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Fair Trade.

DISCOVERY ORGANICS



(Left to right) Julie Sage, fair trade & marketing; Annie Moss, president; Randy Hooper, managing director; Damien Bryan, general manager and Stefan Misse, senior buyer.

Devoted to Change

By Robin Brunet

Photography by Phillip Chin

In July, Discovery Organics' new 20,000 square foot headquarters in East Vancouver was still being prepped for occupation. But Annie Moss, who founded Discovery in 1998 with partner Randy Hooper, could be found wandering through the bare facility, looking like the proverbial kid in the candy store.

At every turn, she grins at the much larger storage areas that will accommodate the certified organic and Fair Trade produce Discovery buys from producers or their brokers across Canada and the U.S., but fairly unique in the industry. Discovery also buys 30 per cent of their selection directly

from small producers in many parts of Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador.

She's also thrilled that customers who often drop in will be able to visit her in comfort. "In our old facility, our desks are literally crammed together and meetings are conducted in a tiny lunch room," she explains.

But even though the new headquarters will enable Discovery to broaden its scope, the hands-on approach that distinguishes the company will remain unchanged.

Hands-on, in fact, is the key to Discovery "providing

independents across Western Canada with the absolute best organic and Fair Trade certified produce," according to Moss. Instead of using third parties to do business with farmers in the global south, Moss and Hooper do it themselves wherever possible; and to take a single example of the resulting travel itinerary, Hooper has visited Latin America 60 times in the past nine years.

Hooper, 60, admits that dealing directly with growers in foreign countries can be a logistics nightmare as well as enormously time consuming. But neither he nor Moss can

imagine conducting business otherwise. "With the new trend of worker's rights influencing consumer purchases more and more, we need to make sure that Fair Trade certification standards are maintained," he explains. "Our direct buying approach also allows us to help determine what our growers should cultivate in order to maximize their revenues, as well as check on food safety and handling." To prove that point Discovery has a full-time office in Central Mexico, with a production specialist developing programs with small producers. "That isn't just an extension of our business model," explains Hooper, "Every buyer in the produce business is aware of climate change and how extreme weather relates to supply and pricing, so we are also developing a supply chain in areas that have good growing conditions during the winter months, that don't freeze and which have reliable water."

Moss and Hooper try not to make the excursions alone. "Sometimes our customers — store managers and buyers — come with us so they can see for themselves the authenticity of our supply chain at every level," he says.

These travels, combined with a staff of 50 people fiercely committed to the values of organic and Fair Trade, send a clear message to our customers. "Everyone knows we walk the talk," says General Manager Damien Bryan. "Plus, our hands-on approach has interesting outcomes. For example, we list our products by the farm as well as the

country of origin, and farms, retail buyers and shoppers all respond strongly to that because they seek a connection to the land as well as the food on their plate."

Discovery's expansion from a warehouse with one loading bay to a facility that can accommodate eight trucks simultaneously comes at an opportune time in the organic sector. According to the Canadian Organic Value Chain Roundtable (a coalition of government and industry representatives), 58 per cent of Canadians buy organic products every week, and sales of organic food and beverages grew from \$2 billion in 2008 to nearly \$3 billion in 2012.

Moss and Hooper believe the sky is the limit for further market growth. "When we started Discovery 17 years ago, there were only a handful of organic farmers selling into the commercial wholesale marketplace," says the former. "Today there are 400 certified farms in the province — and far more producers now have the production, coolers and professionalism to sell to a demanding retail sector."

Some outsiders may glance at Moss' flowing garb and Hooper's ponytail and assume the couple is a product of Vancouver's counter culture. But this is only true to the degree that doing things differently is second nature to them.



California-born Moss, 54, moved to B.C.'s Read Island (part of the Discovery Island chain) at age 11. "Dad was a surveyor and mom was a farmer, and farming was vital to our well-being because the island had only 25 inhabitants and no electricity," she recalls.

Discovery Organics recently opened a 20,000 sq.ft headquarters.

Hooper's father was a Vancouver trucker who transported produce to northern logging camps. Hooper subsequently operated a farm and a small food business on Saltspring Island, and it was while plying his trade that he met Annie. "She was working in sales for an organic produce co-op, and I was supplementing local production on Saltspring with a year-round selection of organic produce."

The idea for Discovery came about because Hooper also bought produce directly from Fraser Valley and Interior growers. "I recognized that these farmers weren't big enough to afford their own packaging, facilities or ability to market effectively, but given the early success of the organic movement we knew that the 'buy local' trend would soon follow, so Annie and I decided to develop markets for our local producers and help ease them into the commercial marketplace," he says.

