

Where's My Cheese?

Still Grinning Co-op members have been rounding up healthy food and smiles since 1996

By Emily Votruba

Current Contributor

It is a chilly, rainy Tuesday morning at 9 a.m. A group of six are waiting in the turnaround of Suz McLaughlin's driveway on M-22, just inside Frankfort's city limits. Someone spreads out a tarp on the wet gravel. The big United Natural Foods semi-truck is on its way, only about 15 minutes late.

Still Grinning Co-op, established in 1996, is the latest iteration of a cooperative natural food impulse in Benzie County that dates back at least to the early '80s. It has a membership of 32 households, about 10 of which make regular monthly orders of natural and organic bulk and processed foods, ecologically sensitive cleaning and personal care products, and many other items and brands that cannot be found anywhere else in the county.

I paid my \$20 non-refundable lifetime membership fee and joined up almost as soon as I heard about this co-op, back in 2010. A veteran of fierce, pioneering, labor-intensive, large food co-ops in



A small group of moist, yawning, middle-aged people—dressed for the various occupations taht they will resume later in the day—waits for a few boxes, bags, a couple of toothbrushes, and some Ayurvedic soap. Photo by Jordan Bates.

Brooklyn and Ithaca, New York, I did not need to be sold on the idea of a no-work co-op that would save me the time, gas expense, and sticker shock of trips to Oryana Natural Foods Market, a community cooperative since 1973 in Traverse City, where I had been heading

about once a week for higher-quality cat food, bulk grains and nuts, organic spices, and my special addiction: Tandoor Chef frozen Indian dinners. I also found new things! Like 10-pound bags of inky Forbidden Rice, Madagascar pink salt, Nielsen Massey vanilla extract, and

organic, full culture yogurt that comes in glass or cardboard containers that are safe for freezing.

I am going to come right out and say it now—I am writing this article with one very selfish purpose: to drum up new members for our little co-op! The fact is, we are starting to have trouble meeting our total minimum order of \$850 per month. (Full disclosure: both Current owner-editors are also members of Still Grinning Co-op.)

Maybe I should start by explaining what a food co-op is. In our case, it is a collectively owned store with no store-age. Once a month, one of us (McLaughlin) submits our orders online with our distributor, United Natural Foods, and then, a week later, a huge semi-truck shows up with a bunch of undivided-up boxes and bags of stuff that we have collectively bought at wholesale prices. There is no building overhead cost, no employees, no shelving, minimal packaging, no displays, no cashiers

Please see Co-op on page 2

All Aboard for Asparagus

Choo-choo!

By Linda Hepler Beaty

Current Contributor

One of the first harbingers of spring in the veggie world is asparagus, a popular early farmers' market pick. Fortunately for those of us in Benzie County, there are quite a few asparagus farmers along our northern border that are already well underway for spring production. Whether you prefer the U-pick option at the Norconk Asparagus Farm—between Empire and Honor, very close to the Benzie-Leelanau county line—or the pre-bundled option at the iconic wooden Harris Farm stand, which stands under a shady grove of trees on Indian Hill Road near Honor, there is plenty of asparagus to be had in our neck of the woods.

People are so enthusiastic about this spring staple that they begin inquiring about availability as early as April, says third-generation farmer Harry Norconk, who, along with wife Barbara, owns Norconk Asparagus Farm.

"When you get a sunny day, about 50 degrees, people start calling to ask when the asparagus will be ready," he says.

But while there is no hard-and-fast rule, you will not see asparagus in Northern Michigan until it reaches about 70 degrees and the calendar flips to May, he adds.

"The season starts May 10, plus or minus 10 days, and it normally ends about June 25, plus or minus five days," Norconk says.

Any earlier than that, and you are in for a disappointment, because asparagus that emerges through the ground on an isolated warm day in late April or very early May will not grow much taller once it cools down to a more seasonal 40 to 50 degrees, and by the



Behold, the mighty asparagus. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

time that it warms up again in mid-May and begins to grow taller, the spears can be tough. Another problem with an early season is the constant specter of frost, which renders the tender veggie to mush overnight. According to the National Climatic Data Center, the average last potential frost date for Frankfort is May 23, meaning that even once the asparagus season is underway, a farmer may still suffer a crop loss.

This year, the asparagus was up in early May.

"But just when it got to three or four inches, we got hammered with a frost; it was 23-24 degrees at night for two days," Norconk says.

The result was a total loss of what would have been a first picking. But Norconk considers an early frost less devastating to the asparagus business than one later in the season.

"If you're going to have frost," he says, "it's better to have it at the beginning of the season, when you can tell people 'No, it's not ready yet,' than if we start delivering it, and then it frosts. When that happens, everyone is upset."

The Mighty Asparagus

While asparagus is globally grown—China, Peru, and Germany are the highest producers worldwide, while California, Washington, and Michigan are the top producers in the nation—and universally loved, few people know much about its history or how it is farmed.

The flowering perennial was once classified in the lily family, like onions and garlic were, but onion-like plants have been moved into the Amaryllidaceae family and asparagus into their own Asparagaceae family. Asparagus is native to most of the western coasts

of Europe (from northern Spain to Ireland, Great Britain, and northwest Germany), northern Africa, and western Asia. It has been cultivated and enjoyed both as a vegetable and a medicinal plant (some considered it an aphrodisiac) since the days of ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt. It was the 15th century before asparagus began to be noticed in France and England, and it was introduced to the United States by the mid-19th century.

The spears emerge from a grouping of rhizomes, known as a rootstock or a crown, and the time from planting a year-old crown to full productivity is about three to four years. A field of asparagus can produce for about 15 years on average, says Norconk, and even longer in a less-crowded home garden.

