



Photographs by Tom Wallace/Star Tribune

The organics assortment at the Rochester farmers market is better than any found in the Twin Cities. About a quarter of the vendors follow sustainable farming practices.

NATURAL from T1

Organic choices in the deli, too

The thrilling assortment — better than any found in the Twin Cities and all sourced within a 50-mile radius of the city — isn't just a result of the region's wealth of organic and sustainably minded farms. Informed consumers also play a role. "We do not actively recruit organic growers," said market manager Jennifer Kalenze. "Within our health care-centric community of Rochester, there is definitely a push for chemical-free, locally grown and accountable food."

Rochester Downtown Farmers Market, 4th Avenue and 4th Street SE., 1-507-398-8791. Open 7:30 a.m. to noon Saturdays through Oct. 29.

NATURAL FOODS CO-OPS

A no-brainer. The Twin Cities metro area is fortunate to have a confederation of member-owned natural foods co-ops. Most could be renamed Organics Central, offering not only the merchandise but also the kind of informed service staff, sophisticated labeling, progressive management practices and commitment to local food sources that big supermarkets can't touch.

The area's alpha co-op, Wedge Co-op, is the nation's largest single-location, member-owned store of its kind, boasting stellar produce, meat, bakery and deli departments (all are certified organic) that many like-minded retailers use as a role model.

But the Wedge isn't the only big boy in town. Valley Natural Foods in Burnsville, Mississippi Market in St. Paul and particularly Lakewinds Natural Foods in Minnetonka all are experiencing major growth spurts. This fall, Lakewinds is opening a spacious new Chanhassen branch and — in an ironic twist that may hint at the future of grocery shopping — the co-op is relocating its main store (which will double its size) into a nearby former supermarket.

You don't have to be a member to shop, either; nonmembers account for 43 percent of all Valley Natural Foods sales. "It used to be that our members joined because they were savvy about what a co-op is and wanted to participate in it," said marketing manager Charli Mills. "Now we see people who want to become members because they like shopping here. And I think people like the idea that it's a local business, and the profits stay in the community."

For a complete list of Twin Cities natural foods co-ops, go to www.mwnaturalfoods.coop.

WHOLE FOODS, LUNDS AND BYERLY'S

You'd have to be trolling the aisles in a semi-catatonic state not to notice that mass-market grocers have jumped on the organic bandwagon. And why not? The category enjoys a 20 percent annual growth rate, a figure rarely seen inside the halls of this pennies-on-the-dollar industry.

Nationally, Whole Foods Market is booming, with 172 stores and counting in the United States and Great Britain. In Minnesota, Lunds and Byerly's lead the organics pack; the average Lunds and Byerly's store carries around 10,000 organic/natural products, roughly 20 percent of its total inventory (by contrast, the Wedge Co-op offers 15,000). The stores' produce departments were recently certified organic, and the company has hired a chef to create organic grab-and-go soups, salads and other products for its delis.

For a complete list of stores, go to www.wholefoodsmarket.com, www.lundsfoods.com and www.byerlys.com.

FRESH & NATURAL FOODS

Is this how Whole Foods got its start? The northern suburbs, not exactly a co-op stronghold, were crying out for a grocer specializing in health-conscious foods. Enter Kerry Larson, former manager of River Market Community Co-op in Stillwater, who partnered with mall owner Bill Fogerty to replace a defunct supermarket with their privately-owned version of a member-owned co-op. While it doesn't have the Whole Foods' slick corporate sheen and gigantic selection, the three-year-old store betters its conglomerate rival (and nimbly mimics co-ops) in its connections to locally produced organic and natural foods. There's an impressive number of gluten-free products, too. Larson and Fogerty have clearly struck a chord: They're planning on adding stores — one in the east metro, another in the west — within the next year.

Fresh & Natural Foods, 1075 W. Hwy. 96, Shoreview, 651-203-3663, www.freshandnaturalfoods.com.

INTELLIGENT NUTRIENTS

Horst Rechelbacher's progressive paean to clean, green living is an organics hot spot. A deli cooks almost exclusively with locally grown organic ingredients, and it shows everywhere except for the price (top is \$7.75), offering a brief but appealing menu that changes daily but always features full-flavored soups, fresh salads,



Organically grown garlic was among the array of goods at the Featherstone stand in Rochester. The market is on the banks of the Zumbro River.

made-to-order sandwiches and sweets.

The free-spirited Wunderbar pours a heady selection of wines, beers, spirits and cocktails that are either certified organic or "harmonically grown" (IN-speak for being produced under organic guidelines but not certified by a third party). An adjacent store sells top-quality house-brand organic products, including agave (liquid, low-glycemic sweetener), chocolates, cocoa, coffees, dried herbs, teas, nuts and licorice and peppermint breath mints.

Intelligent Nutrients, 983 E. Hennepin Av., Minneapolis, 612-617-2000, www.intelligentnutrients.com.

SHORT LIST

Clancey's Meats & Fish (4307 Upton Av. S., Minneapolis, 612-926-0222). Two dozen Minnesota family farms, most practicing sustainable, natural and often organic practices, supply this Linden Hills shop with top-flight beef, lamb, pork, poultry and dairy products.