Discovery started small, in the living room of Moss' Burnaby home. But during its first few years, the company brought 90 local growers to market. "Initially we did business by driving around in a five ton truck, but in 2001 we secured a 2,000 square foot warehouse, which we quickly outgrew, and in 2005 we moved to our 12,000 square foot facility, which grew so fast that after a while it seemed normal to hold business meetings in our cramped lunch room," Hooper says.

As of late July, several weeks before Discovery was scheduled to move into its new headquarters, the old facility was a hive of activity, with Moss and Hooper manning the phones, poring over schedules, and answering questions from incoming warehouse staff.

Beyond the windows where the buyers and other office personnel work, visitors are inevitably struck by the intense,

Discovery Organics, Congratulations on Over 17 Years of Success!

Working closely over 17 years with Annie and Randy has been an amazing and insightful journey. They have helped teach the real value of food, and food producers, through an unending series of programs, adventures and incredibly dedicated work. I'm honoured to call these people colleagues and friends and congratulate them on their latest adventure.

—Dave Wilson,
Produce Operations Manager,
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fresh aroma of produce. The organic and Fair Trade certified bananas from Ecuador, avocados from Mexico, and ginger from Peru are some of Discovery's year-round staples, and they provide vivid bursts of colour throughout the climate-controlled warehouse. A complete selection of organic fruit and vegetables is also offered year-round.

This high quality inventory may be a windfall for local grocers and their customers, but growers have benefited equally from Moss and Hooper's business model — especially in Mexico and other Latin American regions, where many farmers live in abject poverty. "Small operators are ripped off all the time by buyers within those countries, so once we determine who we want to do business with, we sign long-term contracts and pre-finance to cover the grower's pick and pack expenses," says Hooper. "All transactions are third party audited by our Fair Trade certifiers to confirm proper working conditions and fair payment to labourers. Our visits also let us see firsthand the community benefits of social premiums that are built into pricing. These include portable water systems, free clinics for health, dentist and cataract surgery, and a myriad of other projects in those producer communities that are funded through the social premium. Witnessing those projects are my favourite days."

"We are an interesting business, with a unique business model. As organics has become mainstream over the years we have continued to work with and promote local producers,



The staff is fiercely committed to the values of organic and Fair Trade.



develop markets for Fair Trade certified produce, and work directly with small producers across the board. I feel that all our work helps authenticate us, and we understand that as the organic produce market develops, it is reassuring for retailers to feel confident in our supply chains. I'm proud to say that I am



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The new facility can accommodate eight trucks.

hard-pressed to find many producers on our list we haven't visited directly in Canada or the U.S., and nearly all in the global South," Hooper says.

Fair Trade practices have resulted in growers being able to develop infrastructure that bigger businesses take for granted. "I'm thinking specifically of a Peruvian co-op that after being guaranteed a good price from us for its mangos for many years, was able to build its own packing plant," says Hooper, which gives them much more control of the supply chain.

These gains compel Julie Sage, Discovery's Fair Trade certification & marketing director, to predict that Fair Trade may soon become as important as the organic movement to the average consumer. "As a business model it's still minuscule compared to other countries: for example, less than one per cent of bananas sold in Canada are Certified Fair Trade compared to 50 per cent in Switzerland. But the public is increasingly concerned about the conditions in which their food is grown, so there's tremendous opportunity to expand what we're doing." Between 20 and 30 per cent of Discovery's produce is certified fair trade, and Sage is confident the percentage will grow.

Meanwhile, the sheer size of Discovery's new headquarters will enable the company to develop new markets. "Up until now we weren't able to increase the volume required to meet an expanding interest in organics amongst retailers outside our historic customer base, which has been primarily natural food stores, but all that will change soon," says Stefan Misse, one of Discovery's three buyers. "Even in our old facility, our sales have been growing by double digits annually; so I've no doubt that within a few years we'll be overcrowded again in the new location."

Hooper, however, plans to slow his pace in coming years. "We operate 364 days a year and I've worked weekdays, weekends and holidays for the past 16 years, developing everything to the point where people like Stefan, Julie and Damien can take on more responsibilities," he says. "Now I want to return to farming, and I'm already cultivating some acreage in Maple Ridge, east of Vancouver."

Moss agrees that her staff members are ready to guide Discovery to new successes. "Damien, for example, was responsible for procuring and developing our new headquarters," she says. "That's his baby, and it's an enormous achievement."

But Moss won't be tilling Maple Ridge soil with her partner anytime soon. "Frankly, I never thought I would spend my life as an office worker, which is essentially what I am at Discovery — but I absolutely love my job," she says. "It's an honour to provide the best produce. That, along with helping small farmers improve their business, gives me tremendous satisfaction." ●



Discovery Organics is an **independent** and **BC owned importer/wholesaler** of certified organic produce, serving retailers since 1998.

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