

Store of the Month

Roots Market, Olney, Md.



Roots and Wings

An independent grocer's conscious connection is intended to make a contribution far beyond its marketplace.

By Bob Gatty

Walk in the front entrance at Roots Market, a natural and organic supermarket in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., and you're greeted by bountiful array of produce, much of it fresh from local farms and all, except for the water-grown hydroponic tomatoes from Hummingbird Farms on Maryland's eastern shore, certified organic.

Hanging above the stalks of asparagus, packs of bright-red strawberries, blueberries and Golden Nugget tangerines is a sign that reads: "Price conscious? So are we. That's why we check our competitors every month

to ensure that we are beating their prices on most items, every day of the year."

Right there at the entrance, that sign assures customers that Roots isn't some ultra-pricey store they can't afford. It's welcoming



Caption:

and reassuring, and, combined with the beautiful color of the fruits and vegetables, makes a pleasing first impression.

"Conscious" is a big word at Roots, and signs throughout the Olney, Md., store are an important part of the connection the market and its staff has with its customers as they explain details about products, their origin, the methods used to grow the food, or such



terms as “Fair Trade.” It’s a connection intended to raise customers’ consciousness of both the attributes of the food being offered and the impact shoppers have on our planet through the choices they make.

The store is part of Conscious Corner, a privately held company that includes the original Roots Market, which opened in 2000 in Clarksville, Md., about 10 miles away; Bark pet stores in both locations; Nest, a Clarksville a natural products specialty/gift store; and Great Sage, a vegan restaurant, also in Clarksville. All were Roots spinoffs, in one fashion or another.

For Jeff Kaufman and Jody Cutler, founders and co-owners of Conscious Corner, the company is about more than making a profit. “It’s about reducing suffering on the planet,” says Kaufman. “That shows up in the food we sell and the vendors we purchase from — vendors who use less harmful practices to the earth and animals, and who share our philosophy of being accountable to both people and planet.”

That sounds like a huge concept for small-business entrepreneurs like Kaufman and Cutler, but when you shop Roots, Bark or Nest, or have lunch on the outdoor patio at Great Sage, it becomes clear that it’s not just PR. These people walk the talk.

“We’re not hippy-dippy co-op people, but we share a lot of the same principles,” explains Kaufman in his tiny back-room office at the Olney Roots store. “We believe that business and ethics can work quite nicely together.”

Selecting ‘Vendors We Love’

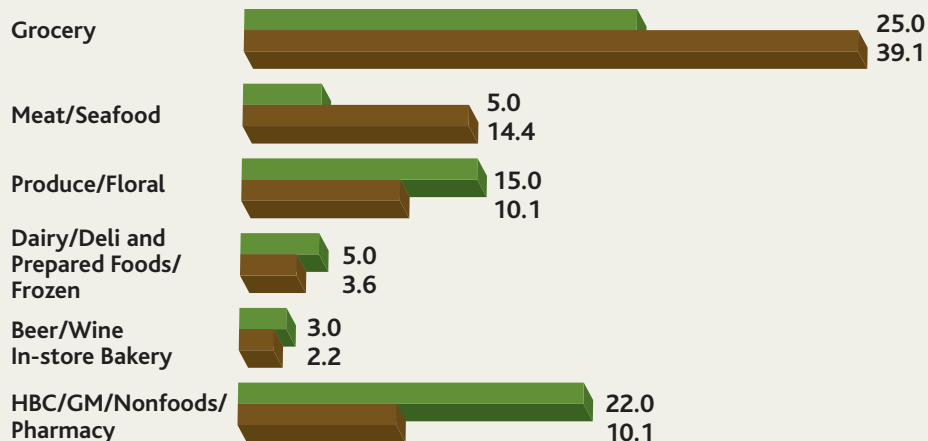
Recently, Kaufman visited Coombs Family Farms in Vermont, a seventh-generation

Roots Market

16800 Georgia Avenue, Olney, MD 20832

Roots Market vs. Industry Average

% of Sales by Department



Trade Area Statistics

	1-mile Radius	3-mile Radius	5-mile Radius
Estimated Population	5,313	67,304	171,430
Total Households	1,723	25,993	60,938
Average Household Income	\$166,856	\$116,084	\$114,285
Average Age	36.12	40.76	39.27
Owned Housing	92.4%	79.4%	79.0%
White Adults	69.8%	62.1%	54.3%
Black Adults	10.7%	16.3%	15.6%
Hispanic Adults	7.2%	9.3%	14.3%
Asian Adults	9.6%	10.0%	13.2%



