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## West Philly's Mariposa Food Co-op Focuses on Outreach Along Baltimore Ave.

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Food for thought: The Mariposa co-op in West Philly is expanding and hopes to better serve more of the neighborhood. Photo by RYAN STRAND

Strolling down Baltimore Avenue, the tiny Mariposa Food Co-op might be easy to miss were it not for the cluster of activity around its small purple and cyan storefront. Shoppers and delivery workers elbow for space in the store's single entrance. Its two aisles are jammed with an array of fresh produce, grains and crates of food not yet stocked.

The cramped conditions are an unfortunate symptom of success. What started out as a scattered collection of buying clubs in the late 1960s blossomed into a cooperatively owned marketplace at 4726 Baltimore Ave., with more than 1,000 members who purchase a stake in the business and work hours in the store. In return, they receive access to the co-op's stock of organic, locally produced, or sometimes hard-to-find food items as well as cheaper bulk goods than they could find as an individual.

Nearly 30 years later, 500 square feet of retail space was at capacity. For a time, new applications for membership were suspended. "About five years ago we really started feeling the growing pains of our current space, and realizing we ... seriously needed to start looking for a new location or a second location," says Bull Gervasi, a member and project manager for the co-op's expansion.

Dreams of expansion went from fantasy to necessity. But more than simply accommodating more supplies for an expanded roster of stakeholders, there was an even larger, albeit less tangible need.

To its members, the co-op is a culmination of alternative thought in Spruce Hill and Cedar Park, historical bastions in West Philadelphia for radicals of all stripes. It is a means to buy organically grown food from fair-trade suppliers, and it serves as a community meeting place. It is a business owned by neighbors, not a faceless company.

But some outside the co-op saw things differently. They thought it was a secluded club that catered primarily to the tastes and incomes of the wealthy, or white residents, or just simply hippies, depending on the perspective. Contrary to the co-op's mission, it was inaccessible to most of the neighborhood.

**It would be** near impossible to seriously argue that the co-op is intentionally racist or classist. Membership is open to anyone, and the required equity payments (a minimum "buy-in" to help support purchasing power) are extremely flexible. There are anti-racism statutes built into the group's foundational philosophy and a members' committee that exists specifically to debate and combat conscious or unconscious racism's impact on the organization.

In spite of these efforts, and although members are overwhelmingly drawn from the economically and ethnically diverse surrounding area, the majority are white and middle-class. The "members only" rule for patronizing the store and its deliberately low profile on a commercial strip with few options for healthy food seemed evidence enough for these charges.

"We had been so pressed for space, for a long time there was no outreach or marketing," says Gervasi. "A lot of people simply didn't know what we were about or even who we were." Part of the expansion included hiring an outreach coordinator specifically for the purpose of broadening the foundation of the co-op and creating a community survey to shape the new location.

"Right now there's a neighborhood survey team going door to door, telling people about the co-op and the expansion and asking what they want to see in a store in the neighborhood," says Gervasi. "We're going to incorporate that into the new store."

Capital Campaign Coordinator Leah Pillsbury adds, "There was also an idea that we only sell fresh, local, organic products" says Pillsbury, "if we only sold those things it would be very expensive ... we sell conventional items, too. With the expansion we'll be able to sell an even wider range of products."

Previous rules have also been relaxed to make the co-op more accessible. Nonmembers will be allowed to shop as much as they like, and members will receive a discount and a say over the operation of the organization. Work requirements for members will no longer exist, although "working" members will receive an additional discount for their labor.

There is a physical component as well. The new market space at 4824 Baltimore Ave., a block west from the current storefront, is a former bank building that housed a local church group. The imposing, columned structure was chosen in part because the church was eager to sell the building since it was difficult to maintain, but also because it was so prominent—a departure from the current unassuming storefront.

The plans include offices, increased storage capacity; food-prep areas; 2,500-square-feet of retail space; classrooms that will be open to members and the larger community; and, of course, 2,000 more square feet of retail space than the current location. That allows for lots of small changes that will radically alter shoppers' experiences, and hopefully attract more patrons. "Right now you have one cashier and one system and if there's a line, there's a line. You have to wait. Now, we'll be able to have multiple people on at peak time, and eventually an express lane. That kind of improvement in customer service is huge," Pillsbury says.

Accommodating new amenities and renovating a historically certified building does not come without a price. At \$2.6 million, the expansion would be an ambitious plan for the most savvy businessperson, let alone a democratically run organization of well-intentioned neighbors.

The largest single source of funding has come from members, but three-quarters was cobbled together from outside organizations that were sold on supporting the move through the efforts of volunteer board members, stakeholders and a tiny staff of full-time employees.

Sources of funding include major subsidized loans from the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation, the state's Department of Community Economic Development and the Reinvestment Fund. The sale of the old building, support from the Northcountry Co-op Development Fund, and numerous small grants and loans filled in the remainder.

What is most impressive about the expansion project is not its cost or its size. It is the larger story of Baltimore Avenue being remade by the people who live and shop there, of neighbors working to fill the voids left in the commercial fabric of the city after decades of neglect and depopulation. Now, Mariposa can join the restaurants, bakeries, cafes and small other small markets—owned and operated by residents of the neighborhood—that have populated the corridor in recent years.

"I like the idea of us taking over this old bank building, this huge institution," says Pillsbury. "We want to be responsible and friendly, a neighborhood institution."

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