Asparagus plants need a weed-free environment and lots of water and sun. Once the weather has warmed sufficiently, the spears can grow to full length (about nine inches) within 24 hours, and each plant can produce as many as 25 spears per season, making daily picking a necessity during the short growing period. The vegetable is hand picked, using an asparagus-picking cart, on which up to five people are seated low to the ground, bending forward to snap the asparagus at ground level as the cart passes over the rows. According to Norconk, the average asparagus season yields about 20 pickings, the first two or three a bit sparse, and the last few with smaller-diameter spears.

After the last harvest, the remaining spears that emerge are allowed to grow through the summer season, the stems reaching several feet high and resembling a large frilly fern. The tall plants produce carbohydrates and

Please see Choo-Choo on page 7

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Co-op

Continued from page 1

to pay, and McLaughlin and Richard Hitchingham take care of all of the office work, bank trips, and accounting for free, so there is absolutely no mark-up for members. The only catch is that the “shopping” day is once a month, and you have to come and get your stuff and take it with you right then, or it gets rained on.*

The co-op is great if you like to plan ahead, generally know what you want, have some storage-space wiggle room, and have prioritized driving less, using less packaging, and making ecologically responsible and healthful food choices. And if you can afford the initial outlay of \$95 for a 50-pound bag of organic cane sugar, you can save the extra \$138 (not to mention gas money, fumes, and drive time) that it would cost you to buy the very same product a pound at a time somewhere else.

Each member has a login to the UNFI website and a virtual shopping cart. What I like to do is build my cart over the course of the month, adding and subtracting things as my whims and budget dictate. Once a month, usually on a Thursday or Friday, McLaughlin sends out a warning that our “orders are due” the following Monday. This is the time to finalize the cart and get realistic about how much kimchi I really need.

We get our delivery from the same truck that goes to Oryana and other stores in the region, and that means, almost anything you can get at the big O, you can get in McLaughlin’s driveway, except for fresh fruits and veggies. But when the truck stops for us, instead of a stock team with scanners and pallet shifters and cool uniforms, the truck driver finds a small group of moist, yawning, middle-aged people, dressed for the varied occupations that they will resume a bit later in the day, usually waiting for just a few boxes, bags, a couple of toothbrushes, and some Ayurvedic soap.

What follows is no more than 20 minutes of “Whose is this?” “Did I order that?” “Where is my... oh, there it is.” “Hey, I didn’t get my...” (If you really didn’t get your _____ [which is rare], McLaughlin makes a note to have the co-op’s longtime treasurer, Hitchingham, credit your account.) You hand McLaughlin your check, and then you go home and make towers out of your 96 rolls of unbleached recycled toilet paper.

If you are on top of what you ordered when you show up on truck day, it all goes pretty darn smoothly, and is certainly waaaaay less work than other member co-ops, such as the Park Slope Food Co-op, which, when I was a member, required a 3-hour-and-45-minute work shift every single month, during which I would organize CLIF bars, sweep up arrowroot spills, clean bathrooms, cut cheese (literally), weigh out spices into baggies and put price stickers on them, move cases of soda around in a dank basement, and figure out how to fit boxes of escapist kumquats, three-foot collard green stalks, and rutabagas I could barely palm all onto the same sloping shelf,

while getting sprayed by the produce mister every 10 minutes or so and being literally pushed around and yelled at by a consortium of left and right anarchists, nondenominational Christians, and petulant hippies. God, I miss it.

Small Is Beautiful (But Not Too Small...)

Most co-ops start small, like Still Grinning is now, and grow until they end up with a store, because most people, it is true, do not like to buy 50 pounds of rolled oats at a time, and they really do not like it when their oats get sleeted on because they had to take their kid to the doctor and the truck was late, because the roads were really bad in Bear Lake. (Usually in these rare cases, with our small friendly group, we can work something out; I can pick up for you while you take Little Betty to school, and you can pick it up from my foyer later in the day.)

“It used to be that if you were a member of any co-op in the Michigan Federation, you were a member of the others. Oryana was the first to go rogue and have its own exclusive membership structure,” McLaughlin says, explaining how the co-op landscape has changed. “We used to purchase from a co-op, a nonprofit organization of small distributors that couldn’t compete with the big conglomerates. But, one by one, they got sucked up: Blooming Prairie, North Farms out of Wisconsin. And before that, it was Michigan Federation of Food Co-ops, out of Ann Arbor.”

Benzie County is no longer quite the food desert it was when McLaughlin, Hitchingham, Will Amstutz, and several others signed on with a co-op called Lakeland in the mid-’80s. They can remember the bad old days when the dining and shopping options were much less diverse and very short on healthful and fresh, let alone organic, free range, GMO- gluten- or cruelty-free. Lakeland was part of a network with members in several cities. For instance, Sally Cook, a Still Grinning member now, was a Lakeland member when she and her family lived in East Lansing.

“Lakeland was very well organized, but you had to volunteer work shifts as part of your payback,” Amstutz says. “It was, at times, very cumbersome and time consuming. If you were an unloader, you unloaded, then another team did the splitting. You had to volunteer or be assigned, as a requirement. It was like, ‘Why are we spending so much time doing this?’ Part of it was the number of members—it was big. About 84 people. You couldn’t have 50 or 80 people showing up to rummage through hundreds of items, 30 people looking around saying ‘Where’s my cheese?’

So McLaughlin, Hitchingham, and Amstutz decided to go off on their own.

“‘Why are we going off on our own?’ I had to keep reminding myself, ‘Because we need to keep it simple,’” Amstutz explains. “That was my input: ‘Keep It Simple, Stupid.’ I thought it would be great to have a KISS buying club. So we organized under extremely simple principles.”

United We Divide

When it first formed in 1996, the new co-op met in various places to compile orders, receive deliveries, and then divvy up the goods. Remember,

this was not exactly before the internet, but it was before most people were spending their every waking moment and a lot of their money online.

