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ARGUS FARM STOP

Mission Driven



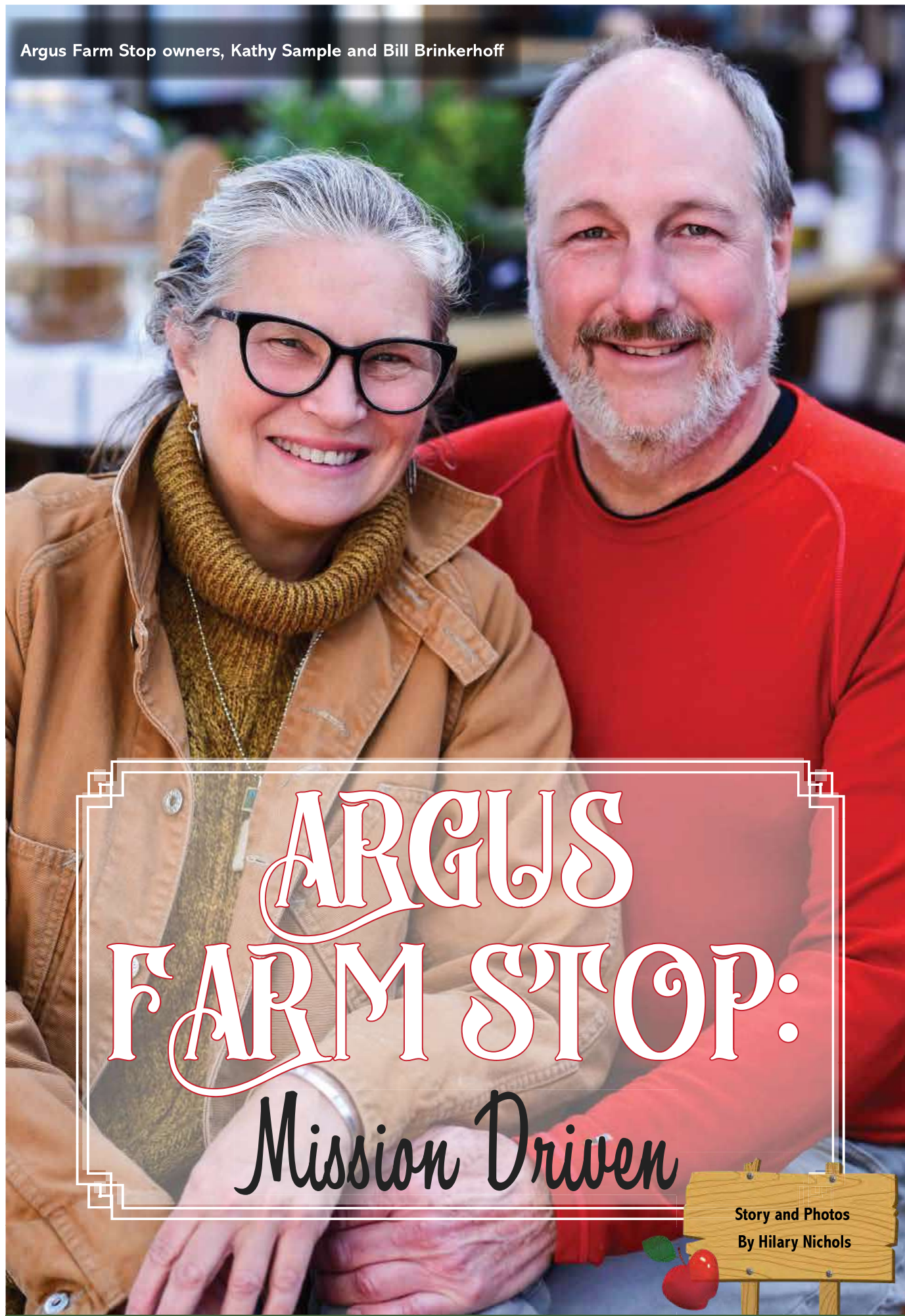
**Bill Brinkerhoff and Kathy Sample
and Argus Staff Members**

