



# Leading by Example

Frontier Natural Products Co-op is an Iowa Gift to the Wider Food World

By Renee Brincks

In 1978, decades before American food policymakers developed standards for organics, a small natural foods cooperative in eastern Iowa first introduced its own organic offerings. Frontier Natural Products Co-op became an early leader in the industry by selling organic peppermint and spearmint from Oregon.

“Our commitment to the principles of organic began well before the National Organic Program was even conceptualized,” says Tom Havran, who joined Frontier as an herbalist associate and today works in communications. “It was important enough at that time that we constructed a separate interior mint room to process and bag those products. We actually sequestered organics from conventional, even way back then.”

Frontier Co-op’s pioneering roots reach back to 1976, when the then-two-person operation was founded in a cabin along the Cedar River. Buying clubs and natural food stores purchased wholesale herbs and spices from Frontier and sold them in bulk to their own customers. Demand grew quickly, and the co-op took over a renovated Fairfax grocery store just two years later. Frontier moved to Norway, IA in 1982, and its main offices are still located there today. The company also maintains facilities in Urbana and North Liberty, and marketing operations are based in Boulder, Colo.

Approximately 30,000 customer members in the United States and Canada currently buy wholesale herbs, spices, teas, bulk foods, body care items and essential oils from Frontier, and its Simply Organic and Aura Cacia brands. Consumers can find the products at independent co-ops, health food stores and mass-market retailers, including HyVees statewide and Whole Foods in West Des Moines.

Frontier’s rise from cottage-based business to industry leader is linked, in part, to an extraordinary focus on innovation and quality. In addition to developing comprehensive organic and natural product lines, the co-op has created robust social responsibility programs that address concerns related to sourcing, sustainability, community development and more. While the company’s mission statement has changed several times to keep pace with a dynamic industry, those changes “aren’t as remarkable as what has always stayed the same,” notes Havran.

“What hasn’t changed is our values statement: At all times and with all people, we will conduct our affairs and the affairs of the company with unwavering integrity. That, to me, is kind of our mission,” he says.

As an example, Havran points to Frontier's Well Earth sourcing program. Co-op administrators vet potential suppliers worldwide via in-house guidelines that promote sustainable production methods, worker safety, environmental responsibility, food safety and positive community impact. Frontier actively works with growers to cultivate new organic ingredients and convert existing operations to organic, and the company's Simply Organic 1% Fund supports organic organizations and efforts. The co-op also offers a variety of fair trade-certified products, such as teas, spices, vanilla, sugar and cocoa powder.

"There is a way to impact locally overseas, and Well Earth helps us do that. It's a way to get beyond your local product shed with those indispensable items that come from other countries," says Havran. "You can't grow vanilla in Iowa. But even if we could, would it be completely right to do so and take that economy, that resource, away from where it originated? Why don't we go there and support that local resource? That's what Well Earth does."

Such programs make a measurable impact, especially given that Frontier Co-op works with suppliers in some 50 countries. The company also benefits communities abroad and at home through the Frontier Foundation. Since it was established in 2000, the donor-advised fund administered by the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation has granted more than \$400,000 to environmental groups, service organizations, scholarship endowments and disaster relief.

"Frontier is a company you can stand behind because they do good things," says Michelle McClintick, wellness coordinator at New Pioneer Food Co-op in Coralville. "They're all about fair trade. They're all about organic. They take care of their staff. And they're not just about the global community, but also about their own people here in Iowa."

New Pioneer's Iowa City and Coralville stores stock Frontier and Aura Cacia products ranging from herbs and teas to lotions, bubble baths and room sprays. The organic and conventional essential oils are especially popular.

"A lot of people are trying to make their own body care products and house cleaning products, and the essential oils are a great place for them to start," McClintick says.

Havran has seen that do-it-yourself mentality become increasingly common in recent years, as consumers take more time to produce and preserve their own foods.

"We offer tools to overcome that 'I'm just going to buy a packaged solution' mindset. We provide the ingredients to make your own solution," he says.

Those same principles shape menus at Frontier's employee restaurant, Frontier Cafe. Head chef Liz Hopkins serves up house-made dishes made with locally grown ingredients, and staff members frequently share harvests from their own gardens. The co-op also offers subsidized on-site childcare, tuition reimbursement, computer purchase assistance and at-work car care services, fitness facilities and haircuts, in addition to standard benefits.

Happy, motivated employees help Frontier succeed.



Frontier CEO Tony Bedard sourcing vanilla beans in Madagascar

Photo by Andrea Shriver



Frontier Chef Liz Crooks in their Norway, IA Kitchen

Photo by Joe Coffey

"As a company, we've always had a really high standard of ethics and I think it shows up in the people... Everybody's very hard-working here, very modest, and committed to making the coop successful," he says. "Some of that is just typical of eastern Iowans, maybe. But I think when that meets the kind of company that Frontier is, it gets us firing on all cylinders and we can create something that's really dynamic and unique."