

Catching the Co-op Wave in San Diego

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

High spirits and stimulating conversations marked the 55th annual Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) conference in San Diego June 16–18. Attendees included over 400 food co-op managers and directors, along with educators and allies representing a record 112 cooperatives and organizations in two countries and 35 states from Alaska to Florida and California to Maine.

Attendance by food co-op board members was high, and many co-ops sent several directors. Participants of age 30 and younger, while a minority, were more numerous than ever and were an encouraging presence—in many cases representing one of the many food co-op startups in the country. (See “Co-op Milestones,” p. 4.)

This year’s theme was “Surf’s Up: Catch the Co-op Wave,” and the local host was Ocean Beach People’s Organic Food Co-op, whose staff and volunteers, led by General Manager Nancy Casady, contributed a great deal to hosting the conference and special events. First-day tour buses took visitors to Ocean Beach Co-op’s thriving store and to local cultural and political landmarks.

A very full conference program included two days of speakers and 40 workshops focused on co-op member linkage, growth and expansion, management strategies, board of directors training, innovative food projects, and startup challenges. The program was an outstanding offering of resources and presenters, addressing needs in operations and governance and large social issues, while providing flexibility and strong content for co-op veterans as well as newcomers.

CCMA conference planning is headed by Ann Hoyt, professor of consumer science at the University of Wisconsin and director of the UW Urban Cooperative Initiative. Additional support comes from university staff, co-ops in the host city, and co-op trainers, managers, and directors. The conference was also aided by a more robust CCMA.coop website and social networking participation on Facebook and Twitter.

CCMA is sponsored by the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA), a membership organization representing over 20,000 cooperatives. The CEO of NCBA, Paul Hazen, and its vice president for public affairs and member services, Adam Schwartz, reminded the crowd of the vital national and international activities led by NCBA, especially preparations for 2012, declared by the United Nations as “The International Year of Cooperatives.” These businesses have unprecedented opportunities to promote understanding of the ▶



Clockwise: CCMA attendees toured the Ocean Beach Co-op. Phil Burl helping us sort out our board roles. Cooperators gather at the opening reception. A surprise visit from Janice Joplin. Adam Schwartz passes the “mic” for good IYC ideas.

PHOTOS BY JACK MICHEL



A Passion for Plants

I first gazed upon the pearly bloom of a *Trillium ovatum* 15 years ago. When I began to study botany and wildcrafting in the Cascades that year, I discovered that these enchanting lilies were being harvested and sold on the herb market. The thought of our old growth forests without the beloved Western *Trillium* was heartbreaking. Thankfully, I was not alone and through conservation we can still enjoy these harbingers of spring.

Today, I teach my students that ethical wildharvesting requires a relationship not only with the plants we use, but with the complex ecosystems where the plants grow. With that relationship comes the immense responsibility of stewardship.

It's this commitment to stewardship that shapes my work as Quality Control Manager at Mountain Rose Herbs. I strive to raise industry standards and preserve our ethical foundation, and will never compromise the quality of herbal products we carry or the health of the unique ecology we all treasure.

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Lab & Quality Control Manager


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◀ cooperative way of structuring ownership and serving communities.

A national affiliate organization, the Cooperative Development Foundation (CDF), manages projects including the Howard Bowers Fund, which offers scholarships for food co-op training and development. Many CCMA conference attendees first made it there through support from the Bowers Fund. This year's fundraising efforts—including a reception at Bill and Michelle Lerach's La Jolla mansion, an Air Guitar party, the annual silent auction of co-op swag and collectibles, and a public bidding for one year of displaying a large quilt made from co-op T-shirts—totaled nearly \$39,000. In addition, food co-ops have been leading contributors to disaster relief funds managed by CDF, with assistance in 2011 going to cooperatives in Alabama and Japan.

Keynote speaker Mari Gallagher summarized her firm's research on food deserts and poor public health. Gallagher reviewed innovative programs in Chicago and elsewhere that are helping residents in food deserts access quality food, and she challenged food co-ops to stretch their mission, to expand their imaginations and approaches to these challenging issues. Specific opportunities mentioned include expanding farmers markets and SNAP (food stamp) and WIC sales, food kiosks in other stores, and mobile sales scenarios.

A different kind of food desert was described in a brief presentation to the annual meeting of ▶



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PHOTO BY SAM KOPRAK



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Clockwise: Dwight Gaddis of Lakewinds and Christina Nicholson of Mississippi Market at Rockin' for Bowers with air guitars. Yoni Landau says Yes, good answer! Mari Gallagher tells us food deserts in big cities are not a mirage.

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Awards at CCMA for Cooperative Service and Retail Excellence

The annual award for Cooperative Service went to Amber and Nicole Sallaberry of Reno, Nev., and the Cooperative Excellence Award went to Seward Co-op in Minneapolis, Minn. Co-ops with milestone anniversaries (10, 30, 40, 50, and 70 years!) were also honored, and are noted on page 4.