Ecopolitan (2409 Lyndale Av. S., Minneapolis, 612-874-7336). The Twin Cities' only "raw" restaurant is an oven- and stove-free zone, so the "cooking," using all-organic ingredients, pops with fresh flavors. Salads, soups and a killer guacamole are the menu's stars, and the juice bar is second to none.

France 44 Wines & Spirits (4351 France Av. S., Minneapo-

lis, 612-925-3252). More than 50 wines are clearly labeled certified organic or "eco-wine" (an in-house term for wines that aren't certified organic but follow biodynamic or similar farming processes). "We used to have a separate eco-friendly section," said Kristine Igo, France 44 wine specialist. "But there are so many wines that fit into that category that it's impossible for us to keep them segregated."

French Meadow Bakery & Cafe (2610 Lyndale Av. S., Minneapolis, 612-870-7855). Lynn Gordon's one-of-a-kind bakery, which specializes in yeast-free, dairy-free and sweetener-free breads made with stone-ground and sprouted grains, has been certified organic for 20 years. The cafe offers a long menu of organic options, from blueberry corn pancakes to macaroni and cheese.

Solo Vino (517 Selby Av., St. Paul, 651-602-9515): Several dozen wines, clearly labeled, fall in the organic-biodynamic mode. "When I first started buying wine 12 years ago, no one would even mention their wines were organic," said Chuck Kanski, SoloVino co-owner. "But nowadays a lot of people know it's a benefit, and winemakers bring it up right away."

Tea Source (752 Cleveland Av. S., St. Paul, 651-690-9822; and 2908 Pentagon Drive NE., St. Anthony, 612-788-4842). Choose from 27 organic teas from around the world.

Shopping cart

These Minnesota-made products — some are certified organic, others fall into the more nebulous "natural" category — are tops in their classes and are available at most area natural foods co-ops, Lunds and Byerly's, Fresh & Natural Foods, Kowalski's and Whole Foods.

Ames Farm honey: Exquisite, single-source raw honey from bees buzzing around several Minnesota counties.

Angie's Kettle Corn: This crisp, slightly sweet newbie from Mankato, a hit at Vikings games, resides in a preservative-trans fat-MSG-cholesterol-free zone, a snack rarity.

Cedar Summit Farm milk: It's all in the grass: pasture-fed cows (and no homogenization) give this organic milk its lusciously old-fashioned personality.

Larry Schultz Organic Farm eggs: Gorgeous, terra cotta-colored farm-fresh eggs, from hens living in Owatonna and feasting on organic feed.

Parker's Farm peanut butter: "Peanuts, salt, love, care and pride" reads the ingredients list on this creamy, all-natural p.b. No hydrogenated oils or trans fats either.

Peace Coffee: Roasted in south Minneapolis, this robust bean boasts all the right words, including *organic*, *shade grown* and *fair trade*.

PastureLand butter: Milk from grass-fed cows provides the foundation for this golden butter, which just won, once again, top honors in the American Cheese Society's annual competition.

Salsa Lisa: Fresh salsas (top-notch ingredients, no preservatives) that range from Minnesota mild to scorching.

Sonny's Ice Cream: Frozen food of the gods, made with organic milk and cream by artisans who work in such small quantities that each pint bears a hand-written batch number.

Sunrich edamame: High-protein, low-carb, non-GMO soy nibbles, direct from Hope to your grocer's freezer.

Thousand Hills Cattle Co. beef: A premium product, from grass-fed cattle raised on "eco-positive" (sustainable, humane practices with no pesticides or antibiotics) family farms.

Urban Fare soups: Natural, often organic ingredients and inventive recipes (apricot-lentil, split pea-rosemary) make these soups a beacon of great taste at the supermarket.

Wild Country Maple: Organic maple-syrup goodness, crafted from a scenic sugar bush near Lake Superior's north shore.

Rick Nelson



Reading the labels

Confused about organic terminology? Here are the basics:

Certified organic: Food that is grown with an emphasis on renewable natural resources and inspected (by an agency accredited by the United States Department of Agriculture) in compliance with national standards; many pesticides and all synthetic and petroleum-based fertilizers are not permitted, and animals must be kept free of antibiotics and growth hormones. Merchants and processors who follow specific storage and handling practices may be certified, too. The label is not an indicator of quality or safety.

The USDA Organic seal certifies that 95 percent of the product's ingredients are organic. The "100 percent organic" seal is for products containing only organically produced ingredients; "Made with organic ingredients"



means the product comprises 70 to 95 percent organic ingredients.

Non-certified organic: Food production that follows organic practices but has not been verified by an accredited agency of the USDA, often due to expense (certification isn't cheap), bureaucracy (the paperwork is considerable) or time (soil must be kept free of banned additives for a minimum of three years).

Natural: An unregulated term that generally means the product is minimally processed, minus genetically engineered ingredients, preservatives, antibiotics, growth hormones and synthetic colors, flavors or sweeteners.

Source: USDA