



Granola Toting Hippie is Now a Mainstream Foodie

BY JEANNIE HOWARD

Long before organic and natural foods became a standard in practically every grocery store, or before clean eating was something mainstream individuals struggled to achieve, Bob Gerner, founder and general manager of The Natural Grocery Company, knew that these were the foods that were best for our bodies as well as the planet and has been a local leader in the natural foods movement for more than 45 years.

“The basic belief that I have is that the country—the world—will be better if we put less poisonous chemicals into the ground, the water, the air and our bodies,” he shared. “I want all foods to be organic.”

Stepping into Sacramento Real Foods as a young man in 1969, this was Gerner’s first introduction to the health food movement. He said he was quickly converted and never looked back. Shortly after this initial encounter he became a partner in the Natural Food Works in Davis. Realizing that he did not want to be one of ten partners, he opened his own

store where he focused on manufacturing the natural foods he wanted but didn’t find being made.

“When I opened Westbrae Natural Foods in 1971 in Berkeley I hadn’t planned on having a retail store,” he shared. “We first opened as a granola factory cause that’s what I was making at the University at Davis.”

Due to zoning for his building, Gerner was forced to have a retail space. “We opened the first twelve feet for retail and the back was for manufacturing and warehousing,” he said.

Between manufacturing in-house and using co-packers, the wholesale portion of his business grew rapidly. Gerner and his crew were making everything from fruit juices and jams, toasted nuts and nut butters to breads and granola, and were bringing ingredients to local producers for them to make things such as mustards, Italian pasta, mayonnaise and Chinese noodles.

Even with all the variety of products being offered,



Gerner said the store wasn't reaching much of his community. "The only customers were hippies. We didn't appeal to the neighborhood very much and I wanted to change that," he shared.

Changing the name of the retail portion of the business to Gilman Street Gourmet Natural Foods and Delicatessen, Gerner had hoped to reach a broader clientele. "I expanded the bakery and added the deli where we regularly made fifty different dishes using items from the store—it ended up being 25% of our sales."

After making a few adjustments to his business model, Gerner, again, changed the name of his store to Berkley Natural Grocery Co. in 1981. "That was the beginning of The Natural Grocery Company we know today. Later I opened El Cerrito Natural Grocery Co. in 1988," he said. The Natural Grocery Company still owns both Berkley Natural Grocery Co. and El Cerrito Natural Grocery Co.

Undertaking a massive change in his business, Gerner decided to sell The Natural Grocery Co. to his employees in 2002. "I've always believed in employee ownership and felt it was fairer and the workers were rewarded for the success of the company. Also, I wanted The Natural Grocery Company to survive and be of benefit to our community after I retire," he said. "It was a surprise to all of the employees and not a pleasant one to many."

At the time, many long-term employees weren't happy with the ownership change because it affected their pension plans. Gerner said that the pension accounts actually grew faster with the new system.

Quick to correct anyone who calls him the owner, Gerner said that his title is founder. "I still rule with an iron fist," he laughed.

Even with several name changes and ownership changes, Gerner shared that The Natural Grocery Company has seen

a relatively low rate of turnover. "Right now we have five employees who have been here more than 30 years, another five have been here over 25 years, six or seven for more than 20 years, and quite a few more have been with us between 15 and 20 years," he said.

Looking back at how far the natural foods movement has come since his first encounter, Gerner is amazed. "We have gone from organic food being a hippie thing and only carried in a few counter culture stores to it being in every store.

The largest seller of organic food is Costco and the largest organic brand is Safeway's O Organics—it's crazy!" he said. "But if we are going to continue to change it has to be the big retailers who accept it."

At seventy years old Gerner is in his store every day and is as passionate as ever about his food principles. "I started this company when I was 24 years old and it still is not work to me, there is no difference between this and living," he shared. "I enjoy our customers, the employees, our suppliers, I love visiting the farms and talking with everyone."

He is proud of the progress he and his team have helped bring in since starting in the natural foods business. "Over the years we have done many things and had a lot of fun," he said. "We had the first 100% organic produce department in the Bay Area, made and sold the first tofu burger in the United States, and started the Non-GMO project which has become the fastest growing label claim in the U.S."

While he may be looking towards retiring from The Natural Grocery Company in a few short years, he is by no means ready to slow down his quest to bring organic food to all. "I want to open a shop in Peru. I feel it is ripe and is very much how Berkeley was in the 70s. They need more of the food they grow and ship out around the world to be consumed by their people," said Gerner. "They grow a lot of organic food and very few people there get it. I feel there is a storm building and that country needs it."

