

# CULTIVATOR

Winter 2023

News from The Cornucopia Institute

cornucopia.org

## How to Take Back Power in the Grocery Aisle

If you purchase your food at a local or regional grocery store, consider yourself lucky.

The US has one-third fewer grocery stores than it did 25 years ago. Just a handful of retailers control over half of grocery sales in the US. The impact on your food choices and the organic food system needs our collective attention. Here's why.

Large retailers act as the gatekeepers of the food system. They use vast purchasing power to negotiate with mega-suppliers for steep discounts that make it tough for smaller, local players to compete. Not only are independent grocers and farmers forced out of business, you are left holding the proverbial bag — a bag filled with food produced in a system whose primary objective is corporate profits.

The remaining independent retailers uphold a resilient organic food system. Unlike giant grocers, independent retailers and co-ops work hard to build relationships with local producers. They frequently work directly with smaller suppliers, helping sustain and promote local agriculture, while strengthening the organic supply chain. Eaters count on them for thoughtful sourcing guidelines and credible information about their food.

But consolidation is increasing throughout the food system, and not just among grocery retailers. We see this trend in the organic sector as large food companies buy up formerly independent organic brands.

You might be surprised to learn who owns your favorite organic brand. When organic companies are bought by Big Food, it begs a question: Are profits from organic lines subsidizing conventional products and funding efforts to undermine organic principles?

**Among the 10 North American food corporations that invest the most money in lobbying, seven have purchased formerly independent organic brands.**

Although Big Food wields enormous resources and influence, you can count on us to continue fighting for transparency in the food system.

You have power, too. The consumer dollar is critical in countering corporate lobbying power. Cornucopia continues our crucial *Who Owns Organic?* work to help eaters decide whether their "organic" dollars align with their values.

We invite you to use the *Independent Organic Brand List* that recently landed in your mailbox as a roadmap to hidden gems in the food system. Given the effects of consolidation on farmers, consumers, and communities, it's clear that *bigger does not mean better*.



*JIMBO'S, an independent retailer with four San Diego stores, goes above and beyond to support local independent brands.*



# Integrity and Transparency

A letter from Cornucopia's executive director

Dear friends of Cornucopia,

Independence has been on my mind. Our work is inspired by the link between integrity and ownership, and the small-chain networks that result. The Cornucopia Institute is not just a watchdog — we're an *independent* watchdog. We are unbound by the economic interests that haunt our food system. We don't take money from the government or from corporations looking to buy our support. More than half our funding comes from people who care deeply about the food system — people like you.

We know you want to support independence in the marketplace. But mergers and acquisitions happen at a dizzying pace. That's why Cornucopia tracks *Who Owns Organic*. You want to know where your food dollars truly go.

What about all of the once-independent organic brands that have been bought by corporations or investment bankers? In some cases, the brand founder holds onto the reins, and the food stays much the same. But we can't assume it will.

Take Hu Chocolate.

In 2013, their organic chocolate bars hit the marketplace accompanied by this mission: *The words "healthy" and "natural" used to mean something before the food industry hijacked them. We are taking them back.*

The packaging remains but this brand is now owned by an extractive corporation.

In 2021, Mondelēz acquired Hu Chocolate. That same year, Mondelēz was accused of knowingly profiting from child slave labor in Africa to produce other chocolate products. That case is winding its way through the courts. Also in 2021, Mondelēz was found to have violated the law by firing factory workers who were involved in a labor union.

When we buy Hu Chocolate, we are in effect helping to pay the legal and public relations costs of the extractive business practices at Mondelēz. We contribute to their lobbyists, helping them encourage our congressional representatives to mold regulations in their favor.

Use Cornucopia's *Independent Organic Brand List* to choose

food that's free from corporate influence. You can also shop at your local independent retailer or co-op, if you're fortunate enough to have one in your area. They offer you more independent brands than the chain stores, and they work hard to support them.

Your gift to Cornucopia this year funds transparency in our food system, from seed to store.

You make it possible for us to remain the independent watchdog that organic food needs, and I thank you for all you do.

For people and food over corporations and profits,

Melody Morrell, Executive Director

## How to avoid mega companies when stocking your pantry



Did you miss this in your mailbox? Our *Independent Organic Brand List* helps you choose food free from corporate influence.

# How do your snow peas get to the shelf?

Distribution is obscure, but it matters.

For small and mid-sized organic farmers, the path from their fields to your carts is filled with barriers. Distributors call the shots, demanding large quantities, price breaks, and perfect looking produce. But some organic food distributors have a different vision.

In California's Central Coast, Coke Farm has created its own model. In 1978, Dale Coke planted his first half-acre of organic strawberries, a harvest that sparked a mission to support other local organic farms. Today, the organic-only food hub represents more than 100 farmers, 95% of which are minority and women-owned.

Olivier Griss joined the team to help local family farms find access to national markets. Farmers are the heart of the business: Coke's



adherence to growing the best organic produce in California has created a devoted customer base. Its commitment to community can be seen in Coke's partnership with a local nonprofit that creates economic opportunity for limited-resource farmers through training in organic farm management.

