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## Feature



Photograph by Phil Carter

## Kresge Co-Op

Valerie Luu  
City on a Hill Press Editor

On a daily basis, students on their way to a literature class or the Owl's Nest café pass by a hidden gem.

This space is often occupied by people conversing over Yerba Mate tea on its huge wooden deck as melodies of Bob Dylan and the Beatles float out of the black double doors.

The Kresge Natural Foods Co-op, simply known as the Kresge Co-op, is a student-run grocery store that has existed at Kresge for decades. Run entirely by 19 members, the co-op works to bring healthy, local, and organic produce and groceries to the Kresge and UC Santa Cruz communities — without looking to make a profit.

Situated across the street from the Porter apartments, its blue awning sticks out from red brick walls, with a “co-op” sign written in Rastafarian-colored graffiti letters. Adorning the interior walls are paintings of giant ants and a unicorn-mermaid, with poetry proclaiming love for bagels and breast milk.

Footprints and handprints mysteriously meander across the ceiling. Three guitars sit, waiting to be played, propped against a worn-in couch where people sit studying with open notebooks and steaming cups of tea.

People are warmly greeted, dancing, hugging and indulging in conversation. Students are frequently seen dancing to music while putting together a salad using mixed greens and vegetables from the co-op or creating a “co-op bagel”— topped with Earth Balance spread, nutritional yeast and Melinda’s Hot Sauce.

“It’s very bohemian. It’s not yuppie and gaudy like the dining hall and food establishment, all concreted up and square,” said second-year Ryan Abelson, an environmental studies major who hangs out at the co-op every day. “Good food makes happy people. Happy people make good vibes.”

The co-op offers a welcoming environment that is appetizing in more ways than the typical grocery store, Abelson said, a place where students can hang out and establish a personal relationship with co-op members. “You can’t hang out in a grocery store and do your homework and make up random conversations,” Abelson said. “[At the co-op] there’s no lines, no mess of shopping carts and a bunch of people in the way. It’s smaller but it’s more open.”

In the early ’70s, the Kresge Co-op had its humble beginnings as a teepee in Porter meadow, created by a small group of students who decided to use their collective power to purchase food in bulk. The co-op was shut down, however, when it was discovered that illegal substances — namely marijuana — were being sold out of the back flap of the teepee.

“It’s really difficult to fully know the history because it’s not written down anywhere. Just like a lot of things in the co-op, it’s passed down orally,” said Dorota Szuta, a former co-op member. “It’s like the Bible — you don’t know how accurate it is because it was passed down through so many people before it’s written down.”

Regardless of the origins and accuracy of the stories members share about the co-op’s beginnings, the original ideals of buying healthy, bulk food and using collective power to fuel the co-op is unwavering.

Also steady over the years has been the distinguishing feature of the Kresge Co-op as a student-run cooperative that uses a consensus process to make decisions on what and where to buy products, how to hire employees, and how to function on a daily basis.

It means all core members — those who made a year-long commitment to work six hours a week and attend a weekly meeting — have to agree on potential decisions or actions. If an agreement isn’t

reached, members must negotiate in order to go forward.

“It’s about finding a way to make decisions in which everyone has a say, balancing our needs and desires with other people,” said Bey Sharpe, a core member and fourth-year literature student.

This consensus-based community model is one that Kresge College — originally known as College Six — was founded upon. As an experimental college, founding provost Bob Edgar emphasized the use of a participatory and consensual democracy, as he wanted to leave as many decisions as possible to the newly forming college community.

Darien Rice, a groundskeeper for Kresge for the past 18 years, is on the Kresge Co-op’s board of directors, an advisory committee. She explains that the university has tried to distance itself from its experimental nature over the years and does not think the co-op could be started in today’s university.

“It couldn’t happen now,” Rice said. “It’s only out of that original vision, where students had a lot more to say about how their total experience here was, that allowed it to get started.”

Karen Rosewood, one of the College Administrative Officers (CAO) of Kresge College, said there was a time where students and faculty would gather at Kresge Town Hall to make decisions on who to hire and discuss other college issues.

“There is vitality in this college community that does have to do with that,” said Rosewood, who began working at Kresge College as a proctor in 1991.

Aside from the food co-op, Kresge College houses a garden and music co-op that also keep the tradition of community and cooperative alive.

“College themes sometimes get neglected, but that’s actually enacted in how the co-op leads their business,” Rosewood said. “Deciding by consensus, that’s a tough thing to do.”

The bumper stickers on the co-op’s walk-in fridge say it all: “Co-op, We Own it,” “Support Organic Farmers,” “Food Not Bombs,” “Eat More Kale,” and “Organic for Life.”

