SUPPLIER SPOTLIGHT: GOTHAM GREENS

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By Dan Bergsagel

In July, the Gazette reported on the important role that one of our distributors, the worker-owned cooperative and Fair Trade advocates Equal Exchange, plays at the Coop.

This conversation with a like-minded distributor and our Coop buyers highlighted the stories of many Coop suppliers in our carefully curated supply chain. But it also underscored how most members don't know about these suppliers.

"I wish members knew more about what is going on behind the scenes at this lovely

grocery store," said Britt Henriksson, one of the Coop's receiving coordinators.

This supplier spotlight aims to showcase where the Coop's food comes from: like--minded organizations that value workers' rights and sustainable, ethical practices, and produce healthy, delicious and fairly-priced products.



Gotham Greens is among the most local of the Coop's suppliers. The company grows leafy greens at farms in Gowanus (1 mile), Greenpoint (6 miles) and Jamaica (13 miles).

(Fun fact: the honor of the most local supplier appears to go to a beekeeper on Union Street, a block away, whose honey is sold at the Coop.)

Unlike a traditional farm, Gotham Greens grows lettuce in hydroponic, climate-controlled greenhouses that nourish plants with nutrient-rich water regardless of the season.

Gotham Greens utilizes regenerated former industrial buildings like the Greenpoint Wood Exchange and the Edward Langer Printing Company factory.

Hydroponics has historically struggled to shed its sci-fi connotations or—as the *New York Times* highlighted in a piece in 2011, when Gotham Greens' launched—its association with illicit marijuana farming or a lack of flavor.

But Jodi Genshaft, a vice president at Gotham Greens, said the company has become a sought-after supplier to grocery stores and restaurants across the five boroughs "including Whole Foods Market, FreshDirect, Amazon Fresh, Wegmans, ShopRite, Union Market, and of course, Park Slope Food Coop!"



FRESH AND LOCAL

The Coop strives to source food locally. This prioritizes fresh food and reduces carbon

emissions associated with transporting the food.

At the Coop, “local” is defined as a one-day truck drive (approximately 500 miles). Transporting fresh lettuce from Gotham Greens’ first Greenpoint facility should take about 20 minutes (of course, depending on the traffic on the BQE).

“It’s pretty impressive that they grow within just a few miles of the Coop. You don’t get that pretty much anywhere,” said John Horsman, one of the produce buyers at the Coop.

The Coop has been buying from Gotham Greens since 2013. While Gotham Greens is certainly the closest “farm” to the Coop, it remains relatively small.

“Gotham Greens are basically salads in a clam shell. So they don’t factor against the cases upon cases of loose salad greens that we sell. I would say it is under five percent of the total leafy greens we sell,” Horsman said.

Freshness is at the core of Gotham Greens’ business model, whether selling to the Coop or anyone else. “We harvest in the morning and it’s in the store in the afternoon,” cofounder and CEO Viraj Puri told Fast Company back in 2011. “Literally, they get it the same day. And we can do that year-round.”

This shorter supply-chain also helps reduce food waste. Reducing the time in transportation can lead to significantly longer shelf lives for their products. “Our packaged salads typically offer three weeks of shelf life while lettuce from California and Arizona typically has less than a week before it goes out of date,” Genshaft said.

GROWING CLIMATES

During warmer months, Gotham Greens lettuce is primarily competing with local loose salads from traditional organic farms in the Northeast, but during the colder seasons it becomes harder to source leafy greens locally.

Genshaft explained that “more than 90 percent of domestically grown leafy greens come from California and Arizona,” 2,600 miles away from the Coop.

Approximately one third of the packaged salad sold at the Coop in winter—including arugula, spinach and supergreens—come from Lancaster Farm Fresh in Pennsylvania or Myer’s Produce in Massachusetts, where greenhouses and polytunnels allow for lettuce to continue to be grown in winter.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

This is true beyond leafy greens. “Most of the produce grown in the United States comes out of Yuma, Arizona and the Bakersfield area of California,” said Horsman. “It’s an ideal growing region, and it’s not easy to replicate the geography and climate. They have it down to a science out there with consistent near-perfect temperatures all year round.”