The Coke network makes it possible for small organic farmers to reach distributors, retailers,

co-ops, specialty mom and pop outfits, and eaters like you. A rotating product list of niche items like red okra, purple snow peas, sour gherkins, specialty chicories, dry farmed Early Girl tomatoes, and Meyer lemons serve as beautiful reminders of the benefits of supporting local organic farms.

Says Griss, "Let's just call it the preventative medicine for humankind and the planet."



Illustration courtesy of Coke Farm.



# Cornucopia in the Field

## Our Collective Future

Cornucopia's staff and board members gathered at Nehtawanta Inn in Traverse City, Michigan, for several days of strategic planning. Sally Van Vleck and her late husband, Bob Russell, founded the Nehtawanta Research and Education Center in 1987. Their legacy of activism and civil engagement is alive and well throughout the community and beyond.



What a year! Executive Director Melody Morrell spoke at the annual Provender Alliance Educational Conference and attended the Independent Natural Food Retailers Association Conference; Deputy Director Michele Marchetti and Organic Investigator Anne Ross took the stage at Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op's 50th Anniversary Celebration; and Cornucopia sponsored Good Food Fest, an "epic farmers market" that celebrates Pennsylvania agriculture. Cornucopia also went into the classroom, engaging student volunteers from University of California, Berkeley.



Photo courtesy of Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op

Michele Marchetti and Maryam Jawwaad at Good Food Fest in Pennsylvania.

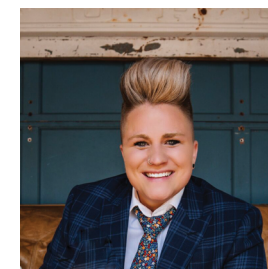


Michele Marchetti (far left) and Anne Ross (third from left) with a group of farmers at Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op's 50th anniversary celebration.

## Our Newest Hires



Maryam Jawwaad  
Operations Coordinator



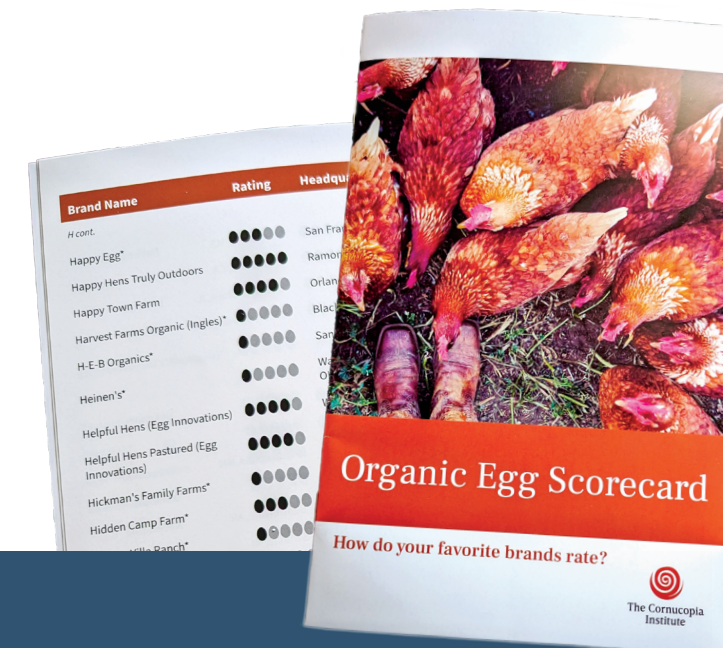
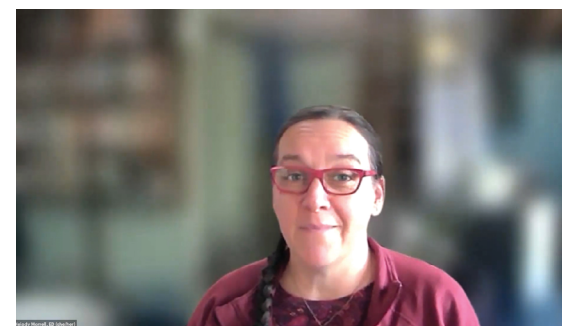
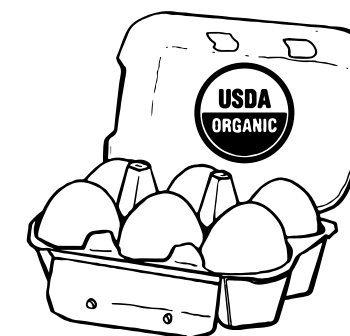
Athens Balko  
Senior Philanthropy Officer



Rebecca Shimp Martin  
Communications Manager

## Policy to Plate

Director of Policy Kestrel Burcham, JD (top), and Executive Director Melody Morrell (bottom) take supporters behind the scenes of our updated Organic Egg Scorecard in a Zoom webinar. We printed the scorecard for the first time ever, sharing it with independent retailers and co-ops throughout the US.



