

Crown O' Maine Organic Cooperative

By Leah Cook

Crown O' Maine is a distribution company sourcing and selling Maine foods, whether farmed, raised, produced, or caught. It began on our family farm in Aroostook County as a response to the geographic challenges of marketing organic produce and grew in a grassroots, necessity-driven way over the last 15 years. From selling organic potatoes from our family's van, we've grown to the point where our two trucks pick up from 140 producers and deliver \$1 million worth of product to 150 different customers.

There are lots of local food distributors who consider themselves small, and the definition of "local" can be fuzzy. Our company has grown step by step so that \$1 million in sales comes from an average order size of \$300. Our products are grown and produced across the state, in places as far apart as Fort Kent, Grand Isle, Portland, Thomaston, Unity, Guilford, and Whitefield. Our customers are restaurants, retail stores, buying clubs, and schools. We, the owners, still pack orders every week. When our trucks pick up, they load mixed loads and a wide variety of sizes: four pallets of potatoes, roughly four tons, or three cases of sunflower oil, or 25 bags of onions at a time.

We, like many other businesses in the sustainable food world, have grown slowly for many years, cultivating demand alongside the supply. In recent years, we've seen and experienced the explosion of interest in local foods, and in these past few years of recession, we've also seen that interest continue to grow. Food, and the kind of food we're in, is a values-driven business.

There are many factors contributing to our success, and a few critical ones. First and foremost is the nature

and culture of Mainers. Mainers have an active interest in their neighbors and have been breakaways within the nation for awareness and engagement in sustainable food systems. Maine has a working heritage and practicality that saves it from some dilution of local food movements by trends and buzzwords.

Another contributing factor to our growth has been the resources available for small businesses and farmers that have been key in the incubation of successful ventures. After two strong growth curves and accompanying plateaus of slow steady growth, we received grant money and loan money from the Maine Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund (AMLF) and Finance Authority of Maine (FAME) that went towards the purchase of our first refrigerated commercial truck. Without outside funding, we would not have been able to afford the truck that allowed us to expand and reach our current level of growth.

From our perspective at the intersection of producer and consumer, we see several key things that could help this movement/industry. They are

- Sympathetic educated policymakers.
- Continued definition of what sustainable food and agriculture systems look like in Maine.
- Continued financing for infrastructure needs.

In the end, there is no substitute for hard work, and the creation of a local sustainable food system will depend on all of us working hard in our respective spheres, from farmers to policymakers, to craft it into reality. 