“We had one sheet with just a few things on it,” Amstutz says of those early days. “We limited it to 12 members at first. If someone dropped out, someone else could come in.”

Sally Cook remembers the meetings, where co-op members would gather to parse out shares of the bulk delivery, showing up with their own bags and jars.

“We’d have a huge tub of peanut butter. And it was the natural kind with the oil on top, so it had to be stirred first,” Cook says.

“Eventually we got smart and got a drill with a paddle on it,” McLaughlin chimes in.

“But someone still had to clean up all the oily, peanut buttery stuff afterward,” says Cook, laughing.

“And we had to do it in a public place, usually. We’ve been in some weird places,” McLaughlin says. First they met in what is now the Roadhouse restaurant building in Benzonia. Then they met at FieldCrafts, a screen-printing and embroidery business who employed a few Still Grinning members. Then they found a home at the Mills Community House. For a while, they were meeting in the basement of L’Chayim in Beulah.

Want or Need?

Cook buys all of her flour from the co-op, despite that she does not bake as much now that her kids are grown.

“I could maybe live without the co-op, but I would miss it,” Cook says. “There are still some things you can’t get in Benzie County. It takes some time to be a member of the co-op, but it takes more time to try to find some of this stuff in the stores. And sure, it’s amazing what you can get now from Amazon. But it’s a tradition in our family to belong to a co-op. Sometimes my daughter will [join in on] our order. I am always looking for something to add. Sometimes you find stuff that you end up really liking, like these canned peaches we can’t get enough of now.”

McLaughlin’s catering company, Still Grinning Kitchens, specializes in local and organic food. (The Betsie Current profiled McLaughlin and her business in a 2015 Q&A that you can read here: bit.ly/2qGoQLi.) She has been the co-op’s chief coordinator and order wrangler since ’96, and she is not tired of it yet.

“I do it for very personal, selfish reasons!” she says, referencing choices for both her business and her home life.

Are We Sustainable? Survey Says...

Sharron and Paul May, of The May Farm in Frankfort, have been members for 20 years, their main motivation being Oryana’s prices and distance.

“[Still Grinning Co-op is] a very grassroots, local alternative to the dominant paradigm for those of us scrappy die-hards who have chosen to cobble together an existence here,” Sharron May says.

But we are an aging co-op, full of empty nesters and some, like me, never-been-full-nesters, and even though I do at least two-thirds of my grocery shopping through the co-op, there are months when I am one of only three or four orders, and that just does not cut it. So back in August, we began

discussing our future. It was Sharron May who volunteered to conduct a survey of the membership—what can we do to improve the co-op, to amp up our monthly orders, and/or how can we attract more members?

She had about 10 responses to her survey. Only two people said that they “needed” the co-op (I was one). Three said it was a “want,” one said it was both, and one said it was neither! And one person said they were just in it for the opportunity to buy Traverse City-based Higher Grounds Trading Company’s coffee at a bulk discount, another service that the co-op provides, separate from our account with UNFI.

The Pros

Among the reasons cited for membership:

- The once-a-month ordering system helps with prioritizing and budgeting.
- The convenient pick-up location (for some members, it is walkable).
- The desire to avoid trips to Traverse City.
- The fact that it is much cheaper than ordering from other online outlets and paying for shipping.
- The value of participating in a cooperative effort.
- Bulk buying reduces packaging waste.
- Maintaining a well-stocked pantry of staples, especially through the winter, at very low prices.
- Continuing a family and local tradition of co-op membership.

The Cons, and Suggestions

The Tuesday morning delivery time is a challenge for some people to fit into their work schedules. It has been suggested that we find a delivery place where items can be left for an entire day without getting wet, to provide some additional flexibility. Some have suggested ordering be every two months; retiree members and those without children do not necessarily need to order every month, and some members are now out of town during the winter. Some suggested going back to having meetings where orders are split up. Some people are overwhelmed by the billions of choices and have a hard time figuring out what to order; some are put off by the ordering interface, which requires a few steps to delete cart items and does not seem to have been designed by Apple. You need some access to a computer or a smart phone to place your order, unless you join forces with an existing member.

Is Still Grinning Co-op for You?

In my opinion, this is the easiest co-

op in the whole world, and we are just in an ebb tide in membership. Benzie County’s population is aging rapidly, according to the latest figures from the county’s Council on Aging. We are losing younger people, especially young families, for lots of reasons, including lack of work, and perhaps more crucially, lack of affordable housing.

On the other hand, we do not have a membership limit, it is easy (and cheap!) to join, and with no work-shift scheduling, we really could probably have a few dozen more members without creating a lot of trouble for our wonderful volunteer staff. So maybe this article will help us to keep grinning for few more months or years, by inciting a few new people to join... is that person you?

If you do not make regular trips to Traverse City for any other reason besides food shopping, this co-op could be for you. Small businesses—and not just small food businesses, like McLaughlin’s—could benefit from ordering food and green cleaning supplies in bulk. And not to worry if your housing situation is small, temporary, or precarious, there may be a way to partner with another co-op member with a large pantry who is willing to be your “store” for your orders or who may want to split an order with you, once you realize that you are never going to use all five pounds of those chia seeds.

Sure, the inventory of local stores in Benzie County has improved a lot, even since I moved here in 2010. Shop ‘n’ Save in Benzonia and Honor Family Market, to name two, are shining examples of openness to special requests, and Shop ‘n’ Save in particular stocks a terrific variety of local and organic produce and healthy convenience foods. But there are still some things I cannot find anywhere at all within 50 miles of my house, let alone at wholesale prices.

I have found my cheese. And you can have some!

**That is the theory. In reality, McLaughlin is too nice to let that happen. But there is a \$5 fee assessed to people who do not show up to pick up their stuff. Again, theoretically. I am not sure it has ever been levied.*

Want to learn more about becoming a member of Still Grinning Co-op? Contact Suz McLaughlin at 231-352-7669 or stillgrinningkitchens@gmail.com.

