



Co-op Cafe

CONNECT • SHARE • LEARN

Stronger Together

Balancing Autonomy
& Collective Power

Auburn, CA

February 7, 2026



Columinate





Table of Contents

Agenda.....2

About Our Host, BriarPatch..... 3

About Our Sponsor - NCG..... 4

the National Co+op Grocers.....4

About Our Sponsor.....5

NCG Development Co+operative..... 5

Honoring our Ancestors.....7

Community Agreements.....8

Co-op Principles..... 9

Pair Share About Autonomy..... 11

Presenters..... 12

 Dave Olson..... 12

 Kate “Sassy” Sassoon..... 12

 Chris Maher..... 13

Small Group Discussions After Speakers.....15

Individual Reflection.....16

Small Group Conversation Guide..... 17

World Cafe Principles & Guidelines.....19

Resources..... 20

Your Facilitators.....21

Notes..... 22

Co-op Cafe Feedback..... 25

bathroom code: 2018



Agenda

1. **Welcome & Introductions**
2. **Land Acknowledgement**
3. **Honoring our Ancestors**
4. **Community Agreements**
5. **Principle 4 – Autonomy and Independence**
6. **Presenters**
 - Dave Olson, NCG
 - Kate “Sassy” Sassoon
 - Chris Maher, BriarPatch General Manager
7. **Small Group Discussions – about the presentations**
8. **Intro to World Cafe**
9. **Lunch**
10. **Small Group Discussions – about today’s theme**
Autonomy vs. Collective Power
11. **Large Group Takeaways and Learnings**
12. **Break**
13. **World Cafe Small Group Discussions**
Topics generated by YOU!
14. **Takeaways and Learnings**
15. **Evaluations**
16. **Closing**



About Our Host, BriarPatch



BriarPatch Food Co-op is a natural foods grocery store with two locations: Grass Valley & Auburn, California. The cooperative has strong roots in Grass Valley, where it has grown from a small buyers' club to its current 11,000+ member-owner base with annual sales of \$55 million.

BriarPatch is known for providing high quality organic, local and sustainably produced food. The Co-op's produce departments work closely with local farmers to plan crop production and ensure a profit, securing a strong local food system. The stores feature deli and bakery departments that offer fresh grab-and-go options made in-house. The meat departments highlight local and regeneratively raised meat and sustainably sourced seafood.

BriarPatch is committed to the local community and regularly engages with, promotes and gives back to area nonprofits and causes. The Co-op is considered one of the top 10 major employers in Nevada County, employing more than 250 people.

As part of BriarPatch Food Co-op's commitment to renewable energy, the store invested in a 680-panel solar carport and hosts EV charging stations through ChargePoint. In its continued efforts to be responsible for its environmental footprint, the Co-op has pledged to reduce its impact on the climate by working toward its 2025 Sustainability Goals. Its clean energy investments have offset over 3 million pounds of CO2 emissions. Nearly 50% of the Grass Valley store's electricity use is generated on site and more than 2,200 EV charge visits are recorded each year. The Auburn store was outfitted with a carbon neutral CO2 natural refrigeration system, which only 2% of U.S. grocery stores now have.

BriarPatch opened its second location in Auburn on August 10, 2023. Through its broadened footprint, the store will increase awareness of and access to good, local, clean food for more people, as well as share the advantages of a co-op model with new communities.



About Our Sponsor – NCG the National Co+op Grocers

What is NCG?

National Co+op Grocers (NCG) is a business services cooperative representing 166 retail food co-ops (our members) with combined annual sales of \$2.8 billion and serving over 1.3 million consumer – owners. Our members operate 240 stores in 39 states across the

country. NCG helps co-ops realize many of the benefits of a chain while maintaining the autonomy of an independent community-owned grocer. We help unify co-ops to optimize operational and marketing resources, strengthen purchasing power, and, ultimately, offer more value to food co-op owners and shoppers. Our ability to deliver value derives from aggregating the purchasing power of NCG’s members. The NCG system’s success is a function of the interdependence between NCG and its members — each holding the other accountable to perform, while fully accepting responsibility for the growth and prosperity of the whole.





