcome when setting up a PocketMarket. The scenario Lee Fuge of FoodRoots lays out, is one that highlights how food, does and should belong in municipal planning so that such a fundamental need is not grouped in with other business-related bylaws. And here's Lee Fuge speaking of the barriers they face.

Lee Fuge: Well let me catalogue the ways, one of our organizational barriers is a shoestring budget, lack of human and financial resources, we're working on that aspect of things. Within our region we have something like fifteen different municipalities, and organizations on the island that are like municipalities but aren't exactly municipalities, so there's this broad range of legislation in place that tells you what you can or can't do depending on where you are physically in the region. So, the legislative bylaws in the city of Victoria are different than the legislative bylaws in Oak Bay and in Saanich and Central Saanich and Sooke and all those things. So, in Victoria we have a special events policy and an application process, which is easy to work with. And the Victoria based markets can fairly readily gain access to city boulevards through that application process. It's not costly, in fact there's no cost for it, except that the sponsoring organization has to add the city to its insurance policy. Whereas some people in Saanich would try to get a market on a parking lot of Saanich municipal hall, which is a large parking lot next to the Galloping Goose, and they were told that the property wasn't zoned for commercial purposes, that each of the participants in the market would have to have a \$200 business license, that there would be other fees attached. So, it depends on the different rules in each municipality. The interesting thing is Victoria, just ten days ago, adopted an urban agriculture resolution, I guess it was, a group in the Songhees area of Vic West is probably going to be the first group to test that, because we're looking at going onto public parkland which has different rules attached to it than boulevards because there's no commercial use allowed for parkland. So, with that group in the Songhees if they want a pocket market if they can't find a boulevard to go on and they need to go on to parkland under the current legislation we would have to go before council and get approval from council to set up two tents to sell veggies in parkland. Whereas if we were across the street on the city boulevard across from that park we wouldn't have to go to council we would just be able to add that site to our current permit. So, there are those things that you have to deal with. Some municipal bodies are fairly supportive of the kind of thing that we're talking about and others have yet to be educated.

Jon Steinman: In wrapping up this final segment of today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, Lee Fuge of FoodRoots answers whether or not their distributor's co-operative model could replace the dominant food distribution system.

Lee Fuge: I don't think it's going to be an option, like in so many other areas we in the privileged West and particularly in North America have been living in a false paradise. We have available to us products that have never been available to North Americans in

the past and I'm sure won't be available in the future so I think we've had the golden age of industrialized food and industrialized food delivery.

Jon Steinman: That was Lee Fuge, the co-founder of FoodRoots, a newly formed Victoria British Columbia-based distributors' co-operative. The Co-operative was also created with Susan Tychie whom you heard just earlier and Brian Hughes of Kildara Farms. More information including how to become a member of the co-op, can be found on the FoodRoots website at foodroots.ca.

I'd also like to thank Deconstructing Dinner correspondent Andrea Langlois for sitting down with Lee and Susan and recording that interview.

And in closing out today's broadcast titled Co-operatives – Alternatives to Industrial Food, I will indicate that this is only part 1 of what will be a series featuring periodic explorations of the co-operative model within Canada's food system. Again, the co-operative model is one built upon seven principles, principles that challenge the dominant industrial food system. Previous broadcasts of Deconstructing Dinner have recognized that Canada's food system is built first and foremost upon profit, with little concern for people, animals and the planet.

Mentioned at the beginning of today's show were the seven co-operative principles, and for those of you who have tuned in half way or just recently those seven cooperative principles consist of this:

1. Open and voluntary membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for the community

In part II of this series on the co-operative model, we will visit with a newly-formed land-cooperative just outside of hundred-mile house British Columbia. Within an economic system that values land for food in the same way it values land for recreation and suburban development, we will learn more about group of established farmers and community members who are challenging the barriers to land ownership that many new Canadian farmers are faced with. And stay tuned in the next few weeks for that show.

Also, more info and links to other food focused co-operatives in Canada will also be located on the Deconstructing Dinner website under the show title Co-operatives – Alternatives to Industrial Food.

Abra Brynne: It's about values that aren't just economic, it's about community and sustainability and environmental justice, not just the bottom line for your dang quarterly report.

Jon Steinman: That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-operative Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant Bob Olsen.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

This radio program is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country and relies on support from you the listener.

Should you wish to financially contribute to this program, you can do so through our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner or by dialing 250-352-9600.

Till next week.