

COSTERMONGER

A SAG HARBOR STALWART

From its bohème roots to its contemporary Fruit and Nut Club, this natural food grocery has thrived.

BY CHRISTOPHER GANGEMI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANDEE DADDONA

The floor paint in front of the Provisions café counter never stood a chance.

It has been worn away by the Birkenstocks of countless yogis, by the restless feet of children handheld by parents searching for a healthy snack, and by aging hippies who are turning to health food to stave off prescription medications a while longer. A slight, bespectacled man with a gentle presence sits in the café. He seems to know each customer on a personal level. He muses over his disparate clientele and says, “There’s a lot of different directions where business comes from.”

The man is Rich Kresberg, owner and proprietor of Provisions Natural Foods in Sag Harbor.

Provisions, which originally opened in Port Jefferson in the 1970’s, first appeared in Sag Harbor as a health food grocer, with no café, at the corner of Division and Henry Streets, where the Goat Alley Gallery used to be across from Espresso Market. The store would later add a café and move to Main Street. Eventually, Linley Whelan, an employee, bought Provisions with Kate Plumb, who currently manages the East Hampton Farmers Market and remains active in the area’s Slow Food chapter. Whelan and Plumb moved Provisions to its current waterview location on Bay Street in 1987.

Today, Provisions is many things to many people. At its most basic, it’s a health food store with a small organic café. There are two entrances. The front entrance leads to the grocery section of the store. The side entrance leads to the café. Kresberg developed the café menu with chef Paul Jones, who has been at Provisions for the past 12 years. While it contains health food standards like a “grilled tofu salad” or the “baby buddah” (a combination of brown rice, beans, sea vegetables, steamed greens and root vegetables), it also has that chicken hot dog (served on an organic whole-wheat roll) for your kid. Then there’s the ever-rotating slew of delicious specials like “udon noodles with stir-fried seitan.”

Healthy business: When Rich Kresberg bought—and revamped—Provisions nearly two decades ago, he brought a hard-nosed background in restaurant management, a devotion to community ties, and a personal interest in the healing power of what we eat.



“There’s a certain balance to the menu,” says Rich. “It offers something to everyone with special dietary needs.”

The menu also represents a compromise. Economic tensions have always been present in the health food movement. Do you risk profitability by staying true to your ideals, or do you branch out and risk offending a certain portion of your customer base?

“We tried to run a strictly vegetarian café,” says Kresberg, “but that didn’t fly business-wise. So I modified the rules a little. I decided to introduce chicken, but with the understanding that it would be free-range. I offer food that, even if I don’t eat it all myself, is full of quality ingredients.” He pauses a moment, considering the change. It seems obvious that at some point in the past, this was a difficult decision to make. “It was a good compromise,” he concludes. “It introduced a lot more people to the store, and now our most popular soup is the chicken soup.”

But as popular as the café is (they just got those nifty vibrating discs that let you know when your order is ready, to help manage the lunch-crunch), it represents only a third of Provisions’s revenue.

The grocery section of the store carries the café, and just as Rich seemingly knows every customer in the store, it’s obvious that he knows his products as well. You’d be forgiven if you thought he was born in a kale patch, but this isn’t the case. In fact, before Provisions, Kresberg ran a Cajun restaurant, the Great Jones Café, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, that he admits was “as far as you can get from a health food restaurant.” The only vestige that remains from his brush with the bayou is the café’s “eggs jambalaya,” but even that is served with veggie sausage.

Ironically, the success of the Great Jones Café ultimately pushed him into the health scene. The restaurant helped his finances, but it also served up plenty of stress. The rigors of managing a restaurant coupled with a city life that didn’t come naturally began to affect Rich’s health. By the early part of the 1990s, Rich was exploring alternative methods of health care and working with a naturopath. “Through that experience,” he explained, “I began to slowly learn about health food and alternative medicine.”

By 1993, in order to focus on his “health regime,” he decided to take a sabbatical from the restaurant business altogether. He spent much of his time in Wainscott, in a house he purchased in 1986. “I joined Quail Hill Farm in Amagansett. I was eating a mostly macrobiotic diet, meditating, practicing yoga. I learned how to take care of myself.” His health began to improve. But the sabbatical couldn’t last forever. Although his money was running out, he didn’t want to go back to the restaurant or the city.

“My world in the city was very small. I worked in the restaurant mostly and only out of absolute necessity would I venture north of 14th Street. My last apartment was on Third Avenue and 13th street. My friends used to kid that I lived on the Upper West Side.”