Development Co+operative®

About Our Sponsor

NCG Development Co+operative

What is the NCG Development Co+operative?

The NCG Development Cooperative (NCGDC) empowers startup food co-ops to launch thriving, community-owned grocery stores through hands-on guidance, strategic planning, and comprehensive development support. From refining business concepts and bylaws to partnering in site selection and store design, startups work closely with NCG's Startup Resource Manager to build strong foundations and prepare for NCG membership. With a focus on collaboration and long-term success, NCG is growing a resilient network of co-ops nationwide.





Indigenous Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that the land we are on today are the ancestral homelands of the Nisenan and many other Tribes, whose land is unceded and who were nearly exterminated by colonization.

The Nicenan people have remained committed to the stewardship of this land over many centuries. It has been cherished and protected, as elders have instructed the young through generations. We are honored and grateful to be here today on their traditional lands.

We recognize that the long and painful history of oppression, colonization, displacement and erasure happened, and in order to address and change it, we must first speak and acknowledge it.

May this acknowledgment be more than words—may it be an invitation to reflect on our place in a shared history and our responsibilities in the present. May it call us into deeper learning, accountability, and relationship with the people of this land, past and present, and with the land itself.

We invite you to learn about more about the Nicenan people (<https://www.nisenan.org>) and support the California Heritage Indigenous Research Project - CHIRP (<https://chirpca.org>), a tribally-guided nonprofit dedicated to preserving, protecting, and perpetuating Nisenan culture.

On behalf of all of the cooperators here today, we made a donation to CHIRP.



Honoring our Ancestors

We begin by pausing to remember and honor those who came before us.

We call in our ancestors—the ones of our families, of our cooperatives, of our communities, and of this land.

We honor their wisdom, their labor, their resilience, and the love that carried them forward so that we could be here today.

We especially lift up those who fought for civil rights in this country—who risked, resisted, and sacrificed so that freedom, dignity, and justice could be more fully realized.

We also honor the leaders in the cooperative movement—visionaries who organized people and resources, who built businesses and communities rooted in shared ownership and mutual care. They showed us that cooperation is not only an economic strategy, but a pathway to freedom and self-determination.

May the strength of our ancestors inspire us.

May their struggles and their triumphs teach us.

May their dreams remind us that we are part of a larger story.

We thank them for walking before us, and we invite their presence to guide us as we gather, learn, build wisdom and strengthen our community together.



"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

Community Agreements

Our aspiration, or collective vision, for how we want to be in relationship with one another, to help everyone in the group feel like they can contribute and be a part of courageous conversations.

- **Be Curious, Open, and Respectful** - call in, not out.
We're trying to throw sunshine, not shade.
- **No one knows everything - together we know a lot**
- **Confidentiality** - don't speak for others without explicit permission, don't share something communicated in a private or safe space.
- **One mic** - one voice at a time
- **Take Space/Make Space** - if you are usually quiet, challenge yourself to take more space, and if you usually talk a lot, be mindful to leave room for quieter voices.
- **Expect unfinished business** - There are always more conversations to have and more work to do.
- **Take space and time** - to take care of yourself.
- **Notice when it's time to come back together as a full group**, wrapping up individual conversations so we can listen and participate collectively.
- Anything else?



Co-op Principles

Seven Principles guide cooperative businesses all over the world. Learn more at the [International Cooperative Association](https://www.ica.coop/) website.

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
- 4. Autonomy and independence**
5. Education, training, and information
- 6. Cooperation among cooperatives**
7. Concern for community

A growing number of co-ops, including National Co+op Grocers, many individual grocery co-ops and US Credit Unions, have adopted the 8th Co-op Principle - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).

The International Cooperative Alliance is currently undertaking a global consultation on possible changes to the Cooperative Principles, including a proposal to make Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion an explicit eighth cooperative principle.