Amber and Nicole Sallaberry are sisters who for six years have been drivers of organizing the local food community around the Great Basin Community Food Co-op in Reno, Nev. They are sixth-generation Nevadans from a ranching family and, in their dedication to a local food economy, have networked over 50 producers and have worn all the hats to keep this community-based project rolling. In an extremely challenged economy, under the leadership of the Sallaberry sisters, Great Basin Co-op has secured USDA funding as well as gained over \$400,000 in member loans in support of the co-op's plans to move in late 2011 into a 7,000-square-foot facility, which will include a local farmer distribution center.

The award for Cooperative Excellence went to **Seward Co-op in Minneapolis**, which is in its second year of operations in its attractive new 25,000-square-foot facility and continues to experience strong growth in sales and member-owners. At its new location, Seward has attracted several thousand new members and has doubled annual sales to over \$20 million. The co-op continues to catalyze and support community ventures in local agriculture and its city neighborhood, plus actively participates in the Principle Six cooperative campaign. General Manager Sean Doyle was joined by a dozen other Seward Co-op staff, board members, and former general managers in celebrating this cooperative enterprise, now in its 40th year and continuing to expand services to its community and local food economy.



Recognizing co-ops reaching their 40-year milestone.



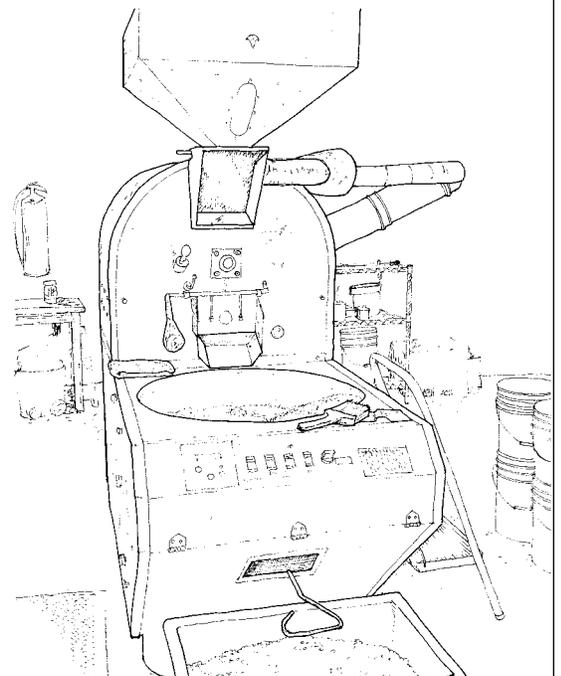
Seward Co-op general managers past and present celebrated the award: Stuart Reid, Gail Graham, P.J. Hoffman and current GM Sean Doyle (with ukelele).

PHOTOS BY JACK MICHEL



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CCMA keynote speaker Brett Fairbairn urges us to lead in these turbulent times.

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◀ the Cooperative Grocers' Information Network (CGIN). Jonathan Reinbold, a local sustainable-farming activist, described dramatic changes in San Diego County's farm economy over the past 60 years. Although there are a large number of very small farms, land formerly used for grazing and food production has been given over almost entirely to nursery operations and sod grown for lawns and sprawling housing developments, with only 10 percent of local "agriculture" actually producing food. Included among the food producers is the Wild Willow Farm and Education Center, which has Ocean Beach People's Organic Food Co-op as a sponsor (see CG #154, May–June 2011).

Brett Fairbairn, a co-op scholar and provost at the University of Saskatchewan, returned to CCMA and gave well-received remarks both in small group sessions and in a keynote presentation, "Keepin' It Real: Co-ops in Turbulent Times." Fairbairn reviewed the current economic turmoil and trends in globalization and sketched cooperative issues from a very informed and sympathetic perspective.

Fairbairn challenged cooperators to embrace uncertainty and strengthen use of our imagination. Evolution is necessary and is characterized, he emphasized, by variation with mixed reproductive success. In Fairbairn's view, we need to engage in unconventional conversations, learn from outsiders, and think of governance as inclusive of additional stakeholders.

Present and unfolding economic circumstances are very supportive of the cooperative way of doing business. The CCMA conference in San Diego reminded us of these opportunities and that The International Year of Cooperatives can't come any too soon. ■

Cooperative Grocer Is a Winner

Cooperative Grocer won several awards at the Cooperative Communicators Association's annual institute, held June 19–22 in San Antonio, Texas.



First place: Illustration/graphic art by Meleck Davis for "Waking the Sleeping Giant: Recognize patronage dividends for what they are—co-op capital," May–June 2010

Second place: Cooperative Grocer website

Honorable mention: Illustration/graphic art by Ken Davis for "Flexible or Flawed? New co-op laws provide options, provoke disagreement," Nov.–Dec. 2010

Cooperative Grocer

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