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The Betsie Current is a free tabloid, published 12 times this year and distributed throughout Benzie County. Advertising inquiries, comments, suggestions, critiques, articles, photos, poems, and letters are welcome. © 2016, The Betsie Current, all rights reserved. www.BetsieCurrent.com

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

CONSTANTLY FLOWING

Mondays

Circle Time for infants and toddlers at the Benzie Shores District Library at 630 Main Street in Frankfort. Infants and toddlers (+ their parents/caregivers) will have fun rhyming and moving with Miss Char, as well as a focus on repetition. Each week, children build their repertoire of rhymes, both old and new. There is an informal playgroup following Circle Time. 10-11am.

Yoga class for seniors led at no charge by Michelle Leines at The Gathering Place Senior Center. 10579 Main Street in the Honor Plaza. 231-525-0600. 10-11am.

A volunteer will be at the Benzie Shores District Library to repair clothing while you wait. No formal wear or upholstery; no drop-offs. 10:30am-12pm.

Cards at The Gathering Place. We have a dedicated group of card sharks who play Pinochle weekly during lunch, but we aren't limited to Pinochle: grab your friends and join us for euchre, cribbage, and rummy, too! 12-1pm.

Grow Benzie Farmers' Market: Every Monday at 4pm and 5:30pm, there will be free cooking and nutrition-education classes. All are welcome! Fresh vegetables and fruits, baked goods, bread, jam, honey, maple syrup, artisan crafts, and more will be featured at each market! You can also tour our new edible trails and try out mini-golf! The Grill Benzie Food Truck will be there so bring the family for dinner! 5885 Frankfort Highway (M-115) between Benzonia and Frankfort. 3-7pm.

Tuesdays

Sunrise Rotary Club's weekly meetings are over breakfast at the Cold Creek Inn of Beulah. Come join us! 7:30-9am.

Stretch and tone with Jean at the Oliver Art Center in Frankfort. Email annamallien@gmail.com if interested. 9-10am.

Technology Tuesday: Benzie Shores District Library in Frankfort offers assistance with technology. Learn how to download ebooks, audiobooks, and magazines to your personal devices. 10am-12pm.

Music by the Melody Makers at The Gathering Place. 10:30am-1:30pm.

Knitting Group at Benzonia Public Library. A "knit-along" project for those who want to work on the same project, or bring your own project if you prefer; we'd love your company! Need help? If you are having troubles with a current project, bring it along and we'll help you get it straightened out. Call Michele at 231-383-5716 with any questions. 1-3pm.

Chair Yoga class for \$5 at The Gathering Place. 3:30-4:30pm.

Yoga with Kari at Pleasant Valley Community Center in Arcadia. Open to all levels; \$13 per session. 231-383-1883. 5:30-7pm.

Deep Stretch & Meditation: This practice begins with asana (postures) and sequences that encourage deep release and ends with

meditation. A variety of guided & non-guided meditation techniques, including Yoga Nidra, will be explored week-to-week. 5:30-7pm.*

Wednesdays

Pilates with Anna at the Oliver Art Center. annamallien@gmail.com 9-10am.

Stay Fit with Doris at The Gathering Place. 10-11am.

Open studio at the Oliver Art Center. Participants are strongly encouraged to become members and to contribute a donation of \$2 per visit. 10am-4pm.

Bingo at The Gathering Place. Cost is \$1 per card or bring a prize. 12:30-1:30pm.

Yoga with Kari at the Oliver Art Center. Open to all levels; \$13 per session. 231-383-1883. 5:30-7pm.

Thursdays

Elberta Farmers' Market at the Elberta Pavilion Park. 8am-12:30pm.

Stretch and tone with Jean at Oliver Art Center. annamallien@gmail.com 9-10am.

Adult coloring at Benzie Shores District Library. All materials provided. 10-11am.

Bible Study at The Gathering Place. 10-11am.

Bunco at The Gathering Place. 1-2pm.

Computers with Carol at the Darcy Library at 7238 Commercial Street in Beulah. Ask Carol computer-related questions. Read to Rosie, the cute little dog! 1-5pm.

Everyone is welcome to attend Open Clay Studio at the Oliver Art Center, including families! Per 4-visit block (12 hours total, used how you like), \$60 fees cover one adult or one adult and child pair. It can be as fun or focused as a student prefers, and all skill levels should consider taking part. Children must be accompanied by an adult at all times in the studio. Price includes: 25 pounds of clay, glaze, and firings. 3:30-6:30pm.

Yoga with Kari at the Ware Farm of Bear Lake. Open to all levels; \$13 per session. 231-383-1883. 4-5:30pm.

Open Mic Night at The Cabbage Shed in Elberta. 8pm.

Fridays

Pilates with Anna at the Oliver Art Center. annamallien@gmail.com 9-10am.

Bunco at The Gathering Place. 9:30-10:30am.

Wii Bowling at The Gathering Place. 1-2pm.

Saturdays

Frankfort Farmers' Market at Open Space Park on Main Street, between 7th & 9th streets, along the beautiful waterfront. 9am-1pm.

Farmers' Market and Flea Market at the Interlochen Eagles #3503 at 20724 Honor Highway/US-131, three miles west of Interlochen. Consisting of Michigan-grown

fruits and veggies, flea marketers, cottage food vendors, artisans, arts & craft vendors, and independent reps. 12-4pm.

Body Sculpting on the ball with Deanne at Oliver Art Center. annamallien@gmail.com 9-10 am.

*Yoga classes at Discover YOU Yoga and Fitness in Frankfort every day of the week, except Saturday. For a complete schedule and more information on classes and rates, visit discoveryogami.com.