Stocking up: Although the café at Provisions is bustling on any given day in August or January, grocery sales are still the majority of the store's business.

As fortune would have it, he didn't have to go back to the city. Provisions, the principled health food store in Sag Harbor that had been feeding the local, alt-eating community for a couple of decades, came up for sale in 1996.

Rich jumped at the opportunity. "I decided that instead of changing myself to meet the needs of my career, I would buy the store and do something that fit my needs instead. All the supplements I needed, all the food I wanted to eat, and the people I wanted to surround myself with, were here." Rich and the previous owner, Linley Whelan, hit it off. "I was a Provisions regular. I knew the staff. It was very important to her that whoever bought the store carried on and even improved on what she had accomplished."

The first five years were tough. Provisions had a sit-down dinner menu back then. "Low volume and a low check average are a bad combination," explains Kresberg. "We'd only do 20 lunches a day and go through difficult slow periods, especially during the winters. We bled money." He ended the sit-down dinners and renovated the café, hitting upon a winning formula: high volume and low check averages.

Around the time the café was renovated, a customer came to him with an idea. Was there a way to reward those who supported the store during the slow months? That question gave rise to the Fruit and Nut Club, which started in 2006. Enrollment for the club is only from December to February, and members get 10 percent off purchases.

"We have about 1,000 members now," says Kresberg. "At \$30 per member, that really helps us during the slow winter months. Of course, I have no way of knowing if it actually increases sales, but people seem to like it. It's our way of giving back to the community. We support the people who support the store year-round. It forges a strong bond between our customers and the store."

But in order to be so popular the store must reflect the needs of the community. At only 2,500 square feet, it's important for Kresberg and general manager Rita Mondragon to get the trends right. They have a limited amount of shelf space. Sifting through the



hype and hucksterism from huge corporations marketing the “green” lifestyle versus finding authentic products from smaller manufacturers is a challenge Provisions welcomes.

They source many of their products from trade shows but also learn a lot from their customer base. “If something is genuinely healthy for you, has more nutrients, isn’t overly processed and has integrity, it will last and it has a place here,” says Rich. “But we’re not interested in fads, like miracle cures or diets claiming to help you lose 50 pounds a month, even if they’re popular.”

The stock at Provisions is fairly consistent but trends come and go. Currently, the “raw food” movement seems to be gaining momentum, and Kresberg feels it’s here to stay. They carry a variety of raw snacks, many of which appeal to parents in search of healthy alternatives for their children. There are raw Kookie Karma cookies, Brad’s raw kale chips and, of course, plenty of fruits and nuts. Provisions also believes that “Gluten Free” is here for the long term. “On the extreme,” says Rich, “more children are being diagnosed with celiac disease, but studies have also linked gluten with compromised immune systems. Reducing gluten intake just seems to be a good idea that’s not disappearing anytime too soon.”

Products that arise out of a dedicated subculture also seem to stick around. “Well before kombucha reached its current state of ubiquity,” explains Kresberg, “people would pass ‘the mother’ kombucha culture around. Its popularity is enormous.” I ask how he feels about Arizona Iced Tea with ginseng, or how about that Dove soap infused with green tea and “cooling cucumber?” “Products

like that actually diminish and disrespect the herbal movement,” says Kresberg. “Those companies are missing the point.” It’s false marketing, like teaching a gymnastics class and calling it yoga.

Another recent trend is the move toward localism. Appropriately, Provisions sources an increasing share of their produce from local farms. “That really took off when Josh Levine became the marketing manager at Quail Hill,” says Kresberg. “Previously, we’d buy product from local farms, but it wasn’t shelf-ready. Josh brought us clean, nicely bundled produce that was ready to display.” Other farmers that sell to Provisions have followed suit. “The customers’ consciousness has evolved. They understand that they’re supporting a local farmer now,” says Rich.

And while the national trend toward “big boxism” (and rumors of a Whole Foods Market or Trader Joe’s east of the Canal) sometimes worries Kresberg, he argues that supporting a local grocer brings an intimacy that bigger stores can’t deliver, and pays other dividends to the community as well.

Walking into Provisions during the cold winter months is a blast of warmth. The wood is a buttery blonde, the music is often reggae, and the space is full of friends you know and friends you haven’t yet met. If you’ve ever waxed nostalgic for the old days when the grocery was the hub of the community, entering Provisions on a quiet January morning can be healing.

“We know our base and we’re a part of this community,” Kresberg says. He pauses, thinking for a moment. “This is here,” he says, firmly resting his hand on the café table. “This is staying.” 🌱