Grand Opening Date: June 2007
 Total Square Footage: 16,000 square feet
 Selling Area: 13,000 square feet
 Number of SKUs: 13,000
 Total Weekly Sales: \$150,000
 Employees: 45
 Checkouts: Six
 Store Hours: . . . Monday-Saturday, 8 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sunday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m.
 Store Designer: Arium Architects, Columbia, Md.

maple farm, from which it purchases maple syrup products. “I like to understand how the foods that we sell are produced,” he says, “and how to explain to our employees and our customers where this food comes from. A lot of stores are about making as much

money as they can. This store is about having integrity, and to us that means selling healthy products that will serve their bodies and serve the ecosystem overall.”

Coombs Family Farms is a good example of the kind of vendors that make it to the Roots’



Caption:

"Vendors We Love" list, promoted with in-store signage next to their products. The signs explain why Roots chose to call them out to customers, a process that Kaufman says doesn't involve any financial consideration. At Coombs, the company uses "tree-friendly health spouts" to avoid damage to the maples and maintains a sustainable management plan for the farm.

"We don't want to buy from vendors who oppress their employees or their animals, or have any kind of shady business practices," Kaufman notes.

At the time of *PC's* visit, Kaufman had just returned from visiting Hummingbird Farms in Ridgely, Md., which produces the hydroponically grown tomatoes sold at Roots. (The only reason they can't be certified organic, according to Kaufman, is because they're grown in water, not soil.)

"She doesn't make much money, but she's concerned about taking good care of her employees and her customers," he says of Hummingbird Farm's owner. "That's integrity, and that's the kind of people we work with. Yes, we want good tomatoes at a good price. But that's just once piece. It's also about having a better environment and a living wage for employees. We're all connected. It matters to us that the women in Africa who makes the



baskets that we sell in Nest are treated well. It doesn't matter if it's in Maryland, Africa or Vermont. It matters to us."

But Kaufman isn't the only Conscious Corner employee who gets to take such trips. General manager Andy Craig, who doubles as the company's cheese buyer, visited France three years ago to learn the cheese-making process from French suppliers, and is preparing for another trip to England, where he would visit several dairy farms and learn to make cheddar.

"I plan to get down to the nitty-gritty and stick my hands in the curds," he says as he shows off the many varieties of cheeses offered in Roots' cheese island, where a staffer was on hand to answer questions, offer advice and custom-cut cheeses on request. While many European-style cheeses often aren't organic, Craig says they're researched

thoroughly to ensure they're produced using traditional cheese-making methods, which discourage the use of growth hormones, antibiotics and other artificial ingredients.

"When we meet with vendors, we are looking for a good story," Craig observes. "We are looking for something we can feel and touch and have a connection with. We want to bridge the gap and make it acceptable for the customers, so they can see where the food comes from."

While Kaufman, a vegan, wasn't terribly excited about adding meat and seafood to Roots, the company has done so with great care, according to Evan Colby, the meat manager who's also a personal chef (one of three employed at the store) and creates sauces and marinades sold from the meat and seafood cases.

Beef sold at Roots is dry-aged Black Angus from Roseda Beef, a family-operated farm in Monkton, Md., near Baltimore. The beef comes from cattle fed only on grass, soybean meal, corn, hay and fresh water, with grain to finish. The company uses no growth hormones and chemical additives, and no antibiotics unless medically necessary.

There are similar stories for the pork and chicken products sold at Roots. Even the bison, heavily promoted at Roots because of its health attributes, comes from a local operation: Gunpowder Bison & Trading Co., also in Monkton.

Today, the Roots Market in Olney features five 4-foot shelves in its meat case along the store's back wall for beef and bison products, including fresh ground (by Colby), steaks and roasts. Then comes chicken — organic, free-range Smart Chicken from MBA Poultry in Waverly, Neb. — and even ostrich patties, which are 98 percent fat-free. There are fresh-ground turkey and sausages as well.