ON DECK

Now through Tuesday, June 6

Benzie Central High School FFA Plant Sale: Plants can be purchased at the greenhouse near the student parking lot, on the west side of the high school. We have large tomatoes for \$5, medium tomatoes for \$3, large peppers for \$3, small peppers for \$2, all herbs for \$3, and herb planters in antique sap pails for \$25. Contact Mike Jones at the high school for more information.

Thursday, June 1

Baby's Breath Work Bee: Help the Northern Michigan Invasive Species Network to pull invasive baby's breath from the Elberta Beach. No need to register beforehand, but any questions can be directed to Emily Cook. Bring work gloves, water, and sunscreen. Meet at the beach parking lot. 9am-12pm.

Thursday, June 1

Platte River Clean Sweep: We will meet at the Veteran's Memorial State Forest Campground at US-31 just outside Honor. From there, we will split into groups before hitting the river. We ask that you bring your own kayak or canoe, life jacket, and water to drink. Each volunteer will receive a free tee-shirt and picnic lunch for their service. To register, please contact John Ransom at the Benzie Conservation District at john@benziecd.org or 231-882-4391. 9am-3pm.

Thursday, June 1

Benzie Senior Resources will hold an informational program about all of the available services, resources, and programs that the agency has to offer. Betsie Valley District Library, located at 14744 Thompson Avenue in Thompsonville. Please call 231-378-2716 with any questions. 7-8pm.

Thursday, June 1

Beards Brewery Tap Takeover at the Hofbrau in Interlochen, to pay tribute to ZZ Top, who is playing a concert in town! Beers available will be:

*Oh! The Citranity: Session IPA

*Serendipity Porter: Chocolate Porter

*Luna: Wheat Saison

*Wunderbrau: Cream Ale

*Owlmadillo: Tropical IPA

*Diamond in the Rough: Red ale/ESB

No Growlers on hand, but bring your own and we will fill it!

Thursday, June 1

ZZ Top at Interlochen Center for the Arts: With more than 45 years of hit songs, ZZ Top is an instantly recognizable and undeniably cool American institution. The 2004 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees bring their own

brand of blues and rock to the Kresge stage for what is sure to be a stellar presentation of many of their classic hits. This legendary trio will rock the house with music that is designed to get you on your feet. Get ready for an evening full of red-hot Texas boogie and blues as this "Little Ol' Band from Texas" does what they do best. Check availability at tickets.interlochen.org. 8pm.

Friday, June 2

Dede Alder, a veteran of Earthwork Music Collective, will perform at St. Ambrose Cellars at 841 S Pioneer Road just outside Beulah/Honor. 231-383-4262. 6-9pm. 6-9pm.

Friday, June 2

Chris Skellenger and Patrick Niemisto have been performing together in some capacity for more than 30 years. From "Big Sky" to the original "Third Coast" to, currently, "Good-bye!" and the CSNY tribute band, "Looking Forward," they have logged literally thousands of gigs in Northern Michigan. Chris and Patrick's considerable catalog covers a wide swath of the acoustic genres: acoustic guitars, mandolin, bass (and an occasional fiddle). with two part harmonies, together define the engaging and interactive sound of Americana meets The Dunes. Stormcloud Brewing Company. 8-10pm.

Friday, June 2

Northern Michigan folk legend Jim Crocket—with friends—at Lake Ann Brewing Company. 6:30-9:30pm.

Friday-Saturday, June 2-3

Yard Sale Fundraiser: Support New Covenant Christian Academy by donating items for the yard sale, purchasing items, or both! Takes place at Fresh Wind Christian Community, 18201 Honor Highway (US-31), between Honor and Interlochen. 9am-5pm.

Saturday, June 3

Benzie Sunrise Rotary Club's 9th Annual Bike Benzie event, beginning and ending at Crystal Mountain Resort & Spa in Thompsonville, is an annual charity ride that benefits area youth. The event offers four picturesque rides through beautiful northwest lower Michigan that challenge riders of all ages and abilities. Benzie County and Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, where a large portion of the 100-mile loop is located, provide a rare combination of incredible natural scenery and perfect cycling terrain. Also, great food stops along the way feature regional snacks. All four rides—30, 62 and 100 miles—start and end at Crystal Mountain. Learn more at crystalmountain.com/bikebenzie. 6am-4pm

Saturday, June 3

California-based Abigail Stauffer can perform folk, blues, pop, and soul. She turns the language of acoustic, pop, and neo-soul music into an irresistible invitation to heal and be healed. Every song is a captivating showcase of confidence and vulnerability, crafting a balance of pain, hope, and joy. With influences like Sufjan Stevens, Regina Spektor, Iron and Wine, and Feist, Abigail's music connects with a wide range of audiences. Stormcloud Brewing Company. 6-8pm.

Saturday, June 3

Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Blake Elliott took both sets of her parents' last names

to create her stage moniker. Raised with a piano- and guitar-playing mother and an Interlochen-trained percussionist father, Blake was around music her whole life. Inspired by the beauty of her home state and this big adventure called "life," she writes songs that tell stories of love and heartbreak, dive bars, good whiskey, and everything that can come from them. St. Ambrose Cellars. 6-9pm.

Saturday, June 3

Andre Villoch—singer, songwriter, and all-around good citizen—performs at Lake Ann Brewing Company. 6:30-9:30pm.

Saturday, June 3

Star Party at the Betsie Valley District Library, presented by the Grand Traverse Astronomical Society: Bob Moler will be presenting a Twilight Talk on the Moon. Weather permitting, members will be bringing their telescopes to view Saturn and the Moon. Come and enjoy a night under the stars with the entire family! 9-11pm.

Sunday, June 4

Please join us for the grand opening of the Overlook Trail at Arcadia Dunes, a universally accessible (UA) trail that runs from the Baldy parking lot to a stunning overlook of Lake Michigan. Dress for the weather and wear comfortable shoes. People of all ages and abilities welcome! This is an open house event, and Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy staff will be available to answer questions. Open-house style from 2-4:30pm.