The CW Interview with Dr. Amy Saunders
on Integrative Medicine and Her Life's Journey

Barb Scholz, Advanced Energy Medicine Practitioner

Student Mosaics at the Steiner School • Laughing through Menopause • Flower Therapy •
Pickleball is Life • Cow Cuddling • Rage Rooms • Kath Weider-Roos Dances with a Bear • Artist Juliet Seignious •
Create a Cozy Winter • Feeding the American Dream • Marie Duquette at the Neurofitness Center •
Social Worker Will Sherry • Unschooling • Yoga Column • Events Calendar • And More

Argus Farm Stop owners, Kathy Sample and Bill Brinkerhoff



ARGUS FARM STOP: *Mission Driven*

Story and Photos
By Hilary Nichols





ARGUS FARM STOP



Story and Photos By Hilary Nichols

Mission driven in all its disparate pieces, this grocery store, that is so much more, is determined to serve many sectors of our local culture. It could seem confusing, if it wasn't all so smooth. Argus is a daily farmers' market, and a local grocery and sundries store. It is a coffee shop and cafe, a tavern, and an entertainment venue. It is an education center offering weekly webinars, classroom curriculum, and full trainings. And Argus Farm Stop is a crucial component that was missing for the growth of our local food system. In every aspect, wife and husband owners, Kathy Sample and Bill Brinkerhoff are hands on and happy to be so. You will find them behind the counter making the coffees, or in the back receiving the produce, or around town driving the CSA deliveries on any normal day. They are fully devoted to this segment of our local economy with the soil under their fingernails to prove it. Running this multifaceted operation can't be simple, but it is clear. Every aspect returns to the central mission, as stated on the website: "To grow our local agricultural economy by supporting the success of local farms. Argus provides a place where local farms can sell locally-grown produce and other goods conveniently to consumers, year-round!"

Argus is a daily farmers' market, and a local grocery and sundries store. It is a coffee shop and cafe, a tavern, and an entertainment venue. It is an education center offering weekly webinars, classroom curriculum, and full trainings. And Argus Farm Stop is a crucial component that was missing for the growth of our local food system.



Their effort is effective. Since opening their original 1800 square foot converted gas station on August 16, 2014, to running three bustling outposts today, Sample and Brinkerhoff continue to expand sales and offerings in all directions. But they won't take the credit. When I request an interview with Kathy for these pages, she defers "you mean you want to cover Argus?" And when I congratulate her for the success of this bustling business, she quickly points to the employees instead, giving full credit to their incredible staff. So, I sit with their general manager Laura Matney and the Packard location manager, Meg Goldwyn. They both wax poetic about Kathy and Bill's mission, nearly coming to tears about how much they appreciate the core principals at the center of the whole Argus undertaking. The enthusiasm is infectious. "We wouldn't survive without our produce managers Trice Kmiechiak and Dani Cavagnaro ordering the right amount to balance a beautiful display that is robust enough to make it exciting to shop from," says Matney, amplifying Kathy Sample's example. Every employee seems to agree, with glee, how happy they are to add their good work to the central tenant: growing the local food economy, for the betterment of us all. Finally, I had to ask the obvious question. Why? What is it about locally grown that drives this complex machine with so much zeal?

There are obvious reasons of course. The colorful flow chart posted at each location with the breakdown of the social, environmental, and economic benefits of buying local outlines, "Each dollar spent at your local business returns three times more money to your community than a dollar spent at a chain or non-local store. Local and regional food distribution uses at least 4x less fuel than conventional food. And local food production protects the health of our environment, our economy and our bodies." But how does this workforce unify around these abstract platitudes? Obviously, most of us haven't abandoned our standard workplace to devote all of our waking hours to the local food movement. These people must be in it for another reason.