This year's theme, Stronger Together: Balancing Autonomy and Collective Power, inspires us to delve into principles 4 and 6, and consider how these principles can both challenge and strengthen our co-ops.



Principle 4: Autonomy and Independence

“Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.” – International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) (www.ica.coop, *Cooperative identity, Values & Principles, 2025*).

Until the 1990s, this principle was implied rather than explicitly stated as a core aspect of the cooperative identity. Not surprisingly, it has been understood or interpreted in a variety of ways.

The ICA’s guidance acknowledges the necessity for businesses to enter into agreements with other entities, but warns co-ops to preserve democratic control when establishing agreements with government, providers of financing, and other organizations.

Principle 6: Cooperation Among Cooperatives

“Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures” – International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) (www.ica.coop, *Cooperative identity, Values & Principles, 2025*).

The guidance notes for this principle go on to say that the 6th Principle is both a show of solidarity and an active way to develop the overall co-op movement: “by working together, co- operatives gain the expertise, scale, and support necessary to heighten awareness, sustainability, and impact, especially where fixed costs and resources can be shared.” (www.ica.coop, *Guidance Notes to the Cooperative Principles, 2025*).

The ICA sees federations of cooperatives (like NCG) as being both directly beneficial to co-ops (helping to represent and advance co-op needs) and as a useful structure for cooperating with other co-ops.

Tension between Cooperative Principles

Whether Principle 4 and Principle 6 complement one another or conflict with each other is often left to individual interpretation. Many cooperators have struggled with the tension that exists between the two principles, and because both co-ops and the markets in which they operate change and evolve over time, how co-op stakeholders understand and embody these principles also evolves. As a result, co-op stakeholders periodically return to this topic to try to build alignment around a shared interpretation.



Presenters

Dave Olson

Dave Olson is the Chief Membership Officer at NCG and leads NCG's new Strategic Development team. The Strategic Development team collaborates with General Managers (GMs) and other senior leaders at co-ops to help them maximize the benefits of their membership with NCG and its programs and services. The team also provides leaders with coaching and guidance and vetted resources to assist with core leadership functions like strategic planning, market positioning, organizational development, and change management. Before coming to NCG, Dave worked at New Pioneer Co-op in Iowa City, IA and then Mississippi Market in Saint Paul, MN, where he resides today.



Kate "Sassy" Sassoon

Kate "Sassy" Sassoon is the founder of Sassy Facilitation, which provides facilitation, training, and organizational design to innovative organizations. A "co-op native", raised in agricultural, housing, daycare, and worker-owned cooperatives, she has deep lived experience of the benefits (and challenges) of cooperation. She draws on these almost 40 years of Membership in her work at Sassy Facilitation, where she has supported democratically owned and operated enterprises across many sectors, including: housing, childcare, worker-owned businesses, production collectives, community land trusts, and intentional communities of all flavors. She strives to bring inspiration, productivity, and humor to her classes and her clients.





Chris Maher

Chris Maher is a whole-hearted supporter of the organic and local food movements as well as food and social justice issues. As General Manager of BriarPatch Food Co-op, the store has become a leader, both local and nationally, on issues concerning social, environmental and fiscal business responsibility. He has committed his career to helping educate people about the co-op story, what co-ops do and why co-ops are a transformative model for the food industry toward better transparency, equity and sustainability.



With Chris's direction, BriarPatch Food Co-op has become an important community hub and role model for other co-ops with a vision for a stronger, more resilient local food system by offering the healthiest, environmentally sustainable and ethically grown and raised food available to all.

BriarPatch was the winner of the 2018 Consumer Cooperative Management Association Cooperative Excellence Award for his work guiding BriarPatch to emerge as a leading co-op in strategic planning, organizational effectiveness, human resources, business results and leadership.

His passion for co-ops began when he was a member of the La Montañita Co-op Management Team, overseeing the food service department. He joined the BriarPatch team in 2007 as the Food Service Manager and was named General Manager in 2009.

