COMMON CROW'S SILVER ANNIVERSARY

HOW GLOUCESTER'S NATURAL MARKET CONTINUES TO THRIVE BY OFFERING COMMUNITY AND GOOD FOOD FOR ALL

BY AMY ALLEN // PHOTOS BY MICHAEL PIAZZA




COMMONCROW
MARKET

When even big-box grocery stores stock organic produce and feature a "health food" aisle, how's a smaller, natural-food market to compete? In the case of a beloved Cape Ann establishment, the answer is quite well. Gloucester's Common Crow Natural Market, celebrating its 25th year in business, has grown incrementally while remaining true to its mission: running a human-scale business that serves its community.

Founder and co-owner Pat Towler attributes the market's success to the growing societal need for personal connections and trust, which is reflected in the store's welcoming environment and its finely curated products.

"I care a lot about the content of what we sell and love bringing people exciting, special things," Towler says. "We look for food that's produced by small family businesses, with organic integrity and no illegitimate claims, and made as close to home as possible. We also adhere to a set of standards related to ingredients."

Indeed, people from Rockport, Gloucester, Essex, Ipswich and beyond make the trip to Common Crow to enjoy soup made from scratch (even the broth), hot coffee and a warm-from-the-oven cookie, organic groceries and produce, personal guidance on supplements, eco-friendly housewares and clothing and the friendly environment.

"An important aspect of our vision is to restore the idea of local, independent businesses as the 'center,' where irreplaceable levels of community, quality goods and great service can thrive," says co-owner Kate Noonan.

Regarding the avian name, Towler says, "Crows have community time and solitary time. They guard and protect their families fiercely. They play and invent. They are a good model of living on Earth, including their notable ability to survive poisoning."

COMMUNITY IS EVERYTHING

In conversation with Common Crow patrons and employees, the word *community* comes up a lot. To them, it's neither a marketing buzzword, nor is it taken lightly. At a time when many people feel lonely and seek social contact, they can get a dose of friendliness and caring at Common Crow from employees and fellow shoppers.

Employee Michael Kelley enjoys camaraderie with his coworkers. He also values the "funky edge and character" of the people who come into the store, many of them artists, musicians and craftspeople. "For many people, this is a home away from home and a place where they are supported and listened to," he says. "I see some of the same faces every day. I got a big hug from a customer yesterday."

Rockport resident and singer of the local band Headlands, John Rockwell is a Common Crow fan. He cites E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* idea that smaller systems tend to be better for people and more sustainable as one reason he's a regular. "I like coming here for its smaller scale and calmer vibe," he says. "They know me here. Someone always asks about my daughter who worked here for a couple years. They know I don't want a printed receipt. It's the small things. Plus, I can take my cargo bike here and get exercise instead of burning gas."

The 7,500-square-foot shop is located on a busy thoroughfare to Rockport, on Route 127 next to the buzzing Second Glances thrift store and adjacent to a yoga studio and a doggie daycare center. The market is well lit by sunlight streaming through the south-facing front windows. The fully stocked shelves and sizable "grab-and-go" food section convey a sense of abundance on a human scale. Aisles are neither numbered nor marked by overhead signs. There's no need because staff members, including co-owners Towler and Noonan, are in the market aisles to guide you and share their knowledge.

IT ALL BEGAN IN THE GLASS SAILBOAT

Sylvie Bell, a mother of three living in Gloucester, says, "Having a cookie from Common Crow transports me back to my childhood." She grew up around her father Mac Bell's downtown Gloucester café, The Glass Sailboat, where Towler worked in the mid-1990s while studying to be an herbalist. Noonan had a nearby mental health counseling practice and often dropped in for coffee at the place she describes as "Cape Ann's hippie living room," owing to its friendly vibe. Noonan and Towler became life partners and, eventually, business partners.

Of her partnership with Towler, Noonan says: "What we can do together far outweighs what we could each do on our own. We are two very different people who process and communicate in very different ways but inevitably end up in the same place. What brought us together was our spiritual connection to the natural world, a pretty strong foundation. Common Crow, while full of daily challenges, provides us with a daily opportunity to practice our devotion."