When you witness the way these offerings flow from the farms to the shelves to the families who walk in to shop each day, it becomes clear. After spending time at both the Liberty Street and the two Packard-street locations, I can see, these concepts are not abstract. They are evident and infectious. It is wonderful to witness the web being built. "When egg producer Lukas Dickerson of Webfoot Pines delivers twice a week, he always comes through for an iced hot chocolate, and invariably when he's near the counter he sees someone buying a dozen of his eggs. Without fail, he leans over and says, 'Those are my eggs.' And then they have a real conversation. And all of a sudden, they have a human being that they can put to those eggs they are eating. And it is so powerful!" gushes Matney.

And it strikes me. This is all an act of love. It is the love that propels such loyalty to the concept and the cause. With little or no parking, with limited supplies, with odd-shaped veggies that can cost more than a traditional store, the draw here is not convenience. Shopping at Argus is a feel-good activity. And that feeling is very real.



General manager Laura Matney makes the mission clear. "Our goal is to get the most money back into the hands of the farmers while paying employees fairly. We spend a little more of our effort and budget, and for the investment we get triple the value. Buying your coffee here helps build the funds that helps us to pay our farmers as much as possible." We really are serving the health of our community, the health of our planet and our own health when we budget a bit more for better meats and vibrant micro greens. Even tipping your friendly barista when you come in for coffee and a pastry supports this elegant equation.

Letting your dollar speak for what you stand for is a revolutionary act. Why not be part of the solution every time you buy bread that was crafted that morning in the kitchens at the local bakeries Crust or White Lotus farms? Sample and Brinkerhoff believed in the premise. Though initially the idea wasn't seen as a sure thing. Far from it. They weren't even eager to bank on it themselves. But finally, it seemed like they had no other choice.

Since opening their original 1800 square foot converted gas station on August 16, 2014, to running three bustling outposts today, Sample and Brinkerhoff continue to expand sales and offerings in all directions.



While they were raising their three kids, Sample and Brinkerhoff kept busy traveling and toiling in traditional fields of biotech and corporate strategy. Their interest in local food was eating it. They joined a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), but couldn't always collect their produce box on time so they were kicked out. The farm box deserved more respect. They began to talk about ditching their jobs to do something together. It was while they were visiting their son's college town in Wooster, Ohio that they were wowed by a farmer's co-op market called Local Roots and realized Ann Arbor might really benefit from such a shop. The couple had over 200 conversations with entrepreneurs, business



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developers, and farmers at the Local Food Summit hoping someone else would advance the idea. But when no one stepped up to spearhead the effort, Sample and Brinkerhoff realized that they were the ones to do it.

"We are business people. We did the research," Sample said. "The Ag Census reported a loss of over 57% of Michigan farmland since the 1950's." (Subsequent surveys now show the opposite.) "We are growing. Now Washtenaw County boasts the highest direct to consumer farm sales in Michigan, and the 10th highest in the country." Argus can have a real impact here. "Can we be part of this return to the land? It is a problem we are willing to fix. It was kind of a test that we were ready to take."

Sample and Brinkerhoff are certainly visionaries, but along with a dream, it was their keen business sense that laid the groundwork. Their market research affirmed that Ann Arbor is ideally suited. An active farmers market, a good pedestrian district, situated near farming communities, and an educated and progressive populace were all crucial business indicators.

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But more than just being smart businesspeople, what makes Sample and Brinkerhoff so outstanding in their field is their convictions. It is clear they didn't pick a business simply for success. Their query was much deeper, and that points to an aspect of these two that is truly at the heart of Argus. They care. Their business plan was crafted to amplify their care for their environment, their town, and their community. It overflows, so that every employee has enough extra to extend that feeling forward. They only needed to convince the farmers.

Building the Network

The young experimental farmers were the earliest to sign on. But it wasn't until the first established farm came aboard that the project could really progress. It was when Tante first joined their affiliates that the whole experiment finally found its form. "Kathy and Bill approached me to be a supplier of vegetables for the Liberty Argus. I worried that I didn't have the time to display vegetables, but Kathy said don't worry, you can just bring them to us and we will display your produce for you. That made it very easy," Richard Andres at Tantré Farm remembered. "It quickly became one of our strongest markets overall. They were very positive and complimentary, encouraging us to bring our crop twice weekly, and they gave us free hot chocolate or coffee every time. Kathy and Bill built such a good neighborly affection," he mused. "There's a great orientation toward service to customers and vendors."

