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## Diablo Foods and Local Merchants: a Relationship that's here to Stay

By *Sophie Braccini*



Connie Collier with a cart full of local products Photo Sophie Braccini

When Connie Collier (the daughter of Lafayette Diablo Foods founder Ed Stokes) went to the Jan. 24 San Francisco International Food Expo, she was on a local mission. "I'm always on the lookout for what is produced locally," she says. "With dozens of products that would satisfy the pickiest 'locavors,' Diablo Foods makes a conscious effort to promote producers from the East Bay (and North Bay for the cheeses)."

The range of local products that the store carries is as wide as the store itself.

You can find Black Diamond beer from Concord and many wines from the East Bay including the Parkmon Vineyard label from Moraga, in the beverage section, or condiments such as Cal-Q BBQ sauce from Danville, Comforts dressings and tomato sauce from San Anselmo.

Looking for something sweet? The dessert section includes Gelato Classico from Concord, the luscious Recchiuti chocolate sauce from San Francisco, or the Mountain Fruit jams from Chico. You can even find locally processed Lotus Foods rice and Coffee Magic which has been roasted locally for 30 years.

"When we started to sell our olive oil retail, the logical place to sell it was Diablo Foods," says Sandi Lutsko, producer of Capey Olive Oil. "We live on the hill behind the store, and our kids went to school together. I knew they would be interested in the kind of quality product we are making."

When the Lutskos looked to buy land in order to grow more plants, they had to go a little further than their native Lafayette - buying a 70 acre parcel in Capey Valley, 80 miles away, where baby olive trees had been planted. When the trees started producing, the Lutskos harvested it, had it pressed, and entered a regional contest. They won. Since then, the olives are harvested and pressed the same day with their company carrying the seal of the California Olive Oil Council.

"It guarantees that our first press olive oil is genuine, has been tasted for flavor and is less than two years old," says Lutsko proudly.

"This is the kind of story that I love," says Collier. "We know the people, how they work and we are proud to offer their products to the public."

Diablo Foods is also promoting organic cosmetic and cleaning products made by a Lafayette mother, Laurie Walter, owner of the Chartreuse line.

"I've been working with Connie since last October," says Walter.

"She's very supportive and unlike other retailers, is ready to work directly with producers and try new things."

Walter mainly sells her products through a network of independent consultants, so she was delighted to work with a business that would allow in-store demonstrations. Diablo Foods is open to new vendors, explained Walter, because of their long experience and deep roots in the community.

Denise O'Keffe - another mother who is balancing life and business - makes Bo's Best Pancakes mix that sells at Diablo Foods. "Diablo was the first retailer to take my mixes," she says, "I live in Lafayette so I naturally went to see them, they were wonderful and for the last seven years have been great partners."

O'Keffe now sells nine different mixes that can be found in about a dozen stores in the Bay Area, and her business continues to grow very steadily.

One of the longest local relationships Diablo Foods established was with the Cake Box Bakery in Lafayette which provides the store with packaged dinner buns. "We sell thousands of them during the holiday season," says Collier, "They have been around for as long as we have: more than 40 years."

You can also find local products from less than 100 miles away in Diablo's cheese department. Suzanne Koplos is a gourmet and an expert on local cheeses at Diablo Foods. Although there are no cheeses from Contra Costa County, she has explored the riches of Marin and Sonoma counties.

Among her favorite cheeses are the Point Reyes Blue, the truffle goat cheese from Cyprus Grove in Arcata, and the Monterey Jack from Bella Cheese in Sonoma. Diablo even carries a camembert and brie that are made in Marin County by Rouge et Noir French Cheese Company.

Another great local source is in the fish department. Besides the crab, halibut, and sea bass which have all been fished in the area, Diablo Foods carries a local caviar: Tsar Nicoulai. Their eggs that are hand produced at their aquafarm in California's Central Valley where they raise the white sturgeons that are indigenous to the Pacific Northwest. The meat department offers local lamb and poultry, and provides grass-fed hamburger from Holding Farm.

Diablo Foods is now part of the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" network.

"People want to buy local foods for different reasons," says Collier. "For some, it's because they want to support the local economy, for others it's because they

like to know where what they eat comes from. They like the high quality and they want traceability, while others want to minimize the carbon footprint of what they eat."

Cost, however, is not a factor. "Most of the time," says Collier, "the local producers propose real specialties, creative and high quality products, and their quantities are still small, so they do not have the economy of scale that other nationally distributed brands have."

Nonetheless, she believes that the growing trend is here to stay and with her team she is working on a labeling system that will highlight locally made items.

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