Roots' seafood department includes Irish organic salmon and other species that come "only from the best waters," according to Colby. "We get our fish from all over the world," he adds, pointing to sushi-grade tuna



from the Marshall Islands. Species sold by Roots carry Monterey Bay certification, Colby notes. "It all has to be totally sustainable and eco-friendly for us to sell it."

Store Tour

As you enter Roots Market in Olney, much of the fruit and vegetables are displayed on wooden tables presented at an angle directly in front of the door. Against the wall at right are lettuces, cabbages, carrots, celery, cauliflower, broccoli, all leading to a vegetarian, organic salad bar that features four homemade soups daily, such as mushroom barley, split pea and white bean broccoli, sundried tomato, and Italian lentil.

To the left of those tables is a lengthy display of bulk items, some packaged and prepared in-store, including nuts, rice, dried fruits, flour, oats and other dry-cooking products. There are more than 20 varieties of shade grown, Fair Trade coffee as well.

Against the back wall adjacent to the meat and seafood, Roots offers a dairy/non-dairy department, which includes milk, eggs, butter and other refrigerated offerings with no preservatives, antibiotics or growth hormones. Most dairy items are organic, and cage-free eggs are a priority. There's also a diverse se-



Caption:

lection of non-dairy products for special-diet customers, including 100 percent organic soy products.

"When local is possible, local is chosen," said Kate Smith, also a general manager at Roots Market. For example, Trickle Springs of Chambersburg, Pa., delivers milk, cream and butter directly from the farm.

Also along that back wall is a prepared foods department that includes fresh sandwiches made in-house. Sweet Sin, located

in nearby Gaithersburg, Md., delivers baked goods, most of which are wheat- and gluten-free, and all contain no hydrogenated oils. Heba's of Manassas, Va., delivers Mediterranean salads that contain no preservatives.

Center store includes nine 20-foot-long aisles offering baking, snacks, American, ethnic, Italian, European, beverages, breakfast, and miscellaneous products. According to Roots, the grocery department's products contain no hydrogenated fats, artificial flavors, colorings





Caption:

or preservatives. Many grains, cereals and pastas have no bleached or bromated flour, and chips and packaged snacks contain no MSG. The grocery department also carries many items for gluten-free, vegan, vegetarian, low-salt, low-sugar, kosher and raw diets.

Just beyond the grocery department is Roots' beer and wine section, with about 300 SKUs, much of it organic from small vineyards and microbreweries. The Clarksville Roots Market doesn't include beer and wine due to local regulations, Craig notes.

A Mission to Educate

Smith points out that wellness is an important component at Roots Market, where educational signs are provided above each type of product, listing their benefits and attributes. "So a customer can go in and learn about the products we offer and why," she



explains. "Part of our mission is to educate our customers."

The store's 3000 SKU wellness and body care section is managed by Miriam Christenson, who helps customers select products to meet specific needs. Joyce Graham, who lives in Olney, says she visits the store as many as four times weekly.

"I love this store," she enthusiastically. "I'm very much into holistic health, and their staff is knowledgeable and helpful. This is my hangout." On the day of our visit, she purchased vitamins and olive leaf for an immune system boost.

Roots also offers free 30-minute consultations with the store's

The Spin-Offs



Those principles are applied to virtually every product sold by Conscious Corner stores, including Bark, the pet food and supplies operation, and Nest, the specialty products store. Both categories of products were previously sold inside Roots, but growth prompted the owners to open those stores. Now, the two Bark stores each carry some 5,000 SKUs of natural, organic, sustainable and eco-friendly products, compared with the 200 or so previously offered inside Roots.

While the Olney store still includes a small supply of Nest products — baskets, shirts and gift items — the full Nest store in Clarksville has a much larger array. "With the clothing found at Nest, we focus on who's making it, whether their people are treated well, and the type of cotton that is used. A huge amount of pesticides used in the world is used in cotton clothing," Kaufman says. The store also sells vegan shoes, which include no leather or animal products of any kind, and which Kaufman wears. Products also include glass items that are either recycled or reused.

Great Sage was launched in 2004, first as a vegetarian restaurant, and now providing vegan food offerings and a bar. Cutler, Kaufman's co-owner, whom he met while they both worked at My Organic Market (MOM's) in Rockville, MD., came from New York City, where her father owned and operated 21 restaurants.