However, the remaining two-thirds of lettuce sold at the Coop—particularly the organic salad greens—is trucked in from these growing regions in the West. At the moment

at the Coop, this includes some specific varieties, such as iceberg lettuce and romaine hearts. Gotham Greens provide crisp alternatives to iceberg lettuce grown much closer to home, such as their Greenhouse Crunch mix.

There are local farms, like Lady Moon, that geographically move by the growing season: “They grow out of Pennsylvania in the regular season, and then move down to Georgia and Florida in the winter months,” explained Horsman.

HOLISTICALLY SUSTAINABLE

The Coop strives to source food not just locally, but also sustainably in the wider context. Sustainability is often evaluated using the triple-bottom-line principles of people, planet and profit.

From the people perspective, Gotham Greens is a local organization bringing employment to the neighborhoods where we live. Their community partnerships with organizations like Green Bronx Machine promote childhood education into healthier diets through donated seedlings, and they donate fresh produce to the well-established charity City Harvest, which distributes free food to food pantries and soup kitchens.

By making productive economic use of the roofs of existing underused industrial buildings—and adding additional functional space—Gotham Greens helps preserve urban landscapes, retaining character in communities.

From the profit perspective, Gotham Greens is a smartly run enterprise. Its product is available in stores far beyond the Coop, and its Gowanus facility, built on the roof of the Whole Foods Market development in 2013, is a long-term partnership. Its expansion from short-life span products like leafy greens into more shelf-stable offshoots like pesto or spinach dip (delicious and also available at the Coop) diversifies its business while still aligning with its core product: fresh leafy greens.

Unlike the Coop, Gotham Greens does not operate based on a worker-owner coopera-

tive nonprofit model. It was founded as a public benefit corporation (PBC), “a for-profit company legally committed to creating a positive impact on society and the environment, alongside shareholder profits, by balancing stakeholder interests (shareholders, community, environment) and reporting on its social mission.” Genshaft said.



However, its recent collaboration with Sesame Workshop—which brought beloved characters like Elmo and Oscar the Grouch to its leafy green packets—was perhaps a triumph of both people and profit: bringing genuine enthusiasm to salad-shy young kids (this reporter’s toddler included) and the associated benefits of healthier diets. Genshaft reported that Gotham Greens “saw this partnership drive sales, brand awareness and education about ways to enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables at every age.”

A MORE COMPLICATED ENVIRONMENTAL STORY?

The “planet” perspective initially seems straightforward. Aside from the clear reduc-

tion in transportation emissions from such local produce, Genshaft and Gotham Greens' promotional materials highlight what they say are the benefits of the company's urban hydroponic approaches:

- They use "up to 90 percent less water than traditional open-field farms" due to the contained hydroponics method and the filtering and recycling of water.
- They use "up to 97 percent less land than traditional farming."
- They use natural pest control in their greenhouse environments instead of chemical pesticides.
- The facilities are energy-efficient and some of their energy supply is from renewable solar and wind electricity generation.

By continuing to use existing buildings and extending their life, Gotham Greens avoids demolition and construction of replacement structures, reducing carbon emissions and extending the utility of the resources and carbon emissions that went into the initial construction.

Gotham Greens is active in reducing waste in the food supply industry, and its Ugly Greens product—often on sale at the Coop—is an example of action on this topic. These are bags of leaves that are not up to the aesthetic standards shoppers are accustomed to because of pests or excessive light. But aside from cosmetic defects, these greens are good for eating.

It's worth noting that it is not clear whether the carbon emissions of climate-controlled hydroponic growing are lower than those of traditional farming.

Climate-controlled greenhouses are energy intensive—how sustainable they are depends on whether the energy source is renewable or fossil. Gotham Greens relies on energy it purchases from the grid. This could mean that the carbon emissions from growing its greens are higher than those grown in a naturally warm and sunny cli-

mate.

Still, that does not take away from the many innovations of urban farming reflected in Gotham Green’s operation, which allow us to enjoy salads plucked from over our own heads that very day.