THE FIRST AND SECOND COMMON CROW LANDING

When Towler decided to leave The Glass Sailboat to launch an herbalist practice, owner Mac Bell persuaded her to buy a portion of the business. Towler and Noonan set up the first iteration of Common Crow in 2000, occupying a small space in downtown Gloucester that offered wellness products, bulk food and supplements. Susan Davis, a Glass Sailboat coworker, came along and has remained with Common Crow ever since. "Getting to know multiple generations of families, making friends and experiencing the trust that people put in me and my coworkers is why I'm here," Davis says. Customers swear by Davis's guidance on supplements and wellness products, and she has a loyal following of her own.

Recognizing the opportunity to expand to meet demand, Common Crow moved to a larger downtown location and transformed into a small health food store stocking








AJWAIN SEED WHOLE
ALLSPICE WHOLE
ANISE SEED
ANISE STAR GROUND

EXIT



Chatillon
NATURALLY GLUTEN FREE WHOLE GRAINS
AMARANTH
BUCKWHEAT
CORN
MILLET
GLUTEN FREE OATS
QUINOA
RICE
(brown, black, wild)
SORGHUM
TEFF
BULK UP!
WILDERNESS POETS
WHOLE MACADAMIA NUTS
foods alive
jungle peanuts
LARGE BAGS
LARGE BAGS

groceries and produce. The market continued growing and after many years of supporting the business part-time, Noonan wound down her counseling practice to focus on Common Crow. Eventually, the co-owners realized they needed a yet larger space and relocated to Eastern Avenue in Gloucester.

THE NEW NEST AND A HAVEN FOR LOCAL PRODUCTS

In 2015, when Common Crow moved into its present-day location, it didn't skip a beat. Seemingly invulnerable to a business plateau, they have reached 70 employees and stock 61,000 items. The bustling café bakes up to 100 cookies per day. Three workers focus solely on making more than 200 servings of soup each.

Kristen L'Abbe-Lindquist, co-owner of Gloucester-based Pigeon Cove Ferments, recalls buying ingredients from Common Crow in the early days of the company she and her husband Dylan founded to make sauerkraut, kimchi and kombucha. "They've always been supportive and excited for us," L'Abbe-Lindquist says. "They were the first shop to carry our products. It's critical for shops like this to support local brands, and they do that well."

When Towler and Noonan learned about the feed protocol and practices of Curtis Custom Meats in Warren, Maine—and sampled their products—they added meat to their offerings. Produce is sourced from Cedar Rock Gardens in Gloucester and Iron Ox Farm in Hamilton, which recently obtained organic certification. The store also carries produce from Crown O' Maine because, "We want to promote use of underdeveloped farmlands of Northern Maine, especially in Aroostook and Washington counties," Towler says.

CROWS COLLABORATE

People pose special requests to Common Crow. Daphne Congelosi, hospitality manager for Rockport Music, coordinates food for the performers at the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport. "Every artist has a hospitality rider in their contract and oftentimes they want organic food, or specify gluten-free, vegan or dairy-free meals, for example," Congelosi says. "The Common Crow kitchen works with me to accommodate them. I can't imagine anyone else doing that."

The community support is two-directional. "I gained 100 brothers up and down the street when we moved here," Noonan says. "These guys help me with anything. When we first got our outdoor freezer, I hadn't thought about how we would get pallets in there without a ramp. A guy down the end of the street who had seemingly every type of machine helped us out. That's just one of many examples."

WHERE WILL THE CROW FLY NEXT?

When asked about retirement and the future of Common Crow, co-owner Noonan responded: "When it is time, this transition will inevitably be a community process, just like when we decided to move from downtown to Eastern Avenue … a kind of natural succession. Common Crow is not only Pat's and my place, it's Cape Ann's place and will evolve into what it is supposed to be, the place that Cape Ann needs it to be."

And so, it sounds like there will be a transition in the distant future. Meanwhile, shoppers can enjoy connecting in the place as it is today. If the pattern continues, Common Crow's evolution should continue to ensure its relevance.

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