Traditionally, farmers have received 14 percent of the sales of their products, according to USDA economists who have tracked the farmer-market relationship for 25 years. At a farmer's market it takes up a whole day to run a booth. At Argus the farmer owns their inventory, they set their own prices, and maintain 70% of the sale. All they have to do is drop off their boxes. Argus takes just 30% for their efforts. The growers know how important that is. "There are no other organizations or stores that offer such generosity to the growers, no other stores that offer such a service. Nobody even comes close," raved Richard Andres. "Everything is extraordinarily well organized, and people seem to truly enjoy themselves whether they're employees, customers, vendors, or farmers. At this point it seems to be a very simple narrative, however this is truly extraordinary."

While getting to know Argus I spoke with their general manager Laura Matney. As a business major with a link to local farms she was fascinated with the low-profit limited liability corporation LC3 model of a mission driven for profit business. Matney explained, "The formula has the agility of a business with the heart of a non-profit. The articles of incorporation are designed for the profit to be given back to our mission, which in this case is the farms. The consignment model was the ideal platform, because it just naturally funnels the lion's share of our proceeds back to farmers and meets the mission."

Jae Gerhart was perfectly positioned to see the impact that Argus has had on the food system and all the hands that till the soil of that system. As the County Local Foods Coordinator for MSU Washtenaw county, her job was to know every farm and farmer, and to work with them to actively increase local food sales. "For local farmers there are a lot of ways to sell direct to the consumer—farmers' markets, roadside stands, CSA, and farm membership programs. Selling to grocery stores often requires large volumes, expensive food safety certifications, and a devoted sales team. Argus offers a way different mode of operation than what our local farmers are used to. That is why this shop is so important," Gerhart affirmed. "It allows farmers to sell in a grocery store setting without changing the down home / local truth of their business." Which is a big part of the appeal. Argus shoppers want to see the soil on their root veggies.



Writers Wanted

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Kids Columnist

We're looking for a new columnist for our ongoing CW Kids Column. Each issue, the columnist writes a feature article which includes 3 or 4 profiles of interest to parents and their kids. We focus on people, organizations and businesses offering cool, fun, meaningful and sometimes therapeutic activities, programs, events and classes for kids. Great opportunity for a writer who is also a parent.

Writers

We are always looking for good articles about the holistic scene... reportage, personal journaling and essays, profiles, interviews, journalistic explorations, and other feature writing.

Modest but respectable pay. If you might be interested, please write to crazywisdomjournal@crazywisdom.net.

ARGUS FARM STOP



Argus owners Bill Brinkerhoff and Kathy Sample, with staff members Will Moyer and Rosie Estes

"The model has provided our farmers a crucial marketplace and a real recovery of their time. And the local food system here is thriving thanks to Argus," Gerhart raves.

Now that 250 plus suppliers are affiliated, providing everything from frozen and fresh goods, cookies to cucumbers, bath and body products throughout the year, that 30% of sales is sufficient. Argus has been able to grow from the initial 14 to now 60 employees, at three locations and expanding. Now their expansion is focused on outreach. Their education sector is what will really amplify this movement and this mission. A free hour-long webinar offered every month reaches upward of 200 new advocates annually who will go on to amplify the local food movement by teaching, farming, or feeding their own neighbors. Their three-day intensive course that lays out all the nitty gritty details of how to open a farm stop has been attended by new operators from far and wide. Agricole in Chelsea, MI is an example. Increasing local food sales is the goal. "And we are just happy that we serve the same mission," Sample assured. "It is not about competition. That is why we made our offerings open source."

Increasing local production can be approached from many different directions. And Argus seems active in them all. Online sales and pick-up and delivery happen every day. The 'Double-Up Food Bucks' program allows them to offer double the value for every EBT dollar spent. Their weekly flower subscription lasts the season, and a weekly produce box aggregated from different farms goes out year-round. Will Moyer and Rosie Estes run the program carefully to provide a taste from all the producers. Argus's General Manager Laura Matney makes sure to note, "We do not intend to compete with each farm's CSA's. They are awesome at what they do. We do something different. Our boxes are smaller for an average family consumption." Now about 190 boxes go out each week.