Because Roots didn't have a kitchen in the original Clarksville store, Cutler and Kaufman decided to open Great Sage when a previous restaurant that was in the space just a few doors down went out of business.

"We opened this place because there was no place for vegetarians [or] vegans, essentially in the whole Baltimore-D.C. area," Kaufman says.

Kaufman's wife, Holly, who is managing partner at Great Sage, explains that as much of the food sold there as possible is locally sourced, and all of it is organic.

"Our chef, Russell Svoboda, has an amazing ability to work with plant-based food and offer raw food, gluten-free food, and food for people with all kinds of dietary restrictions," she said. "It's amazing healthy organic food that just happens to be vegan. It really satisfies almost everybody."

So now, what had been a part of the two 16,000-square-foot Roots Markets are now stand-alone businesses, all just a few doors away, and all adding to the overall ring for the entire Conscious Corner enterprise.



nutritionist, who will take customers on a tour of the store and help them decide what to purchase.

Roots provides many special educational events for customers, such as a recent class on wine tasting and a special women's night, held monthly at Great Sage, where topics of particular interest to women are addressed

by experts. Those events are also used to raise money for such causes as breast cancer research.

All of that is part of Conscious Corner's effort to reach out to customers beyond the natural base of shoppers already committed to natural, organic, vegetarian or vegan lifestyles, Smith observes.

In February, the area was blast-

ed with more than 40 inches of snow in two consecutive storms within just a couple of days, and most of the area supermarkets were quickly out of such necessities bread, milk, hamburger, toilet paper — but not Roots.

"We had plenty," Smith says, "so we used social media — a Yahoo list serve and Facebook

—and everyone started coming in and talking about it in the community. We saw a lot of new faces after that storm, and many of them are coming back. I think our customer base has grown because of that."

Limiting its Earthly Impact

As part of its effort to limit its own carbon footprint, the company purchases Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) from Clean Currents, a Maryland-based sustainable small business committed to fighting global warming. Clean Currents purchases its RECs from a number of wind farms around the country. "We purchase enough RECs from Clean Currents to cover 100 percent of our energy usage," Kaufman says.

In addition, the company is now searching for corn-based food containers that can be composted, according to Jack Moore, facilities director, who also oversees most nonfood purchases. Although such containers are available, there's a problem: the corn used to produce them is genetically modified, "and we're not crazy about supporting genetically modified corn," Moore notes.

The Competition

Probably the company's largest competitor is Whole Foods, which operates several stores in the area. But Kaufman contends that the percentage of organic products offered there is much smaller than at Roots, and that his stores generally offer lower prices because of their much lower overhead.

"We aggressively negotiate deals, and we pay prices similar to Whole Foods. But because our overhead is lower, we



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can offer better prices and still thrive," he says.

Conscious Corner's go-to-market strategy seems to be succeeding. According to Kaufman, even during the recession, sales held their own. "Our growth may have slowed a bit, but we did not lose," he adds.

The Meritocracy

Kaufman credits much of Conscious Corner's success to his team of staffers.



Caption:

"We have a meritocracy here," he explains. "People who do well, who utilize their talents, will grow with the company. It is a strong incentive to give all that they can. Promotions are based on the quality of work, not the time that someone has been here."

Kate Smith has worked for Roots for three years, first joining in customer service. "They recognized my talents and they pushed me even beyond them," she says. "And it's great when your boss pitches in and stocks shelves during special events. He asks, 'What can I do?' And he does it."

Craig has been with the company for nine years, starting in

Clarksville as a part-timer. "I like the connection with people, and I like working with Jeff," he notes. "It's easy to influence change. We have a lot of face-to-face meetings. It's not a corporate structure at all."

Kaufman says he's not as "hands-on" as he used to be, as he now focuses more on the

big picture and strategizing the company's future. Conscious Corner intends to grow carefully and slowly, he continues, "because of our dedication to our current customers. Many operators grow too quickly and end up losing quality along the way. We will only expand as we have the human and financial resources to

do it very well."

However, he acknowledges that additional Bark stores are being considered, an indication that Conscious Corner doesn't plan to stand still.

Meanwhile, Kaufman intends to continue to pursue the philosophy that has proved to be so successful, and in his view, so right. ■

The Bite is Worse than the Bark!



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