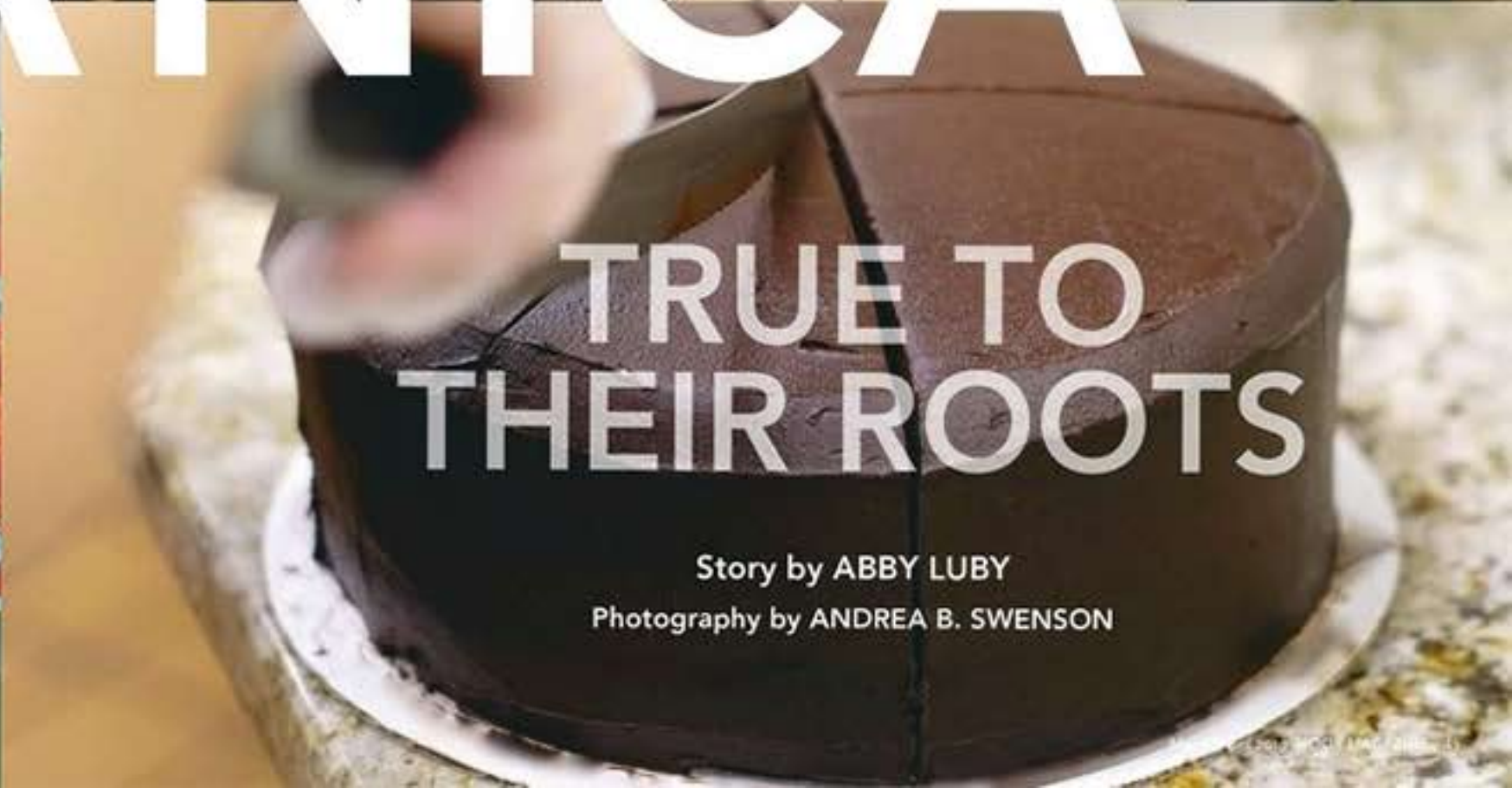




ORGANICA



TRUE TO
THEIR ROOTS

Story by ABBY LUBY
Photography by ANDREA B. SWENSON



The brightly lit aisles are chock full of certified organic produce, packaged and frozen groceries, supplements and bulk items. Homemade broths, baked goods and prepared foods are made from scratch every day.



