

By Meghan Howcroft

Walking into Salt Spring Island's newest grocery retailer, customers might not realize they are part of a movement to change the world. But after shopping in green, Canada's first zero waste, low impact grocery store, it's obvious that the store and its inspiring owners are on the leading edge of a grocery revolution.

green, which officially opened June 25th, is 100 per cent committed to providing zero waste, locally sourced, natural products at a fair market price for the citizens of Salt Spring Island, the most populous of B.C.'s Gulf Islands. After only a few months, self-proclaimed environmental crusader and owner Crystal Lehky is confident of the store's success. "I know a thing or two about viability and where numbers need to be," she explains, "and I can tell you that this business is not going anywhere."

Lehky and her husband, Co-Owner Kevin Feisel, moved to Salt Spring specifically to open green. Tired of her management job at a large grocery retailer in northern B.C., Lehky had been seeking an inspiring new business venture. Although her mother insisted she needed to find her passion for a business to be both meaningful and successful, Lehky wasn't convinced...until she discovered that very passion quite unexpectedly.

"I watched this documentary on islands of plastic floating in the ocean and I thought, single-use plastics are going to be the end of us all!" Lehky explains. The mother of five received a crash course on how single-use plastic poisons our food chain, affects human health, threatens wildlife and never goes away; she figured people would never change because there were simply no options. That night at 4 a.m. she was struck with an idea: What if there was a bulk store that had everything a grocery store had without any plastic packaging? She started Googling and discovered Original Unverpackt in Germany — the first zero waste grocery store in the world. The more Lehky researched, the more she knew this was exactly the venture she'd been searching for.

Salt Spring seemed the ideal location for green because of its status as a longstanding farming community, its



Crystal Lehky, co-owner
Photo Credit: Wayne Stadler

GOING GREEN

with Canada's First Zero Waste Grocery Store

commitment to local food and its naturally "green" propensities. "Salt Springers keep telling us that they've been waiting for us," Lehky says with a smile. "The response [to the store] so far has been excellent." It's the perfect place for the couple to work on their business model before opening a second store in Vancouver, which Lehky is confident they will do by the end of 2017.

So, how does a zero waste grocery store work? Customers are provided a wide range of non-packaged bulk products to take home in their own containers or in reusable containers for sale in the store. The approximately 1,200 square-foot space has a weigh station where customers write down the weight of their containers, fill them with store items and then have the weight

deducted from the price at the till.

green, with its apple-green walls, tall sunflowers in pots and minimalist design (imagine no packaging cluttering up the store!), is committed to providing locally-sourced products first from Salt Spring Island, then the other Gulf Islands, Vancouver Island, B.C. and the rest of Canada.

Its fresh and oftentimes unique local produce (think mouse melons and Turkish eggplant) is displayed on locally-built farm tables and its almost 200 products run the gamut, from cleaning and personal-care items (including makeup remover pads and feminine hygiene products), to two-ingredient pastas and artisan vinegars, to a keg of probiotic kombucha — one of the store's big sellers from Salt Spring Island Kombucha Company. The cooler is stocked with

that are natural, non-GMO, low spray and organic when possible.

Lehky encourages her customers to bring in their grocery lists and if they can't find something, to let them know. "Once we know what people want, we are going to find that item and bring it in," Lehky promises. She purposefully left one third of her store empty for this reason. "We want to be a store where people can shop for everything," she adds.

green's suppliers and vendors provide their goods in sterilized, reusable packaging and all refuse from the store is recycled, repurposed, regenerated, or rotted. A key link in this chain is Lehky and Feisel's worm farm. Any paper waste from the store is shredded, mixed with vegetable scraps and fed to the family's Red Wigglers. Their compost returns to a local farm supplier, who uses it to re-grow vegetables for the store in "a full re-use circuit".

Lehky asserts that green's prices are comparable to other local grocery stores and stresses that it isn't just another overpriced health food shop. "There are no health foods in my store. There is just food." She feels strongly that if zero

interest in, creating new infrastructure or changing their shipping methods. This explains Lehky's gratitude and undying devotion to any farm and supplier who has made the effort.

The challenges associated with finding many Canadian-grown foods have been unexpected, even with Lehky's grocery management background. Lehky was shocked, for example, to discover that Ontario's large peanut farms were strictly for tourists. "They told me the peanuts the tourists buy are actually American peanuts," she explains. "The peanuts they grow are not even edible."

Some of the products that travel the farthest to get to green are from Quebec's Riviera (green's supplier of yogurt, crème fraîche, sour cream and goat butter). Lehky initially approached six B.C. yogurt companies about changing to glass jars and was told it just wasn't cost-effective. "But Riviera is selling me yogurt cheaper than they would have, in glass jars," Lehky counters. "So why can't more people do it?"

When she asked people in the grocery industry for advice on her proposed venture she was told it couldn't be done, especially since she's cut out traditional distributors. Lehky's response...says who?

"Yes, ordering direct from every single farm and producer is time-consuming. Yes, it's hard. But what isn't? If you're going to do something that changes the way an industry works, it's going to take some effort. And I'm not afraid of hard work."

Being the first store of its kind in Canada, green is under pressure to succeed, although Lehky is confident she has the skills and business experience to ensure it does. "You can't go at [a business like this] lightly when you're trying to change the world," she laughs. "Because if somebody is the first and they fail, nobody else would ever be brave enough to try. I need to show people that it can be done and how it can be done."

Lehky has indeed found her passion. She even gets teary-eyed explaining, "I'm just really passionate about feeding my community. I really believe the business model for the future is that you can make money, but you also need to take care of your neighbours. And green is proof that you can do both." ●



organic eggs in quaint baskets, dairy products in glass containers, and cheeses in wax rinds from The Farm House Natural Cheeses in Agassiz. Traditional bulk style bins house an astounding variety of dried beans, flours, teas, herbs and a delicious assortment of salts from, of course, Saltspring Sea Salt. In the works are a deli-style cheese counter and the introduction of local breads. Although green is not solely organic, Lehky and Feisel strive to carry items

waste groceries are not accessible to everybody, including single parents, they are not doing the right thing. Thus Lehky operates on what she calls "the Wal-Mart theory" — offering low prices and reaping the benefits of volume sales. She strives daily to dismantle the perception that local, natural foods are only for the wealthy.

Creating a greener supply chain has been challenging, especially since most companies cannot afford to, or have no

Low impact store aims to shake up the grocery industry.