

Food for Thought

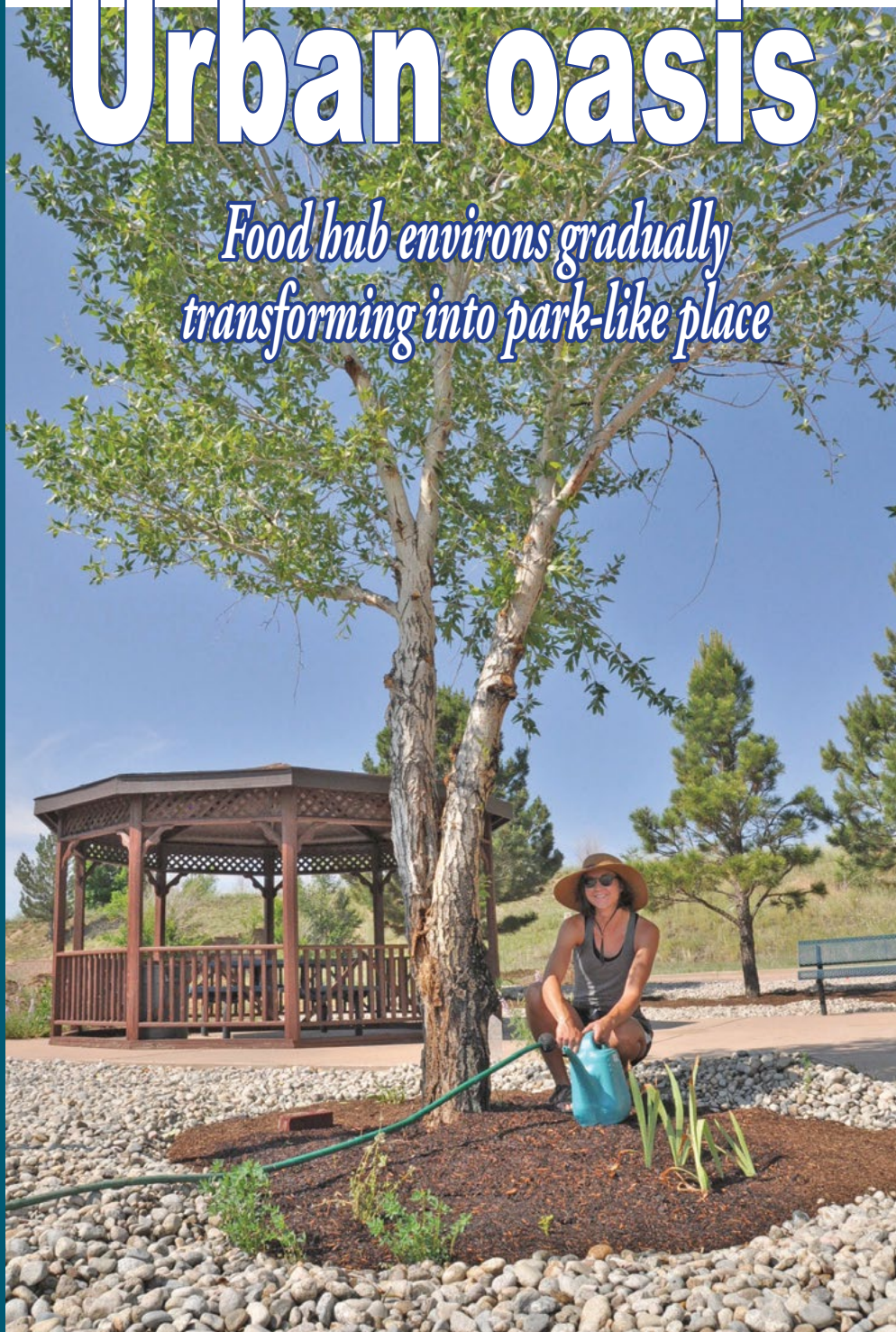
People • Products • Purpose

July 2021

“When I think of that Sun Crest orchard, it hurts to see a slice of my life ripped out, flavor lost along with meaning... A fruit variety is no longer valued and a way of life is in peril... With the loss of variety, consumers will be the ultimate losers.” — *David Mas Masumoto, Epitaph for a Peach*

Urban oasis

Food hub environs gradually transforming into park-like place



OrganaGardens Cooperative member Alyssa Tews is lead manager of the large landscaping and raised-bed gardening project underway at the Peak to Plains Food Hub/Ranch Foods Direct retail store and warehouse. Here, where the rocky soil of an industrial park meets rugged outcroppings and a meandering wooded creek, she and her team are creating a soothing respite from the city that accentuates the wonders of the local ecology. "There are a lot of native flowers hidden in these hills," she said on a recent morning as she watered plants near the newly sculpted walking paths and outdoor gazebo. "We want to create a landscape that is drought tolerant, conserves native vegetation and provides a wildlife sanctuary, especially for birds," she says. Alyssa was born and raised in Colorado Springs, briefly left to attend college, and then returned. In December, she graduated from UCCS with a master's degree in geology and environmental sciences. While there, she worked at the UCCS greenhouse and farm and developed an interest in urban agriculture. "It's insane to think about where most food is coming from and how far it travels," she observes. Supervising the creation of an outdoor community space with shade, benches, walking trails and vegetable beds, at a site intended to bring local farmers together with local residents, aligns perfectly with her values.

The new landscaping at 4635 Town Center Drive is a long-term project that will continue well into next year.