Sunday, June 4

2nd Annual Nashville Comes to Manistee event: creative and up-and-coming artists are in town for the first annual "Big Lake" Songwriters Retreat, hosted by part-time Manistee resident and Nashville songwriter, John Bielecki. They will showcase their talents by performing songs that they have written themselves in a Nashville-style "writer's round" format, just like you would find at the famous Bluebird Cafe. You will watch as writers take turns singing songs they have each written, and, as sometimes happens at these events, you may be the first to hear a song live that may someday be on the radio! We will have delicious burgers and brats. Hi-Way Inn at 715 Kosciusko Street in Manistee. 6pm.

Monday, June 5

The Maples' Open House: We are celebrating and would love to have you join us. Also, we will be moving into the new building on June 6th and could use help moving residents and their belongings. If you would like to help, please call 231-352-9674. 2-4pm.

Tuesday, June 6

Blind Dog Hank will perform rock, rhythm, folk, and blues at Lake Ann Brewing Company. 6:30-9:30pm.

Wednesday, June 7

Indie-rock singer/songwriter Brady Corcoran performs at Lake Ann Brewing Company. 6:30-9:30pm.

Thursday, June 8

Some people might call May Erlewine "Michigan's darling songbird," but her songs have traveled far beyond her home state. One of the most prolific and passionate songwriters of her generation, Erlewine's music has touched the hearts of people all over the world. Her words have held solace for weary hearts, offered a light in the darkness, and held space for the pain and joy of being alive in these times. Erlewine pulls from a wide variety of sounds and influences to create her unique musical landscape—you will hear traditional folk roots, old-time country swing, soul, and rock & roll, but mostly she is inspired by the hearts of the people and the one in her chest. This music is about feeling, and its about telling life's stories. Erlewine is a member of the Earthwork Music Collective, a group of independent artists who share resources and talents to raise both community and self-awareness, along with facilitating and encouraging original music in the state of Michigan. Lake Ann Brewing Company. 6:30-9:30pm.

Thursday-Sunday, June 8-11

Mudstock with The LAC's. Kick off the summer of 2017 by wheelin' and watching The LAC's live. Tickets are on sale now. Camping registration starts on Thursday from 5-9pm and resumes on Friday and Saturday from 9am-9pm. Off-Road Park hours are Friday 9am-10pm, Saturday 9am-7:30pm, and Sunday 10am-4pm. The Air Show starts at 1pm, with Lil Tikes Race following; registration is at the General Store until noon. Concert on Saturday, with tailgating and music beginning at 8pm. Day passes also available. Twisted Trails Off-Road Park, 19405 Read Road, Copemish.

Friday, June 9

Maple Bourbon Release Party at Iron Fish Distillery: The wait is over, and we hope you are as excited as we are! Come enjoy tastings from our second batch of bourbon whiskey, finished in maple syrup barrels. It all starts with maple syrup—provided by the Griner Family Sugar Bush out of Copemish—rested in whiskey barrels, then we finished our bourbon whiskey in those same casks. Come enjoy new maple bourbon cocktails, and free tastes of maple syrup! 6-10pm.

Friday, June 9

Lake Ann Brewing Company's 2nd Anniversary Extravaganza. It's been quite a ride, and many did not think that we would make it. We even faked closing a couple of times, but after two years, the state of the union is strong! Come join The Dunes Brothers on the big stage for an evening of fun and frivolity. 6-11pm.

Saturday, June 10

15th annual Northern Michigan Alliance for Lupus Walk in memory of Josephine Vanham: A walk along the Betsie Valley Trail from Frankfort to Elberta, then back. The goal of each Walk is to help the Alliance for Lupus Research (ALR) to further its mission to prevent, treat, and cure lupus by raising

funds for lupus research. All participants are encouraged to raise a minimum of \$25, and 100% of the money you raise will support cutting edge lupus research programs to fight an autoimmune disease that affects predominantly young women. Check out LupusWalkFrankfort.org for more information. Registration begins at 9am at Mineral Springs Park in Frankfort. Walk is from 10am-12pm. This year, there will be a silent auction between 9-10am, during registration. Door prizes will be awarded. Free picnic for all registered walkers after the Walk.

Saturday, June 10

Don Jones Tribute at The Cabbage Shed. Come join us to celebrate this man and the beauty of music. All are welcome. Music will go from 1-5pm on the main stage.

Saturday, June 10

Watervale Walk: The Watervale Inn is celebrating 100 years as a family-run business! What began as a lumber town in 1892 has evolved into a summer family resort, dating back to 1917. Join us for a walking tour of our historic cottages and grounds. A portion of the proceeds benefits the Benzie Area Historical Society. Tickets are \$20 and can be purchased at The Garden Theater, the Benzie Area Historical Museum, or by calling 231-352-9083. 1244 WaterVale Road, just north of Arcadia. 2-5pm.

Saturday, June 10

Dances of Universal Peace: Using simple movements, mantras, lyrics, and songs from many religious traditions, the dances focus on peace and harmony, celebrating solidarity and unity with all spiritual traditions of the earth. Llama Meadows Eco Farm, 1176 West Street, Benzonia. 4-8pm.

Saturday, June 10

The Whiskey Charmers will perform at St. Ambrose Cellars. 6-9pm.

Sunday, June 11

Spread The Love Workshop: includes painting, movement, music, words, and scrumptious, handmade eats. Our intention is to forge a soulful connection between individuals, inspiring deep self-love that can be carried out into our communities to forge a better world. Cost is \$35 per person for one canvas, paint, brushes, and good vibes or \$50 per person for two canvases. Coffee, tea, kombucha, LaCroix, and handmade snacks will be available for purchase. Limited space available! Call 231-218-0655 or email thejenncard@gmail.com. 11am-3pm.