They say timing is everything. So in the early 1970s after graduating high school, John Marrone traveled to the west coast from his home in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, and saw people eating more healthy food. Having grown up in a household that valued a healthy diet, Marrone was impressed.

"There was a little health food store by the beach in Malibu and they were making organic carrot juice with a Champion Juicer," Marrone recalls. "I was amazed at the bright orange color coming out of the juicer." Today, the juice bar at Marrone's market, "Organica Natural Foods" in Northvale, New Jersey, not only squeezes out certified organic carrot juice, but offers a plethora of organic vegetable juices, smoothies and protein shakes.



Marrone's west coast sojourn inspired him to start his own juice bar and ride the wave of the growing health food trend. "My father said, 'Why don't you open a health food store and not just a juice bar?' My father was a great influence and consultant. I was fortunate that both my parents were so supportive."

In 1978 they rented a small, 800 square foot store in what was then a new shopping center on Livingston Street in Northvale. Fast forward to today's burgeoning 8000 square foot store, half of it retail, the other half fresh, daily prepared organic dishes. The brightly lit aisles are chock full of certified organic produce, packaged and frozen groceries, supplements and bulk items.



As the store grew, Marrone brought in his brother Mark Marrone and his sister Diane Marrone DePiero; both had jointly owned a coffee shop in the area but sold it in order to work with their brother. "We realized that helping John was a great opportunity," says Mark Marrone. "Diane and I saw the potential in the industry and we jumped at the chance to be a part of it."

In the beginning there were many hats to wear in order to grow the business. "My mother did the books for John," says DePiero. "And she taught me how to do the books when I was very young. I still do them to this day."



Mark Marrone oversees the payroll and says expansion was key to competing with the growing number of chain supermarkets jumping on the bandwagon to sell organic products. "As we expanded we put in a bigger produce and dairy section. As a full-size market, we wanted to not just cater to the 'granola crunchers' — the people that were really into health food — but to offer clean, healthy, organic, good food to the general public and is affordable."

Expanding their customer base meant creating more departments. The tiny room in the back where John Marrone

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used to make healthy tuna and sprout sandwiches has evolved into several state-of-the-art cooking and food prep kitchens where homemade broths and baked goods are made from scratch every day. As more food distributors carried organic food products and produce, keeping up with the latest trends in the industry was essential. Most of what was learned came from their customers.

"They come in with so much knowledge and they are so interesting to talk to," says DePiero. "We have customers coming from all over. One woman lives out past Monticello and she always stops on her way to the city." Many frequently ask Marrone to open a new store closer to where they live. "I tell them that we are still trying to perfect this store," he says.

According to one of the associate managers the number of customers coming to the store ranges from about 500 to 1000 depending on time and day. Customers not only make purchases, but they can ask the very knowledgeable staff questions about products and healthy eating.

Organica customers are a diverse group that includes actors, artists, corporate workers, high school students, car-wash attendants and mailmen. Freshly made breakfasts, lunches and dinners offer vegan, gluten-free, organic, wild caught, and antibiotic free; all made with triple filtered water. Not surprisingly, Organica easily segued into catering as well as providing healthy lunches to nearby public schools a few days a week.

Although Organica's success has a lot to do with being on the cutting edge of the health food industry in the 1970s, there is another reason why this independent family owned store is so prosperous. The congenial atmosphere at Organica reaches from the front of the store back to the prep kitchens and employees wearing black Organica caps and aprons bustle around from as early as 7 am to 7 pm. In four decades Organica's workforce has grown to 58 and many of these very dedicated employees work alongside their own sisters, brothers and cousins. And they are well appreciated.

"Helping us build this business over the years has really been is our staff," says DePiero. "One of our head chefs started here as a dish washer and today she's an amazing cook. Some have been here forever."

As they keep tabs on growing competition, John says they need to maintain their standards. "We want people to have confidence in what we sell, keep our prices reasonable and be able to keep our doors open. That means we have to be vigilant in staying organic and staying true to our roots." 🌿

True to Their Roots

By Abby Luby

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Expanding their customer base meant creating more departments. The tiny room in the back where John Marrone used to make healthy tuna and sprout sandwiches has evolved into several state-of-the-art cooking and food prep kitchens where every day homemade broths and baked goods are made from scratch. As more food distributors carried organic food products and produce, keeping up with the latest trends in the industry was essential. Most of what was learned came from their customers.

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