

LA OSA, A MADRID FOOD COOP INSPIRED BY OUR OWN

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ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

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By Kim Velsey

In 2015, Madrid was caught up in the wave of progressive social change sweeping Europe and, after two decades of conservative rule, elected far-left mayoral candidate Manuela Carmena. For Tomás Fuentes and a group of about 15 other people who'd been running a small grocery exchange—buying organic and fair trade products directly from suppliers—it felt like the right time to do something bigger. “We had been pretty happy meeting people from the neighborhood, getting good food, knowing the suppliers,” said Fuentes. “But then we were emboldened, we wanted to be part of the

changes happening in the city.” The following year, the group opened a small organic grocery store, measuring a little over 400 square feet, in Malasaña, a neighborhood in the center of Madrid. The store operated on a cooperative model, though both members and nonmembers could shop there, with worker-members paying lower rates.

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TOMÁS FUENTES, LA OSA

From the beginning the founders wanted to open a larger store—one big enough and with enough worker-members to lower prices significantly and make healthy foods affordable to everyone. In 2019, Fuentes visited La Louve in Paris, started by two Americans who follow the Park Slope Food Coop model. The full-scale supermarket staffed by member labor, with both organic, specialty foods and staple groceries, inspired him. “I fell in love with that supermarket,” he recalled, describing how taken he was with the professionalism of the staff, the low prices and the 16% margin La Louve was operating with at the time. “I had a dream to take the Paris supermarket to Madrid, without any changes, and start running the business in Madrid.”

In late 2020, La Osa, or “the bear,” opened in Barrio del Pilar near the border of Tetuán, a working class neighborhood in northern Madrid. At about 8,500 square feet, it was much bigger than the group’s previous store, with vibrant green signage, lots of natural light, some 700 member-workers and a large selection of organic produce and healthy foods. It was, however, a terrible time to open a grocery store—the peak of the pandemic had passed, but ongoing restrictions and changed habits, shopping and otherwise, made running the store a challenge. Still, Fuentes and others believed in what they were doing: while supermarkets abound in Madrid, organic foods, though growing in popularity, do not. They’re also very expensive.

But the pandemic wasn't the only significant challenge. Unlike in Paris, where the mayor's office helped La Louve find a large, affordable retail space in a neighborhood with a solid middle-class base, the real estate prices in Madrid made locating anywhere close to the center of Madrid prohibitive. Opening in Barrio Pilar, about five miles away from Malasaña, led La Osa to lose about half the members they'd had at their old store—a significant blow. Finding new members in Barrio Pilar proved difficult: Processed foods are widespread in Spain and very cheap, and it was hard to convince people with little money to spare to pay more for fresh, healthy foods, even if those foods were less expensive than they would have been anywhere else.

The founders were forced to take drastic measures to keep their coop alive: cutting the staff from six to two, raising the product margins and cutting other costs wherever they could. The first year, said Fuentes, was “catastrophic.”

But the store managed to stay open and the situation stabilized. Four years later, “the market is much better now and the people who are participating in it are happier, so they buy more,” said Fuentes. There are currently four full-time staff and one part-time worker and the coop has increased revenues, with better selection and a greater sales volume—they now have just over one million euros in product turnover—although Fuentes added that that's because members are buying more, not because there are more members.

Membership has hovered around 700 since the store's opening, with about half the members coming from a neighborhood that's a 20-minute walk away. About 150 new members join every year, but about the same number leave, many because they're leaving Madrid altogether. The cost of living in the city is high, and housing eats up a huge portion of residents' incomes—rental prices have increased 57% since 2015. Someday, La Osa hopes to get to at least 2,000 members. With more members, they could reduce the product markup from 25% to 20%, and maybe one day get to three million euros in product turnover.

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TOM BOOTHE, LA LOUVE

Tom Boothe, one of the founders of La Louve in Paris, noted that there are a number of coops in other European cities that have followed the worker-member model and are doing well: Bees Coop in Belgium, La Cagette in Montpellier, Super Quinquin in Lille. Munich has one that's been successful, and there's a group in Vienna that has a small shop and is well on the way to opening a larger one near the center of the city. A handful of others are keeping their heads above water, although some just barely. The difficult part, Booth added, is locating in a neighborhood that can support the store, ideally where the founders live (many are pushed to more remote areas by real estate prices), and getting capital to transition from a boutique model to the full supermarket—necessary to make it worth members' while to do regular labor in exchange for shopping there. “A lot of the time, coops get a smaller space and do a test boutique while they look for a larger space and they collapse in between.”

La Louve had a lot of factors in its favor, Boothe added: a supportive local government that helped it secure space in a neighborhood they wanted, being able to get a low interest loan from a French not-for-profit lender, favorable press, and a culture that really cares about good food. “We work with the best cheese distributor in France and carry a really nice comte. Most people in France know the difference between that and an industrialized version, they can tell it's really high quality, and when it's half the price it would be in other stores, that really helps us a lot.”

While La Osa had a rough start, Fuentes says that he's really proud that it managed to keep going without compromising its principles, like requiring member labor. Working to change the food system is quite hard, he added, but people are interested in healthy food and the coop model. People who live in other neighborhoods are always

telling him that they'd love it if a supermarket like La Osa opened near them. His response? "OK, first come to our supermarket and increase the membership. And then, maybe someday, we'll do that."

Kim Velsey has been a Coop member since 2020. When she's not writing for the Gazette, she's a staff writer at New York magazine.