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Foreign Exchange Students: What do they think about Benzie?

Questions & Answers with community faces

On average, Benzie Central High School has hosted more than a dozen students each of the past five years from all over the world—Germany, Norway, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Australia, Ecuador, Brazil, South Korea, Thailand, China, and Japan.

Students arrive in late August, just before school begins, and they stay until just after school ends in June. Most students average between 16 and 18 years of age, but they are all considered among the “senior” class, so that they are able to take advantage of fun upperclassmen-only events like prom, senior skip day, and graduation commencement. Every effort is made to ensure that students and host families are matched up based on interests, and many families have enjoyed the program so much that they have hosted four years in a row.

Not only does each student bring his or her own unique culture to share with their native Benzie counterparts, they also bring valuable resources from the state. Per pupil funding allots about \$7,500 per student at Benzie Central, and that includes foreign exchange students—that means these students have brought close to \$500,000 to Benzie Central since 2012.

Two years ago, The Betsie Current interviewed five female foreign exchange students who were members of the Benzie Central Girls Varsity Soccer team. (Read that article here: bit.ly/1QBPHcQ) This year, we wanted to get the boys’ perspective, so we interviewed: Alessandro, 18, from Italy; Basile, 16, from France; Laurits, 16, from Denmark; Linus, 17, from Norway; Matteo, 17, from Germany

Continuing with our interview series on impactful Benzie County characters, *The Betsie Current* caught up with the boys just prior to their graduation ceremony and asked them to reflect upon their year, before they return home mid-June.

THE BETSIE CURRENT: Is your hometown bigger or smaller than Benzie?

ALESSANDRO: My hometown is bigger—about 16,000 people.

BASILE: Much bigger; 1.2 million inhabitants.

LAURITIS: My hometown is called Jonstrup, and it is smaller than Benzie.

LINUS: Definitely bigger. We don’t have as much garden space, like most Benzie people do. But, in exchange, we get to interact with neighbors.

MATTEO: Bigger; 2 million people.

CURRENT: Besides your host families, what are you going to miss most about Benzie County?

ALESSANDRO: Working out and playing sports every day. Second, all of the friends that I’ve made here.

BASILE: Friends. The activities I did while I was here, like playing hockey, fishing, running a lot, watching baseball, playing corn

hole, having team dinners [for the soccer, basketball, and track teams].

LAURITIS: All my friends, school sports.

LINUS: The sports after school are kind of a big deal here, and having sports connected to school is so awesome, because I get to work out every day and not just two or three days, as I would in Norway. It is also a great way

some.

BASILE: Going to the regional finals [with the Benzie Central Boys Varsity Soccer soccer team last fall]. Going downstate for a Griffins game [in Grand Rapids] and a Tigers game [in Detroit]. Going to Puerto Rico with my host family for spring break.

LAURITIS: Winning the district and going on to the regional final with the soccer team.

LINUS: The Chicago trip was pretty awesome. [Any junior or senior taking Mr. Scott Kubit’s World History class can go on a 4-day trip to Chicago to visit museums, the aquarium, attend baseball games, etc.]

MATTEO: That I joined a few sports and had an awesome team. I played soccer in the fall, and I ran track in the spring.

CURRENT: What was the biggest surprise about America?

ALESSANDRO: Taco Bell—man that stuff is good.

BASILE: School is not very hard, and the teachers are really friendly.

LAURITIS: How great Taco Bell is, and how awful country music is.

LINUS: The variety—this country is huge. One second, you are walking alongside towering skyscrapers, and the next one, you are out in the wilderness, up in a tree stand.

MATTEO: How wonderful Taco Bell is.

CURRENT: How did Benzie fit or not fit the stereotype about America?

ALESSANDRO: People listen to country music too much—that’s the normal stereotype that we have, and that definitely fits very well.

BASILE: I would say that the stereotype of Americans eating a lot of fast-food is definitely correct in Benzie, and people driving big trucks. And being very good in sports.

LAURITIS: Benzie fits and doesn’t fit in some ways. I never would have thought of soccer even being a thing at an American school, but, here at Benzie, it’s pretty popular.

LINUS: “Everybody listens to country music” is a stereotype that definitely fits the glove.

MATTEO: High-calorie foods.

CURRENT: What is going to be hardest for you to explain to your friends back home about your time here?

ALESSANDRO: How this experience changed my life and my personality. How different social interactions are here.

BASILE: How friendly people are when you’re a foreigner, and how outgoing they are when you meet them.

LAURITIS: How awesome Taco Bell is, and how awful country music is.

LINUS: Trump winning the presidential election.

MATTEO: School sports with the team. [In Germany and other countries where our foreign exchange students come from, participation in sports is limited to clubs; there are very few, if any, school-sponsored sports.]

If you are interested in hosting a student for the upcoming 2017-18 school year at Benzie Central or Frankfort, contact Ann Burkett at bigmissy37@yahoo.com or call 231-690-0513. To learn more about the program, Council for Educational Travel USA (CETUSA), visit cetusa.org online.



From left to right: Matteo, Basile, Laurits, Linus, Alessandro. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

to keep all of the American foods—mac & cheese, especially—under control.

MATTEO: My friends.

CURRENT: What are you going to miss least about Benzie County?

ALESSANDRO: The weather in Michigan—it is unpredictable most of the time, and the snow in winter killed me. Also, I won’t miss eating sandwiches for lunch every day.

BASILE: Country music, and the fact that everything is far away from your house.

LAURITIS: Snow.

LINUS: The school bus—man, that thing was just torture. Waking up in the middle of the night to get to school is not a thing I am going to miss. I don’t know how people do it for some 180 days in the year. I heard there is room for improvement, and I hope you’ll fix them in the near future.

MATTEO: The school food.