Sample and Brinkerhoff are now even landowners themselves. The Brinkerhoff family invested in farmland in the Dexter area. Now John Cox, who is farming the land, has turned the corn and soybean fields back into pasture lands. Baseline Farms started in late 2016 with acres of sandy soil and 30 head of cattle. Today there are 170 cows, calves, steers and bulls on 190 acres of pastures. The heritage breed cattle are grass fed and frolicking for happy beef you can be confident in. Cuts are offered in the frozen meats department at both Argus outlets, of course. It is just another piece in this perfect puzzle that Sample and Brinkerhoff are stewarding.

Their son Will Brinkerhoff is doing his graduate work at U-M in Molecular Biology and Sustainable agriculture. "Here in Michigan, if we can figure out the land management issues, there is a real option to make a great impact. I think the future is really bright in this region." He credits Argus and his family for this focus. From the dinner table to the lecture halls and back to the field, it just seemed natural to him. "Our food was from friends—our community fed us. And land is what they were concerned with. Soil science was part of the meal, it seemed." His ambitions are great yet measured. "The 'many little hammer solutions' allows us all to play our part. Building back our fertile land and carbon sequestration doesn't happen overnight. But if we recognize a whole system the change is approachable."



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Learning & Improving Along the Way

The knowledge that the Argus team has gained through trial and error, mayhem and mistakes over the last eight years is worth sharing. "It has been a joy and a journey. So, we have made it open source. We were so glad to see Argicole in Chelsea get going with some good guidance. It just gives more outlets for our local farmers to thrive here. And that is ultimately what it is all about," Kathy Sample reflected generously. The equation lacks any element of competition. "We are lucky, we don't worry about that. We don't negotiate for lower prices, or exclusive arrangements. We work with our suppliers on their behalf. Our vendors are also customers and we do this to serve them."

The solutions Sample and Brinkerhoff have cultivated seem to work seamlessly these days, but their systems were not always so smooth. Producers throughout the region have to entrust their treasures to be properly accounted for, no matter who is at the counter, even as the inventory doubles in many directions. Every new success has meant a new method had to be invented in step. They wouldn't have had such success without their amazing team. Sample calls them "A freak show of talent" shaking her head in disbelief. "The intake system was developed by one of our 'local foodavores' (what they call their starting staff.) "Brian Barch was receiving and displaying the produce and chatting with the growers like we all do, when he realized we needed better accountability. He's a genius."

Brian Barch tells the story from those first few weeks, when a grower thanked them for his first itemized pay-out for apples and spinach. "But," he indicated, "I haven't grown spinach in years." The box had been mislabeled. "Now Argus has a protocol to have stickers and barcodes put on each box and item we receive immediately." There have been obvious improvements and more subtle changes. "We were able to take what we learned at Liberty and apply a lot of fixes when we opened the Packard location," Barch continued. "We knew we needed more room behind the coffee bar, and the sales counter at the newest market is scalloped so there's space for customers to arrange their groceries." The builder, Nicholas Durrie of Oak Leaf Design and Build has had a hand in the design of the store from the beginning.

Matthew Keating can comment on the improvements from every angle. Keating came to Argus as a farmer first. He worked at Black Locust Gardens, which sells their dried herbs with Argus. And then he took a job behind the counter at Argus before joining the Oak Leaf design team. "It is kind of luxurious to have so much space behind the counter." As a previous employee, he knows. "Argus cares a lot about the employees. Part of their mission is shaping a journey of food for young people coming in at an entry level. They may say they are localvorian to get the job and then with the nature of the work, they find out that there is so much more behind it." Keating continued, "What Bill and Kathy are doing is very bold. They are putting their money where their mouth is. They are absolutely pouring their hearts out into this undertaking. And the generosity has had a massive impact on the local food movement here." Converting college kids to the scene might be another of their efforts. But their take on it is much more humble. "We just want our workers to be happy and respected. So, we listen to them and are happy to take their advice," Kathy Sample said modestly.

