



Ashley Wilkerson ♦ Daily News staff photos

Aly Marks-Wood and John Wood II recently opened The Green Grocer at 934 East Main Road in Portsmouth.

The Green Grocer attracts shoppers hungry for organic



By Matt Sheley
Daily News staff

PORTSMOUTH — Being a “green” grocer isn’t about putting products on the shelf and hoping customers buy them.

If you don’t know what you’re selling, where it came from and other such details, John Wood II and Aly Marks-Wood say you probably won’t be in the organic foods business for long.

Late last month, the couple opened The Green Grocer store at 934 East Main Road, just north of Union Street.

“Every product you can find in a conventional grocery store, you can find here,” Wood said, as he chatted with a customer by the front door. “We want it to be a place where people can come and do all their grocery shopping.”

These days, more and more people, for various reasons, are turning to organic foods. Some like knowing that no artificial substances and hormones were used in its growth or production of their food.

Others support the “green” food movement because most suppliers emphasize using as little packaging as possible, which Wood said is both good



Customer Barbara Shamblin weighs her selection from the many choices of seeds, grains, granola and oatmeal at The Green Grocer.

for the environment and the economy. There also are people with allergies and restrictions on what they can eat, Wood said, so the clear labeling on organic foods and goods helps keep them informed.

Organic food sales have grown 17 percent to 21 percent of the total market since 1997, according to statistics from the Organic Trade Association. For comparison, the trade association said U.S. food sales have increased 2 to 4 per-

cent a year overall during that same period.

Wood, a Portsmouth resident, said several properties — including the site of the former Market on Memorial Boulevard in Newport — were considered for the new grocery store, but the spot at Benjamin Fish Common seemed to work the best.

Wood said being situated in the back of the property gives the store somewhat of a secluded feel, even though it’s on one of Portsmouth’s busiest roads.

The Woods are not new to the organic food business. Both were in the food service and natural foods grocery business before deciding to open their own store.

During a recent tour of the market, Wood pointed to the range of products, everything from environmentally friendly baby diapers to iced teas, sodas, meats, vegetables and frozen dinners. Wherever possible, Wood said, they stock local products, such as produce and milk.

Some of the brand names are familiar such as Newman’s Own and Annie’s, but others likely can’t be found on the



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As Helen Kenney, rear, purchases her groceries from cashier Savanna Cortvriend, her daughter Sharron Kenney, left, talks with employee Hap Morgan, who has been working with natural foods since 1977. Below are some of the spices the store carries.

Grocer

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shelves of big-chain supermarkets.

But that's not to say the major grocery store chains and smaller independents such as Clements' Marketplace just down the street aren't catching onto the organic trend.

Figures from the Organic Trade Association indicated that in 2003 about 44 percent of all organic food sales were through "traditional" supermarkets, mass merchandisers and club stores, compared to 47 percent at independents and natural grocery stores. The remainder was handled by farmers' markets, co-ops and similar operations.

"We focus on three categories: local, natural and organic," Wood said. "That doesn't mean everything is local or organic, but we're not going to be putting ... anything with artificial substitutes and things like that (on the shelves)."

Friendly welcome

The couple makes a habit of greeting everyone as they come through the door — many they already know by name — saying "hello" and asking if they need a hand.

Although the store has been open for only two weeks, many are repeat customers with questions about a specific item or whether the store has anything that could take care of a particular health problem or serve as a substitute in a cooking dish.

Wood said anytime you open a new business, it takes some time to determine what to regularly stock and what items are in demand. He said the store's bulk canister area, with everything from raw almonds to coffee and oats to dried fruit, has been popular. He said a lesser-known variety of tea and prepackaged Indian dishes also have sold well.

Customers David Ellis of Portsmouth and Louis Mendes of Bristol said they like what they've seen so far.

For Mendes, supporting an independent that's concerned about its customers is important.

"I like the selection here and knowing the people that run it," Mendes said. "I also like the bulk, where I can get as much or little as I want. A lot of supermarkets don't offer that and I can reuse my bags as much as possible."

Ellis said he likes the fact The Green Grocer stocks products that keep packaging to a minimum.

"If I want 30 pounds of organic raisins, I can buy them without getting 30 separate packages," Ellis said. "That's important to me."

Wood said he likes that the store has a wide selection, but doesn't overwhelm shoppers.

"To us, you don't need 100 different varieties of one thing," Wood said. "I think most people are happy if you have two or three choices for what you're looking for, whether it's granola bars or bread."