CURRENT: Besides your real families, what are you looking forward to most about going home?

ALESSANDRO: Seeing my friends again, having huge parties, and being legally able to drink.

BASILE: Seeing my friends, summer holiday with my friends and family, and field hockey. [Editor’s Note: Very humbly, Basile does not like bringing it up it, but we thought that you should know—he began playing field hockey with his brother when he was four years old, and now he is several times a national champion back in France. He is not on the national team yet, but it is one of his future goals.]

LAURITIS: Seeing my friends again.

LINUS: Watching the sun set from a beach with my friends, then staying up all night to watch it come up again. “Døgne,” that’s what we call it.

MATTEO: My healthy food.

CURRENT: What is your favorite memory from your time here?

ALESSANDRO: Pitching in a very close and tense conference game against Onekama—I screamed and threw my glove when I struck out the last guy and we tied. That was awe-

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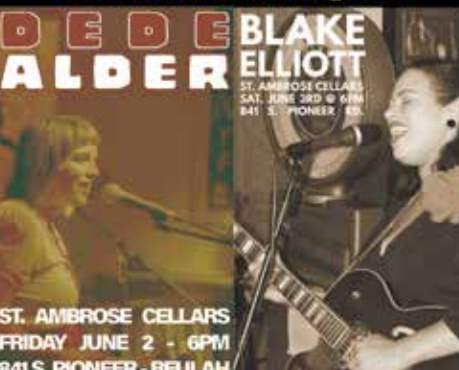
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Choo-Choo

Continued from page 1

proteins, storing them underground, in the roots, for nourishment for the next season. They also produce fruit—a small red berry, which is poisonous to humans.

Norconk looks forward to a busy asparagus season in 2017, with distribution planned throughout Benzie, Leelanau, and Grand Traverse counties to grocery stores, restaurants, and farmers' markets. Although you might think he and Barbara would become tired of asparagus after working with it every day for two months, he contends that they never get sick of eating it.

"We love to eat asparagus, in every way, shape, or form," he chuckles. "Grilled, pan fried, whatever. But usually, we steam it—after a long day in the field, that's fast and easy."

Harris Family Farm Reopens

If you drove past the iconic wooden Harris Farm stand last spring or summer, you might have been surprised to have seen it empty. For many people, it was a tradition to stop there for the first spring asparagus and later for hydroponic tomatoes, European cucumbers, sweet corn, pumpkins, and more.

The farm operation, which began with Walt and Sharon Harris in 1979, came to a halt in September 2015, when Walt suffered a fatal heart attack while on vacation in Homer, Alaska, leaving behind his wife, two children, and three grandchildren, as well as many friends and family members.

"We took a year off," says Sharon, who had been married to Walt for 40 years. By her own admission, she knew little about growing asparagus—though 15 acres of the Harris farm are devoted just to this veggie, not to mention the other produce—and so she briefly considered the idea of giving up the farm, but really did not want to do that.

"You don't want to give up something that's been a part of your life for so long," she says.

After much thought and discussion with family members, Sharon turned the farm operation over to the couple's son Matt (though she will help out, as needed). Prior to taking up farm operations, Matt had been taking

some time off from his career as a mechanic and traveling. While Matt had grown up on the farm and helped his dad out during the growing season, he had not envisioned running the farm himself one day.

"I never thought in a million years I'd have to jump into crops like this," says Matt, who is currently busy with the spring asparagus season, with plans to add sweet corn and pumpkins this year, and perhaps hydroponic tomatoes at a later date.

How does a mechanic learn how to be a farmer? Matt says that, at first, he did not know exactly where to start, but with the help of internet research, the Michigan State University Extension, and discussions with other farmers, he has learned enough to confidently begin the season. And while he does not expect that everything will run perfectly this year, he knows that he can try different approaches in the future to make things run smoother.

"Every farmer has a different opinion," he adds, so there are many options to try.

Matt is realistic about the challenges of farming, including spring frosts and other weather issues, pests, trouble finding workers—and long hours.

"I would like a clone," he says. "So that I could sleep. And spend more time with my son."

Matt and his partner Penny's baby, Walter, was born last September 5, almost a year after the death of the baby's grandfather, Walt. And while Matt may regret being too busy to spend all of the time that he wants with his child, he believes that the farm is a great place to raise Walter.

"I had a lot of happy times here [as a kid], running all over the place," Matt recalls.

The Harris family began picking asparagus last week, so stop by the little stand to get some. And if you see Matt, wish him well on his new adventures in father-dom and farming!

*A version of this story first appeared in our sister publication, the **Glen Arbor Sun**. As of press time, Norconk expected to pick*

and sell his first batch of asparagus on Tuesday, May 16, three days before the Empire Asparagus Festival, which relies annually upon his yield.

Fun Facts About Asparagus

- Asparagus comes in three colors: green, purple, and white. White asparagus is simply green asparagus that is protected from the light and resulting photosynthesis that causes the green pigmentation.
- Asparagus aficionados claim that different colors of asparagus taste differently; many say that purple asparagus is a bit sweeter than green and that white asparagus is milder and a bit more tender than the other colors.
- While many prefer slim spears of asparagus, because they are perceived to be more tender, in actuality, thick spears are less fibrous with more tender pulp than thin spears. Moreover, slim spears may be more visually appealing, while thick ones hold up better to grilling.
- Asparagus has very few calories and lots of vitamins, including vitamins K, B, C and E. It also contains zinc, iron, and lots of fiber.
- The characteristic "asparagus odor" that is detectable in urine after consuming asparagus is due to the asparagusic acid in the veggie, which, when eaten, breaks down into sulfur-containing compounds.
- Asparagus can be cooked in a variety of ways, including steaming, grilling and sautéing. It can be pureed and made into a pesto or shaved raw for a crunchy texture in salads or atop soups.

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