Recently with the addition of local wine and beer, Argus has ushered in a whole new bar scene with the Tavern at the Packard location which now stays open until 9:00 p.m. As café manager, Meg Goldwyn books a calendar full of activities, food pop ups, trivia nights, and live music to fill the evening social hours.



Now the bagging area has levels for shorter and taller cashiers. Fine-tuning the rustic style and comforts for the customers is what Oak Leaf Design and Build is famous for as well as more nuanced ways that every vendor and employee can appreciate, even if they can't see the correlation. While dividing into two storefronts on Packard seemed risky, both spaces have had surprising success. "Our customers are seriously amazing. They are super loyal to unimaginable lengths. All through the pandemic they just held on through whatever new schemes we had to implement. They are willing to work with us," GM Laura Matney reports. "The bigger grocery space now has room for shopping carts which lead to a jump in sales. These neighbors have embraced every new advancement."

Their Packard location café manager, Meg Goldwyn, was one of those neighbors. Before she worked here, they moved from the North side of town to the Burns Park neighborhood. Goldwyn said, "We were sad to let go of our nightly stroll to Liberty Argus to get each night's ingredients before we made dinner. It was the perfect after-work outing to get out together to stretch our legs and see some friendly faces while we got some salad fixings or local lamb chops for supper." When the new Packard Street location opened, she was thrilled. "It came to us!" They made it their tradition again whenever possible. Her appreciation for the destination took on another level when she picked up the weekend hours helping in the back. "When the business separated into grocery and café locations, they asked if I would take on the role as the café manager." She got to quit her commute and walk to work at her favorite spot in the neighborhood.

And Now!

Recently with the addition of local wine and beer, Argus has ushered in a whole new bar scene with the Tavern at the Packard location which now stays open until 9:00 p.m. As café manager, Meg Goldwyn books a calendar full of activities, food pop ups, trivia nights, and live music to fill the evening social hours.

"The management is really fun to work with," assured singer songwriter Anne Erlewine. "Meg makes it easy." Erlewine has played the new venue a few times so far. "The first time I played out after the pandemic was at the Liberty location, and it felt so right to share my new songs for this scene. When the new tavern opened, it was the first place I wanted to play, since they did so much for the community during the shutdown. They have a heartbeat, a pulse, bringing the community together that feels rare to me."

They rearrange the tavern space to make room for an audience of 20 or 30. "Like a house concert, it feels so warm and supportive here," shared Erlewine. Her audience of friends and fans seem to agree. The reception is palpable. This is a special place to sit for a beer and see live music together. "Part of creativity is doing it with others. I got to oxygenate my songs by bringing them out into



Kathy Sample with Aaron Ziola of Juicy Kitchen





ARGUS FARM STOP

the community and see their strength through the reception of others. It is important to music and to art to have a conversation about it," mused Erlewine.

This all completes the ultimate goal, "to grow and uplift our community by crafting the kind of place that people want to wander in," said Sample. This little grocery store cafe is designed to play a big role in our town. Not only local but *local*, local. With so little parking, they had to believe their customer base would be within walking distance.

Argus is one mile down Packard from my house. I walk it for the exercise and for the ice cream. The local dessert is my motivating force. My 14-year-old can be bribed by the fresh blueberries and just picked mint that is blended into Calder Dairy ice cream right before our eyes. The machine looks like a hardware drill that they lower into the concoction and out comes the most amazing and healthy treat. Brinkerhoff sourced the Little Gem machine on the sly. Sample and Brinkerhoff had become fans of the process in New Zealand on their vacation. "That's how we vacation. From farms to dairies, to gardens anywhere we go. In New Zealand each farm would each have this contraption to mix that days' pick into soft serve. We were crazy for it, and then I overheard Bill on the phone to someone with a Kiwi accent and then this funny stainless-steel contraption arrived." Now the community can all be crazy for it too.

Ann Arbor has Argus to thank for safeguarding a piece of our soul. We might not really have noticed, but with a longer vision, it is clear, this family of businesses is the beating heart of our hometown.



