

SPUDS.CA

Green bananas ripen to yellow in the muggy, temperature-controlled 'banana room' at Spud.ca's new Calgary headquarters. The air is cooler elsewhere in the warehouse where workers place bags of Lund carrots and two-pound sacks of Russian Blue potatoes into bar-coded bins. They add frozen Hoven Farms ground beef, a loaf of Prairie Mills Corn Millet bread, and a bottle of lemongrass scented dishwashing liquid. Full bins find their place on one of the six vans which rumble out daily to deliver groceries to the doorsteps of Spud's nearly 1,000 weekly customers.

Twelve years ago, Peter van Seters decided he wanted to bring organic food to Calgarians, and he wanted to deliver it right to their door. He purchased an existing organic food delivery distributor and transformed it into the Calgary chapter of Spud.ca, an organic home-delivery service he first began in Vancouver. Since then, van Seters has passed Spud's reins to a new CEO, Peter van Stolk and Spud.ca has expanded to Vancouver Island, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle.

Each branch of Spud enjoys the autonomy to seek out its own producers and suppliers to find the products that are right for their own clientele – striving to go as local as possible. According to Karen Durbridge, the Purchasing Manager at the Calgary branch, customers have awakened to the importance of locally-produced food. "If they have to choose, customers would rather have local than organic," Durbridge says. But buying local can be difficult in Alberta where growing seasons are short and the selection of available local products is much smaller than it is in more grower-friendly regions like the Pacific Northwest.

Another problem is that many local organic producers are simply too small to supply Spud's needs. No one in Alberta can supply Spud with the 500-dozen organic eggs they deliver each week, and until recently there was no organic dairy processor in Alberta big enough to supply Spud with the milk their customers required. "Before that we had to get our milk from B.C.," Durbridge says. "It is a massive challenge doing local in Alberta."

To meet the challenge, Spud seeks to build healthy relationships with individual farmers and vendors. Part of Spud's philosophy is to support the local industry in a sustainable and equitable way. Durbridge understands the costs involved in organic farming itself and in the process of being certified organic. "We try to pay the right dollar," she says. "We know it is expensive."

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) has been instrumental in linking Spud with organic producers in Alberta. When Durbridge sought an organic chicken producer, for example, her contact at ARD immediately connected her to TK Ranch southeast of Red Deer. TK now supplies Spud with free-run chicken and turkey. ARD also introduced Durbridge to a new baker who "makes the best sourdough ever." This ARD matchmaking supports both sides of the industry. It helps local vendors find a rewarding market and enables Spud to stock their shelves. Durbridge cannot imagine having to seek out all the vendors Spud needs on her own.

Spud aims for a level of social responsibility and engagement not found in other retailers. Durbridge continually searches for products to serve the needs of their vegetarian, vegan and celiac clients, and refuses to stock items containing unhealthy ingredients. The company donates unused products to food charities, and soon will make it possible for their customers to send back empty packaging for recycling. Most of all, Durbridge wants her clients to spend their time doing something other than grocery shopping. "You come home from work and your groceries are already there. You don't have to think about it," Durbridge says. "We would rather our customers go out on the weekend."