The co-op’s main mission is to provide access to healthy, organic, and local foods and members mark up products in accordance with this aim: 30 percent for local and organic, 40 percent for either local or organic, and 50 percent for neither.

“We try and steer customers to pick the better products, and give them incentives to buy things that are good for them,” said Julie Arnez, a core member and first-year environmental studies student.

Arnez, who has large blue eyes and often wears a feather in her hair, feels that it’s important to let customers know what they’re supporting and what they’re not supporting. She works as the ethical investigator who collects data on business practices and corporate ownership.

“I want to make it more obvious to the customers that they’re coming here and supporting better forms of growing food, distributing food and better working terms for people,” Arnez said earnestly.

Essentially, this means buying from the little guys rather than the big guys. The co-op recently stopped selling Dagoba chocolate, an organic chocolate company that was acquired by Hershey’s — a distributor too large and impersonal for the co-op’s preferences.

Instead, the co-op strives to support the most local businesses. Arnez explained how they buy their avocados from a local farmer who uses avocados as his source of income.

“We have avocados from a guy named Bruce, he’s just a local avocado farmer. He owns this little tiny farm and it’s his way of supporting himself,” Arnez said. “It’s not supporting a larger farm that’s local, it’s supporting a single person and we know him.”

Since the co-op works on a volunteer basis, many current and former members liken working at the co-op to having a serious boyfriend or girlfriend.

“Sometimes you’re just too busy in your life to give as much attention as it needs or wants,” said Marnie Sehayek, a first-year Kresge student who recently became a core member. “It takes consistent input. Everyone has their own tasks and that takes effort.”

Sehayek’s tasks include managing the tea and herbs, for which she uses her crafty, self-described clutterbug tendencies to create tea scoopers out of bottlecaps and Popsicle sticks. Other members take upon tasks, which include the grocery buyer, outreach coordinator, and the “bureau slayer,” the co-op member who deals with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Core member Sarah Hieber, the co-op bookkeeper who has a paying job in addition to the co-op, says she doesn’t see a need to be paid for her work.

“I really value that I work at the co-op because I love it,” said Hieber, a second-year environmental studies major. “And not because I’m motivated by money.”

Despite the love many members have for the co-op community and the fact that many, like Sehayek and Hieber, say they don’t mind not being paid, the lack of salary has caused some problems for the co-op in the past.

Sharpe is the oldest member of the co-op, having worked there since he started at UC Santa Cruz in 2005. He explained that member turnover — due to students graduating and lack of monetary compensation — sometimes plays into the inconsistency that characterizes the membership.

“People get busy with their other things — busy with school or have to get a job. It’s such a commitment and takes up so much time without monetary payback,” Sharpe said. “It’s hard to sustain it for some people.”

The large and frequent turnover with co-op membership recently brought about tax problems for the organization. During a shift in new employees in 2005, a tax form that declared the organization’s nonprofit status wasn’t filed with the IRS, a technicality that cost them \$3,000 in late fees and froze their bank account, leaving them unable to place orders.

The co-op organized a series of fundraisers, including a “Fuck the IRS” party held at Kresge Town Hall, which raised about \$1,000 — enough to continue business. The organization is still working to pay off the debt and concurrently trying to secure an abatement that would essentially waive the fees.

“We’re buying our time until we get abatement. If we don’t get it, we might not ever pay it off, [with] the rates of interest it’s incurring,” Hieber said. “It’s not completely back where it was, but the most important thing is that we have so many customers that come into the store and are stoked to buy our products and [are stoked on] what we do.”

In an effort to connect more with the community, the co-op catered Kresge College Family Day and holds weekly potlucks on Tuesday evenings. Aligning with their values of social justice, they switched to Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association Farms (ALBA), a program in Watsonville that trains and assists farm workers to own and grow on their own plots.

To increase the quantity of food, they have received a \$10,000 grant from the Campus Sustainability Council to purchase a new produce refrigerator to replace the broken one, which ended up being converted into a consignment shop last year.

The co-op continues to be, in accordance with their mission statement, a place where “politics and good food meet at the check-out line.”

Sharpe said the Kresge Co-op symbolizes a place that has maintained its liberalism — being an alternative food source with its nonprofit nature — despite the direction of the university, which he describes as becoming more like a prestigious research university and less like a radical liberal arts college.

“The main thing I love about the co-op is that it’s an experimental space. Students come together without a manager, hierarchy, bureaucracy and try and run a store,” Sharpe said. “We’re so used to have someone tell us how things are supposed to be, and to just come together, a hodgepodge group of kids that try to keep something afloat. We decide on our own how things should be.”

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