Along with with our dessert, my son and I pick from a big selection of prepared meals from Juicy Kitchen, Zilke farms, Uncle Peter's Pasties for some nutrition. My son picks a quiche and only shares one bite. I get it, it is that good. Meg is proud to receive and sell the hand-made concoctions. Twice a week Aaron Ziola from Juicy Kitchen delivers sandwiches, wraps, sauces, salads and the quiche made with veggies from Tantre farms. "I know all the hands that went into making this wholesome dish," raved Meg. "It gives such meaning to the term holistic when I can sell this delicious treat to a customer friend. It is a complete circle of our Argus community coming together on a forkful." Ziola is thrilled with the arrangement as well. "We wouldn't have made it through the pandemic if it weren't for Argus," he tells Kathy. She returns the glow, "The athletes eat up your breakfast oats and parfaits like it's the only nutrition in town."

As I spent the weeks witnessing Argus for this article it became clear, Ann Arbor has Argus to thank for safeguarding a piece of our soul. With a long vision, a brave mission and a generous disposition this family of businesses is the beating heart of this hometown. With this focus on feeding us all, the farmers, staff and customers feel received, known, and nourished here in all the ways. Our minds, bodies and the larger civic body all benefit. The values that matter are on display right along with the root vegetables and baked goods.

Visit an Argus Farm Stop location near you!

Argus Farm Stop - Packard Market

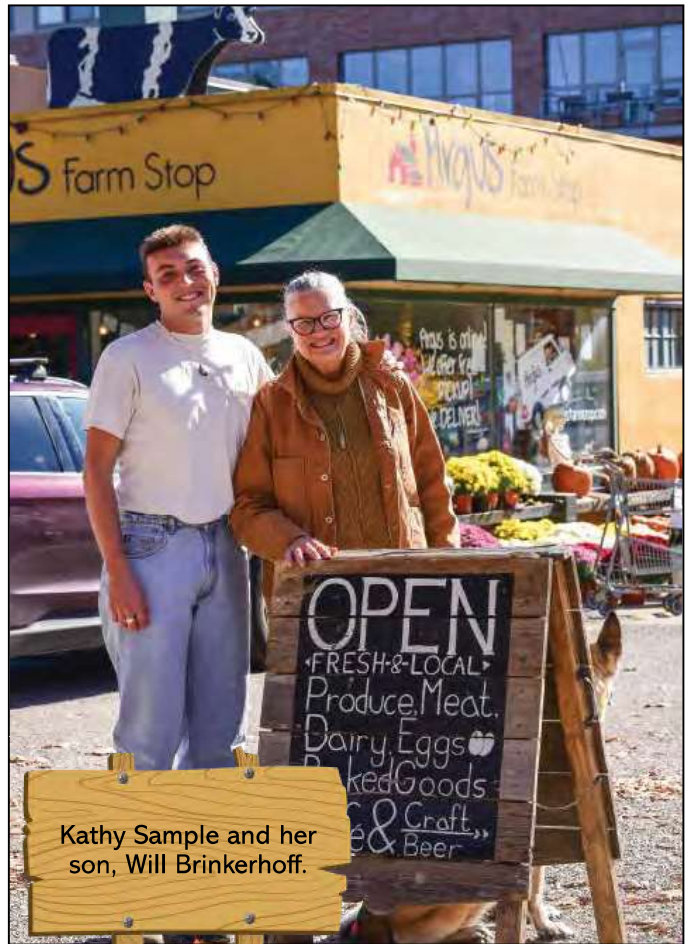
1226 Packard Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48104. (734) 997-5448. Produce, meats, dairy, and grocery. Open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

Argus Farm Stop - Packard Cafe

1200 Packard Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104. (734) 585-5441. Open for café and tavern service. Open 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily.

Argus Farm Stop - Liberty Cafe & Market

325 West Liberty Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48103. (734) 213-2200. Open for in-store shopping and café service. Open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.



Kathy Sample and her son, Will Brinkerhoff.



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