THE SECRETS BEHIND THE COOP’S BIGGEST PRODUCE PARTNER

March 24, 2026

LANCASTER FARM FRESH CO-OP.

Lancaster Farm Fresh CEO Casey Spacht

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By Dan Bergsagel

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.

Many members start their shop in the Coop's overflowing produce aisle—jammed with laden U-boats and members inspecting fruit and vegetables. In the local growing season an incredible third of what you see on the shelves comes from one very trusted supplier: Lancaster Farm Fresh Co-op (LFF Co-op).

WHY SO MUCH FROM LANCASTER FARM FRESH?

A member chooses carrots from Lancaster Farm Fresh

A third of produce at any one time is obviously a significant proportion to be sourced from one supplier. “They are very important,” said John Horsman, a produce buyer at the Coop. “They are very consistent, and the quality is just amazing.” Even outside of the local growing season, Lancaster provides 5–10% of the Coop’s fresh produce, mainly carrots and other root vegetables.

“The number one requirement for the Coop is quality. After quality, we will look at pricing. LFF has very good prices and has extremely good quality,” Horsman explained.

This crucial mix of quality and price reflects in part the values of the communities that comprise the majority of farmers in the LFF Co-op—Amish and Mennonite. Their traditional agricultural and labor practices eschew modern technology, farm equip-

ment and chemical treatment, and instead adopt organic principles that ensure quality products and healthy soil. This traditional practice goes beyond complying with the minimum requirements of the USDA Certified Organic system.

The produce from Lancaster is comparatively local—less than 200 miles from the Coop, although not quite as local as Gotham Greens—which means it is very fresh.

“Their shelf life is just amazing,” said Horsman.

The geographical advantage can best be understood when you consider the shipping challenges for a large-scale farm in the growing regions of California.

A head of lettuce in California will be harvested and the cases will be packed in the field. They will then be stacked on pallets and collected every two hours to be placed in chilled storage.

“It maybe gets out in two days, is driven across the country in four days, and by the time it’s on the shelf it’s maybe five to seven days old,” Horsman said.

Because LFF Co-op is so close, you can hold a head of lettuce in Brooklyn on a Monday and be confident that it was picked on Saturday, or “worst-case Friday,” Horsman said.

“We go through thousands of cases a week of produce, and we look through them all and return stuff if it is not top quality,” he said. “It is a very rare day that we return anything to LFF. I can’t say that about anybody else.”

Often this high-quality traditional farming practice is associated with small farms, and this comes at a financial cost as they compete with larger organizations. “The smaller the farm, the higher the price,” noted Horsman.

However, the growers of LFF Co-op have overcome many of these financial barriers

by realizing the benefits of operating as a cooperative.

AN UNLIKELY START

LFF growing fields

LFF Co-op's alignment with the Coop's tagline "Good Food at Low Prices" reflects the unlikely alliance between Amish and Mennonite farmers and a self-confessed "punk rock skateboarder," Casey Spacht, a founder and the executive director of Lancaster Farm Fresh Co-op.

Spacht has a do-it-yourself ethos and a background in eco-activism, natural food coops and nonprofits. Spacht spoke with the *Gazette* soon after returning from his annual ice fishing trip, on which he caught 15 fish. "I'm a big proponent of clean, healthy foods," he said. "I don't eat any meat except for the fish I catch myself from the clean pristine lakes I find in the north woods of Maine. That stocks my freezer and I'm good for the year."

The farmers and Spacht came together to fill a shared need in their communities: “The farmers were not being taken care of,” said Spacht.

There were several neighboring certified organic farmers growing high-quality vegetables and competing in the same markets.

“They would be delivering to the same restaurant in Philadelphia, and they would see their neighbor’s car there.”

There was a clear opportunity to coordinate to share in costs and avoid duplication. So Spacht said, “Let’s reduce the work for ourselves so we can stay on the farm more and do what we do best: stay with our families, take care of the land and soil and farm these valued products for our community.”

GROWING A FARMING COOPERATIVE

Golden beets from LFF

Spacht and six other farmers first met in 2005 by kerosene lamp-light, sitting on straw bales in the basement of one of their barns, and outlined their visions for a farming cooperative. While the shared need was already there, the shared trust had to be built. “The Amish and Mennonite cultures really keep to themselves, and like anyone would, I had to prove myself to them,” said Spacht.

Since then, LFF Co-op has seen significant growth. Today, it encompasses around 120 farmers spread over more than 1,000 acres—approaching double the area of Prospect Park.

COOPERATING ORGANICALLY, MORE THAN JUST SALAD

LFF lettuce in the produce aisle

In the early days, Spacht took on multiple roles at LFF Co-op, but now the Co-op services are provided by five staff teams: quality, sales, warehousing, transportation and finance.

Spacht oversees the staff teams and in turn reports to a seven-member Board of Directors made up of member-farmers, who are themselves elected by the LFF Co-op members. “We’re not experts in anything; we’re just ordinary farmers filling a niche for our community,” said Spacht.

The cooperative is a community. It has big meetings for all the farmers and gives out awards for things like best quality and best food safety.

“We’re always helping educate our farmers, but it’s not a one-way street. We’ll have a meeting about who will grow what each year, and sit down in a room all day and plan this out for each crop,” said Spacht. These meetings are opportunities for intergenerational discussion and learning, with the age of LFF Co-op farmers stretching from their late 60s to their early 20s.”

“We have a very diverse and cultured group of farmers,” explained Spacht. This farming group has moved beyond traditional Amish farm staples—potato, cabbage, carrots—to meet requests for vegetables and newer varieties that they may not have grown, like red leeks, fennel and Asian vegetables. And more is going on behind the scenes. The Coop may request ten cases of dinosaur kale from LFF Co-op, but this may well be fulfilled by three different farms.

LFF Co-op does more than just produce; some of the eggs, dairy, honey, medicinal herbs, flour and even grains (think the pivotal Harrison Ford scene in Peter Weir’s 1985 film “Witness”) on the Coop’s shelves come from their fields, barns and apiaries.

TRADITIONAL AND COOPERATIVE PRACTICE MEETS THE MOMENT


LANCASTER
farm fresh co-op
grown & packed by
LIBERTY ACRES
ORANGE CARROTS
(loose)
Sustainably Minded.
Product of U.S.A.
lancasterfarmfresh.com
PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMANN

“One of the founding principles for cooperatives is: coops supporting coops,” said Spacht, “and when that is invoked that is a powerful thing.”

Park Slope Food Coop has been with Lancaster since the very beginning, in 2006, sharing the first ever shipments it delivered to Brooklyn with other early adopters like the restaurateur Andrew Tarlow (of Diner and Roman’s).

“Without Andrew and the Coop, we wouldn’t have what we have,” Spacht said. The relationship goes both ways—during the recent blizzard, Lancaster offered to push forward deliveries to the Coop to ensure that stock disruption was minimal.

Spacht wanted to leave the *Gazette* with a note for our current times, when regulations that limit the harm of conventional agricultural practices are under threat.

Lancaster Farm Fresh Co-op is “not just organic, it is beyond organic,” he said. “We are at the highest echelon—not just a certificate—we really take the highest care of the soil.”

Dan Bergsagel is often mistaken for someone else.