



Vermont Guardian

For The Independent Mind

Think sweet, shop local



Shane Desautels, Heather Belcher, Ellen Fox, and Michael Reardon

By Joel Senesac | Special to the Vermont Guardian

posted March 31, 2006

ESSEX — This summer, a new market in Essex adds its name to the growing list of stores offering organic and natural foods, but its owners hope to make it stand out by going local in almost every way possible.

Sweet Clover Market is expected to open near the end of June at the Essex Shoppes and Cinema. On March 23, founders Ellen Fox and Heather Belcher gave the public a glimpse of the market while presenting an entertaining and thought-provoking film about locally-owned grocery stores.

The roughly 30 people in attendance also got a literal taste of what to expect from Sweet Clover as they sampled their way through a pre-movie buffet of dishes made from local and organic goods. This was the second and final installment in a film series put on by Sweet Clover Market.

Independent America: The Two-Lane Search for Mom and Pop is an 81-minute documentary about a cross-country expedition by a married couple, both of whom are former NBC journalists. Their round trip was predicated by two rules: avoid interstates or major highways when possible and never enter a retail chain store, eat at a chain restaurant, or stay at a national hotel chain.

Their amusing quest to survive without Wal-Mart or Starbucks is sometimes easy, in towns that have fought hard to protect local store businesses. But it was a different story in some communities whose

downtowns looked all but deserted. At times this film is a sobering reminder of how life has changed.

Before showing the film, Fox, Sweet Clover Market's CEO and president, explained that the pair showed the film to emphasize the positive aspects of small-town shop keeping, especially the relationships Mom-and-Pop stores have with their customers, something Sweet Clover Market plans to emulate. They didn't show the film to simply highlight the negative aspects of the retail giants, she added.

"There was a time that a shopkeeper was really a part of the fabric of our social activity, that you knew somebody first, you had a personal relationship, and then you developed a trading relationship with that person," Fox said. "We want to bring some of that back to the modern shopping experience. ... A relationship with a store goes beyond just that one economic exchange. ... Sweet Clover is a place to get good information, to share stories, a place where you can come get great food and also support the local community and local economy."

Fox said the market will offer local meats, dairy, produce, household and dry goods, frozen, bulk foods, and prepared foods as well.

"Our real focus is bringing local foods to a market seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. So while lots of us shop seasonally at farmers' markets ... or go farm to farm year round, we want to make that a more mainstream, convenient way to shop for everyone," Fox said.

A more detailed description of their product list is available at sweetclovermarket.com. They said they do not expect to fill all the needs of local consumers, but say shoppers can visit supermarkets for monthly shopping and stop at Sweet Clover Market for their week-to-week needs.

The 3,500-square-foot store will fill the space vacated by Paradise Burritos as well as an unused adjacent space. Renovation will begin when they've raised an additional \$100,000 to meet their budget of close to a \$500,000.

One creative way they're using to accomplish this task reflects their store's philosophy, says Belcher, Sweet Clover Market's CFO, treasurer, and secretary.

"Even though we're not a co-op, we've embraced a number of similar ideals and one of the things that we've created to help build community and get everyone as a shareholder involved in our store is to solicit loans directly from the community individuals who are our neighbors and friends and vendors and shoppers," Belcher said.

People who give them a five-year loan of \$5,000 can either earn 6 percent annual interest or receive a discount on all of their store purchases during that five-year span. The loans will be paid back in a balloon payment at the end of five years.

Fox and Belcher, however, say they want more than money from their customers, they plan to rely heavily on their input.

While they already have a number of vendors lined up, they say the list will be constantly evolving based on what customers want, what products become available locally. For instance, they say, if a farm produces a bumper crop in a particular item, Sweet Clover Market could buy the surplus to sell to their customers.

Listening to customers has been a part of their business plan from the beginning. Belcher, of Westford, first got the idea for Sweet Clover Market when she became an expectant mother and started thinking her about child's nutrition. She worked in Burlington and it was easy to shop organic, but that changed on weekends. Fox, also a mother, agreed and the pair realized that many others shared their sentiment.

They proceeded to conduct extensive market research including an informal survey at polling places in Essex and Essex Junction during the 2004 presidential election and found that roughly 65 percent of those surveyed would shop at a store like Sweet Clover Market.

That sentiment was evident at the point in the documentary when the Independent America filmmakers drove into Vermont; the audience began to clap. If that's any indication that Vermonters are ready to put their money where their mouth is, Sweet Clover Market is on the road to success.

Send us your news tips, a letter to the editor or general comments.

* All fields required - This information is used for verification purposes only - Thanks!

Name	<input type="text"/>
Town / State	<input type="text"/>
Zip	<input type="text"/>
Phone	<input type="text"/>
Email	<input type="text"/>
Subject	<input type="text" value="Please Select"/>
Message	<input type="text"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> I wish to remain Anonymous	
<input type="button" value="Submit My News Tip"/>	

Northern Vermont: PO Box 335, Winooski, VT 05404
Southern Vermont: 139 Main Street, Suite 702, Brattleboro, VT 05301
Contact: 802.861.4880 (ph) | 802.861.6388 (fax) | 877.231.5382 (toll-free)

©2005 Vermont Guardian | info@vermontguardian.com

[Vermont web design, development and hosting by Vermont Design Works](#)

Visit us: www.vermontguardian.com

This document can be located online: www.vermontguardian.com/local/032006/ShopLocal.shtml
