

A farm stand takes root where furs were sold

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Stewart Oksenhorn
The Aspen Times
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Stewart Oksenhorn / The Aspen Times

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ASPEN – Aspenites with a taste for locally produced, organic foods now have a seven-days-a-week, storefront operation where they can shop – and enjoy a ripe slice of irony on the side.

Last week, Roots and Shoots, a market stocking local fruits, veggies and other natural products, opened at 400 E. Hyman Ave. On Monday, Honeybee Organic Juice Bar joined the market in the space.

The previous occupant of the space – a downtown corner location, on street level, across from the Wheeler Opera House, that fronts both the Hyman Avenue mall and Mill Street, and one of the town’s most coveted retail spots – was the Hillis Furs store.

“This is some of the most expensive real estate in Aspen, and we’re selling tomatoes – which is the coolest thing ever,” said Matthew Franzen, a Roots and Shoots employee. “I’m just not sure how that happened.”

Kate Linehan, who operates the Honeybee, echoed the sense of disbelief. “Everyone says, ‘How did you get that space? How did you do that?’” she said, as a co-worker painted colorful signs (“Raw treats”) on the window facing Mill Street. “They’re shocked.”

How Roots and Shoots, whose biggest seller is probably kale, at \$6 a pound, and the Honeybee (20-ounce veggie smoothies for about \$8) came to find such an unlikely home traces back to a pharmacist, a farm, and an Academy Award-nominated film.

Ken Sack, a Florida pharmacist, had an eye-opening experience when he saw “Food, Inc.,” a 2009 documentary that presented a highly unflattering profile of the commercial food industry. “After that, I said organic is the only way to go,” he said.

The 56-year-old Sack, a part-time Aspenite for four years, had sold his Pharmacy Services Group, a company that manages pharmacist benefits, in 2004, and had time and resources on his hands. A year and a half ago, he bought ranch land in Silt and established Eagle Springs Organic, a 1,200-acre farm with a 58,000-square-foot greenhouse, a 1-megawatt solar-energy installation, cows, goats, sheep and chickens. (His plans for the farm include raising tilapia, and growing citrus fruit, which would be a first in Colorado.)

The next piece in the puzzle was a place to sell his produce: About two months ago, Sack bought the Hyman Avenue space, and word got out that a guy who was passionate about organic food was the new landlord of one of the most visible retail storefronts in town.

That kind of information was not going to get past Jack Reed. For several years, Reed has hauled produce from the Paonia area to sell at a series of makeshift locations. He has set up shop outside Victoria’s, the Ute City Bar and Cache Cache; his most recent location was on the patio at Peach’s Cafe.

"I heard farm stand, and my ears perked up," Reed said, adding that an indoor space with refrigeration means he no longer has to load unsold goods back into his truck each night. "I went to investigate. And Ken made it available to us and Kate to run – with a priority for his stuff, of course."

Roots and Shoots sells Eagle Springs' basil, spinach, radishes and more. The store also features produce from a variety of other growers, and items like local honey and granola, and vinegars from Aspen Herb-Infused.

Reed says the timing for moving into the space couldn't be better. Mid-August is high season for local farm products, and Roots and Shoots is overflowing with tomatoes, peaches, onions, greens, peppers and more.

"All I can say is, eat more, preserve more, can more," Reed said. "We're in that one-month glut of Colorado produce."

There is also a limited time window for the market to prove just how much the community values it. Reed and Linehan don't have formal leases – "We have an arrangement. It's more workable than a lease. It's not even understood yet what I'm paying," Reed said – but Sack's plan is to move the market to a below-grade space next year, when he wants to open a pair of watch boutiques in the street-level space. Reed hopes that the next six months or so demonstrate that local foods merit a prominent location.

"This is the chance to buy local as much as possible," said Reed, who will be open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., seven days a week. "Any time you think of going shopping, we're here making a heroic effort to make it available. This is a chance to step up and know your farmer – or know your farmer's market man."

Linehan, who relocated the Honeybee from an indoor hallway space a few blocks away, didn't think the presence of a farm market and her juice bar in their current space indicated a significant shift in Aspen's retail landscape. But she did believe it was a sign of how people are thinking about local food.

"It's a glimmer. It's something that the guy who owns this building even has this idea, this interest," she said. "We have this snapshot of time to make it something that the community wants and needs."

Though Roots and Shoots and the Honeybee don't figure to last long in their current location, Sack confirmed that he intends to make the downstairs space a long-term home for the market. For the moment, he's enjoying giving local foods a most visible presence in Aspen.

"It's certainly better than having fur there," he said.

stewart@aspentimes.com