Brand Name	Rating	Headqu
H cont.	●●●●●	San Fra
Happy Egg*	●●●●●	Rame
Happy Hens Truly Outdoors	●●●●●	Orlan
Happy Town Farm	●●●●●	Blac
Harvest Farms Organic (Ingles)*	●●●●●	San
H-E-B Organics*	●●●●●	W
Heinen's*	●●●●●	O
Helpful Hens (Egg Innovations)	●●●●●	
Helpful Hens Pastured (Egg Innovations)	●●●●●	
Hickman's Family Farms*	●●●●●	
Hidden Camp Farm*	●●●●●	
the Ranch*	●●●●●	

### Organic Egg Scorecard

How do your favorite brands rate?





# Can shopping for food save our future?

Meet the owner committed to a grocery store with a lofty vision

Terry Brett spent a recent fall Friday driving five hours to help a young organic farmer with her ambitious plan to save her family's organic dairy and other dairies in North Central Pennsylvania — it's just one in a long list of contributions Brett and his team at Kimberton Whole Foods have made to local and sustainable agriculture. What started in the mid-80s as a modest farm store has ballooned into seven independent retail locations throughout Southeastern Pennsylvania, all committed to what Brett regards as the keys to our future: our ability to take care of our soil, our farmland, and the people who farm it. Brett reflects on his past, while giving an unflinching assessment of what's needed to sustain our future:

## Why did you get into this work?

It's a wild journey that started when I was a despondent teenager who ultimately dropped out of college in search of a way to make the world a better place. I ended up in San Diego in 1975, where I was introduced to organic agriculture. In the 80s, my wife, Pat, and I made our way to a farm in Pennsylvania and started saving money so we could homestead. I became the first yogurt maker at Seven Stars Farm (top-rated on Cornucopia's Organic Dairy Scorecard). In 1986, Pat opened the farm store at Seven Stars. So, before we were Kimberton Whole Foods, we were a store with the sole purpose of supporting a farm.



## Why do we need stores like Kimberton in our community?

I think it's true for a lot of independent owners that profits are not the sole motive for being in business. What we're trying to do at Kimberton is create a supportive marketplace for farmers engaging in regenerative agriculture. If we don't take care of our soil and our farmland and the people who work it, we don't really have much of a future.

## What are the biggest barriers to your goals?

The distribution system — the way products show up on the shelf — can be predatory. The result is unfair charges that make it tough for smaller brands to compete. We have a small warehouse and packing operation, but we're meeting with the township about



Owners Terry and Pat Brett (above right) started a farm store in 1986. Today, their multi-generational family business works with over 200 local producers in the Greater Philadelphia area.



building a much larger warehouse that could handle more products directly. This will allow us to better support smaller brands, while keeping prices down so more people can afford the highest quality food.

## What are the most important considerations you'd like eaters to make when choosing how to spend their money?

Transparency — who owns the business, where the product is being produced, or the system in which the brand operates. Whether the brand is supporting, rather than damaging, the farming entities it represents. With Farmer Focus, for example, you can track your chicken to the farmer and actual people. The more you get into the corporate world, the mechanism for making money can be antithetical to supporting farmers.

## How can increased transparency change the food system?

More and more brands are getting gobbled up by multinational corporations. The informed consumer will often abandon a company that is purchased by a corporate processor. At Kimberton, our customers are counting on us to vet whether a company is worth

a spot on our shelves. But they still have to read the labels and be alert to changes.

## Can you give an example of an independent brand you've supported?

Painterland Sisters (the newest brand on Cornucopia's Organic Dairy Scorecard) entered distribution with the help of Kimberton Whole Foods' interest. Supporting brands run by people with integrity fills a need in a world that's craving connection. It is why we have always been working to expand — the bigger our footprint, the more beneficial we can be to smaller producers.

We are relatively small, but if three or four or five farms exist because of our support, then I feel that we are fulfilling our mission

## What call to action do you have for Cornucopia's supporters?

When considering the daily food purchases we make, it's vitally important that we choose farming operations that have an eye toward truly regenerative agriculture. Eaters can make a difference, but we have to become informed. It's why Cornucopia and independent retailers are so important: we need to get the message out.



"What's good for the farmer is good for us — it's good for society." - Terry Brett, founder and owner of Kimberton Whole Foods.



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As a donor of Cornucopia, you are a valuable member of the organic food movement. We are pleased to continue to bring you quarterly issues of the newsletter as a benefit of your support.

## What's Inside



Where you shop matters. Read our Q&A with Terry Brett, founder and owner of Kimberton Whole Foods, an independent retail chain supporting a more resilient food system.



Corporate consolidation is changing the organic food system, and not for the better. Fight back by supporting independent organic brands.



How does organic produce get to the store? Meet a distributor with a passion for supporting local organic farms.



After years of work, the final Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards (OLPS) Rule has been published. Our director of policy breaks it down in the [insert](#).