Changing roles, Changing lives

Much has changed for Mariah Hudson over the past year. Back then she had just placed her first order with the SoCo Virtual Farmers Market shortly after losing her retail job, due to the Covid pandemic. She ended up in a

long line of cars waiting more than an hour to pick up her order, as SoCo was quickly overwhelmed by shoppers seeking direct access to local products. "I thought, 'I just lost my job, I don't have anything better to do, why not volunteer to help?'"

She jumped out of her car and went to lend a hand. By the following week, SoCo founder Katie Belle Miller had hired her as the market's first employee.

Together they worked out the kinks and now weekly distribution runs like a charm, with numbered parking spaces, easy text communication and the option for customers to pick up their items after hours inside the retail store. Home delivery is also provided.

The support of the Ranch Foods Direct food hub, which furnishes ample freezer, refrigerator and assembly space, is invaluable. "The food items are safe and secure, and nothing ever has to sit out on someone's front porch," Mariah says. "This is our game changer. Mike's generosity has been incredible."

"One of the best things about this is we're not a traditional farmers market, so the farmers and bakers and artisans are freed up to do what they do well. They don't have to sit here all day long and do what we're good at. We are able to include lots of diverse vendors that way and

provide them with flexible scheduling and inventory management."

Several Ranch Foods Direct items are now available through SoCo. Some of Mariah's favorites include the individually portioned broth bombs, the bacon, breakfast sausage and beef tallow. Beef and pork bundles are also available, and the market is also working on adding bulk grains and flours to the online purchasing options.

Being involved with the market has transformed Mariah's view of the food system and deepened her understanding of its inner workings. Having learned there are options aside from the big box stores, and how many high quality ingredients are available locally, she is now sharing that message in her new job as a teacher's aide at Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning, a Colorado Springs District 11 charter school. She engages with students on food issues and hopes to volunteer with the school garden after it reopens.

Her work has a big impact on local food producers. "SoCo has been a lifesaver for us," says Linnea Thurston, co-owner of Cottage Farms of Calhan, which sells eggs and baked goods. "We had just moved out here and started the ranch and really had no connections in the area. But during the pandemic, we were still able to reach people in the community and give them something they could not get at the regular store. It's been such a blessing." Now she assists with home deliveries. Keeping operating costs low ensures roughly 80 percent of all revenue is returned to farmer-vendors. "We wouldn't have been able to fulfill our dream if it hadn't have been for SoCo, so in turn we want to help other people reach their dreams."



Linnea Thurston gets ready to leave the food hub with a home delivery order. The farmer-vendors and organizers work together to make local food happen.

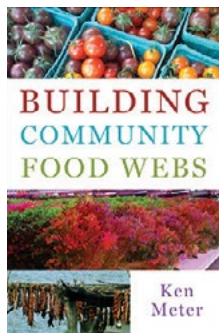
Community vs. commodity



Years ago, Ranch Foods Direct owner Mike Callicrate recalls reading a memorable article about how much food was produced in a small section of Minnesota but how little of it was actually consumed in the same region. "It was shocking," he says. Now, the author of that article, economic analyst and consultant Ken Meter, is out with a new book that covers the work he has done since that time to promote local food networks — what he likes to call "community food webs" — in 140 regions across 40 states, including Colorado's San Luis Valley.

It was Meter's initial farm reporting in the 1970s that convinced him of the critical need to rebuild local food economies. "It was almost impossible to get anyone to print that article at the time," he recalls. "No one wanted to talk about it back then." The trends he uncovered were disturbing. As farmers were encouraged to produce for the export market, the "get big or get out" advice of the '70s set many up to fail during the farm credit crisis of the '80s. Farmers went from earning 40 cents for every dollar in sales in 1910 to around a penny today. By 2018, farm income was lower than during the Great Depression. In the process of "systematically extracting wealth" from both farmers and rural communities, commodity agriculture siphoned away a staggering \$4 trillion, while dividing farmers from consumers. "I feel more hopeful now," he says. "Everyday I'm getting calls from local groups saying the food system is very vulnerable and we

have to do things differently. There's never been a better time for change to happen."



POPPER "JARCUTERIE"
(Single-serving charcuterie boards packed into cute little jars or containers)

Fry up a pound of bacon. While meat cooks, combine 10 oz. of softened cream cheese with 1/2 cup shredded cheddar and 1/4 cup diced jalapeño. Stir until evenly combined. Pat the bacon dry and crumble. Roll the cream cheese mixture into balls; then roll the balls in the crumbled bacon. Layer in small jars with cubes of chile cheddar bread and Southwestern style cheese or Mexican-style chips and crackers.

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Inside the Peak to Plains Food Hub on a recent morning, Victoria Lewis, left, and Lori Kreger, owner of Dona Lorena Salsa & Goods, assemble a large SoCo order for the Salvation Army. Director of programs Quinana Vargas recently began making purchases from the market to provide those in need with healthy food and educate them about options available in the local community. "It's amazing what she's doing," Lori says. Victoria, who grew up on a farm in Kentucky, drives all the way from Denver to assist with the market because she believes so strongly in the cause. Dedication of staff and volunteers make high quality local products available with ease and convenience to rival Amazon or Walmart. "This is a great alternative to in-person markets," Lori says. "And I know my products are in good hands."

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COMING SOON: A new beer brat, featuring craft beer from our friends at local favorite Goat Patch Brewing! **AVAILABLE NOW:** Enjoy the fresh sausages made in-house — including top seller smoked cheddarwurst — as well as smoked ribs. **PREPPED SUMMER SIDES:** Deviled egg potato salad, take-and-bake queso and the ever popular Power Munch salad!



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