

LINC FOODS: INSIDE SPOKANE'S FOOD HUB CO-OP

Beth Robinette, Lazy R Ranch, Cheney

Just under a year ago, Joel and I were sitting next to a dumpster behind a salmon-colored hotel where we had rented excess cooler space of the kitchen. It was a hot July morning that promised to turn blazing. We were waiting for the patty pan squash, beet, and lettuce delivery from Jessica Kagele, a passionate and ambitious young woman who had just begun her first season on her new farm.



Joel Williamson and Beth Robinette of LINC Foods.

Joel and I sat there, anxious and excited. It was happening. We were launching a dream that had been shaped and molded over many, many months. It was a dream we hoped would become a revolution.

LINC (Local Inland Northwest Cooperative) Foods is a worker- and farmer-owned food hub based in Spokane. The worker-owner half of LINC (Joel Williamson and I) are fourth generation Spokaneites, and when we first met in business school at Pinchot University in 2012, we knew we wanted to create something amazing together in Spokane. We both came from agricultural families, so food seemed like a logical place to start. We began meeting in earnest with farmers, food buyers, and really anyone who touched the food system in Spokane who would talk to us.

It became clear that there were many gaps in Spokane's food system. Around the time we began our exploration, the City of Spokane invited a food economist named Ken Meter to do an analysis of Spokane's food economy. His results crystalized many of the conclusions we too were realizing. First, Spokane is an incredibly rich agricultural region. The seven-county region surrounding Spokane produces over \$145 million in fruits and vegetables alone, not including commodity crops such as grain and livestock. Only 0.5% of this food is sold directly to the end consumer, meaning that almost all of it is exported. Fifty-six percent of area farmers report a net loss.

At the same time, Spokane imports \$1.5 billion in food. Spokane's institutions alone spend nearly \$2 million per day on food. And, interestingly, these institutions were telling us that they wanted to start buying local. But the roadblocks to doing so were many. Insurance requirements, large volumes, contract vendor requirements, and the sheer amount of time it took to connect with the many area farmers were all standing in the way. We built LINC Foods specifically around how to address these barriers. After months of scheming, we were ready to put our plan into action.

When we launched LINC Foods, we had a pretty ambitious mission: to fundamentally transform Spokane's food economy by opening the channel between local farmers and institutions. We wanted to accomplish this mission not through competition with existing food distributors, but through cooperation with local farmers. We've grown tremendously since that July morning. We now have 33 farmer-owners, producing everything from produce to dairy products to meat to grain. We are working with seven school districts, four universities, and many area restaurants. Soon, local produce will be found in retirement communities, hospitals, and casinos throughout Spokane.

A different pricing system

Unlike with a traditional produce distributor, farmers list their products on our website and set their own prices. LINC puts a mark-up on top of these prices to cover the overhead, and when the business is profitable, that profit is distributed amongst the worker and farmer owners. Twice a week, Joel and I aggregate produce from our many farms and then deliver orders to each customer in one delivery with one invoice, streamlining the process of buying local as much as possible. Usually produce is picked the same day it is delivered. We are also piloting a multi-farm CSA with Gonzaga University staff and students.

Among the incredible partnerships formed this past year, Gonzaga University has been one of our initial champions and biggest customers. Second Harvest Food Bank has donated dry, cold, and frozen storage. We participated in a business accelerator through the University of Washington that moved our business from pilot to full-blown business. Several local foundations, as well as a local investing club, provided the necessary start-up funds. Our farmers have been unmatched in the level of investment of time, energy, and work put into making LINC a success. After all, if we didn't have such amazing products to sell, we wouldn't have gotten very far.

LINC is also launching an exciting new addition to the co-op: craft malting. We knew from our inception that we would need to have some kind of year-round value-added processing component to really make the business work. The craft brewing industry in Spokane has exploded in recent years, yet despite the fact that we live in an incredibly rich grain-growing region, locally grown malt is virtually nonexistent. Some of the farmers who are already part of the co-op have barley in the ground this spring and we hope to be malting by fall of this year. By next July, I look forward to sitting next to my partner and dear friend, Joel, and cracking open the most locally crafted beer on the west coast. And maybe this time, we'll pick somewhere more scenic to hang out than next to a dumpster.

Beth Robinette is a fourth-generation cattle rancher. When she's not chasing cows, fixing fence, or revolutionizing food systems, she enjoys yodeling badly, making small children laugh, watching terrible movies with her husband, and gazing into the eyes of her faithful dog. (509) 990-4247, elizabeth.clairerobinette@gmail.com. www.lincfoods.com