

How We Met: Passion for organic food leads to business partnership

By Nora Heston Tarte, Columnist
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PLEASANTON -- A fast-food restaurant that serves only USDA-certified organic food, the Organic Coup, opened quietly in November in a hidden corner of a strip mall on Hopyard Road.

The story of how that came to be goes back to a years-long association that developed at the Livermore Costco.

Erica Welton and Dennis Hoover met in 2002 while working at Costco's buying office. As the senior vice president overseeing operations and buying, Hoover was Welton's boss.

Welton, who had a long-standing interest in organic, clean and sustainable food, approached Costco with a host of ideas about offering more USDA-certified organic products at the warehouse store. At the time, it was a fairly new concept.

Her endeavor started with buying organic milk for Costco in 2003. "It was something people were still asking a lot of questions about. Was it real? Is it a fad? Wasn't organic just a hippie thing?" Welton said.

The product turned out to be a huge success, and Hoover took notice.

"She was so passionate about organic products and what they stood for, I credit her for being the catalyst for the organic movement at Costco," Hoover said.

In 2006, introducing organic chicken at Costco was Welton's next big aim. Her understanding of truly organic food helped her stand out and propelled many of her efforts at Costco going forward.

She began to verbalize the need for an organic sandwich shop after several business trips (and life as a busy mom) presented a noticeable gap in the fast food market. Talks really started out of frustration in 2013 but eventually led to the Organic Coup. (The name admittedly came from a spelling mistake by Hoover when he was trying to write "coop.").

"We were seeing this huge shift happening at Costco with members' purchasing habits. Organic was driving the business across all categories. Even organic pillows were selling out. If more and more homes were transitioning to clean, organic food, where were these people eating out?" Welton said. "It was time to open a convenient place to eat that people felt confident with."

Hoover said the restaurant dream was Welton's, but because of their shared successes at Costco and like-minded thinking, he was excited to build something outside of the membership-only warehouse, as long as it would be big and disruptive.

"After 33 years at Costco, you're just brainwashed to do things big," he said.

The Organic Coup serves up a selection of certified-organic chicken dishes in a casual, counter-serve cafe. Their key ingredient, chicken breast fried in organic coconut oil, comes in a sandwich, a wrap or a bowl with vegetables.

"Dennis has an unbelievable history of taking concepts and ideas and making them a reality," Welton said.

While neither Welton nor Hoover still work at Costco, they agree their previous employer impacts everything they do.

"Costco is what we know," Welton says.

"It impacts the Organic Coup everyday," Hoover adds.

This column explores relationships of local residents -- married couples, people and their pets, business partners or acquaintances -- whose connections define the fabric of the Tri-Valley. Know of someone with an interesting story? Let us know. Contact Nora Heston Tarte at nora.tarte@gmail.com.

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{"Infobox Text Indent"}The Organic Coup is at 4825 Hopyard Road in Pleasanton. For hours and more information, call 925-399-6719.

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