Chris serves on the Board of Directors of the National Co+op Grocers (NCG) Board of Directors, a network of over 150 co-ops nationwide. Locally, Chris serves on the Nevada County Food Policy Council and regularly promotes the work of Sierra Harvest and Nevada County Grown, two non-profit groups that support local farmers and provide consumer education on food and wellness.

Under Chris's leadership, BriarPatch Food Co-op has made significant strides in providing access to local and organic food. In 2018, the dollar amount of organic product sales increased by 23 percent, an increase to 50 percent of storewide sales. BriarPatch sold over \$17 million of organic products, making BriarPatch one of the top co-ops in the nation!

Every year, BriarPatch offers organic certification loans and California Farmlink loan guarantees to qualifying farmers. The Farmlink loans make credit more readily available for farmers and reduces the interest rate they pay. BriarPatch also pays all loan fees on behalf of the farmer.



Small Group Conversation Guide

Round 1

- Does solidarity undermine autonomy?
- What makes your co-op/organization feel rooted in your community?
- What parts of your co-op or organization's identity feel essential to protect or preserve?

Round 2

- What gets in the way of your co-op/organization collaborating with others?
- What could you do to make collaboration easier?

Reflection Round 3

- What was interesting from your conversation?
- What surprised you? What excited you? What do you want to learn more about?



World Cafe Principles & Guidelines





Resources

Autonomy and Independence: What's Up with Principle Four?

By Ben Sandel | December 28, 2017

(<https://columinate.coop/autonomy-and-independence-whats-up-with-principle-four/>)

International Cooperative Alliance Cooperative Principles Guidance Notes

<https://ica.coop/en/media/library/research-and-reviews/guidance-notes-cooperative-principles>

National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA CLUSA) Principle 6 Initiative

<https://ncbaclusa.coop/p6/>

BIG thanks to NCG for sponsoring the Co-op Cafes!





Your Facilitators

Rose Marie Klee



Rose Marie’s cooperative journey began when she first moved into a housing co-op in Austin, Texas at the age of 17. Little did she know how much cooperative experiences and ideas would influence her thinking and change her life. She served as a Board Director of the Wheatsville Food Co-op for 16 years, including 12 years as president. She has been an owner of Columinate, working with food (and housing) co-ops and supporting excellence in governance, since 2012. Rose Marie is also a practicing licensed Professional Engineer, specialized in water resources, transportation, and structural engineering.

Rose Marie Klee - rosemarieklee@columinate.coop

Hether Jonna



Hether Jonna is a seasoned facilitator, planner, and passionate co-op enthusiast who believes in the transformative power of people coming together around the cooperative principles and values. A member of Columinate, a shared services cooperative, Hether supports mission-driven organizations—nonprofits, co-ops, and social enterprises—through governance training, leadership development, board orientation, retreat facilitation, and equity work. She has been helping to shape conversations with cooperators all over the country as a member of Columinate’s Co-op Cafe planning team for the past 5 years.

What energizes Hether most is creating welcoming spaces where real conversations happen, ideas flow, and learning is mutual. She believes the best solutions come not from a single voice, but from the collective wisdom in the room. Her approach invites curiosity, honors lived experience, and helps people build the trust needed to connect, reflect, inspire and learn from one another to spark positive change at their co-ops and in their communities.

Hether Jonna - hetherjonna@columinate.coop



Notes & Doodles



Co-op Cafe Feedback

Thanks for joining us today! We'd love to hear your thoughts.

Please rate each section below with 1 being not useful and 5 as very useful

Dave Olson, NCG

1 2 3 4 5

Comments

Kate "Sassy" Sassoon

1 2 3 4 5

Comments

Chris Maher

1 2 3 4 5

Comments

Small Group Discussions

1 2 3 4 5

Comments

Open Space / World Cafe

1 2 3 4 5

Comments



Overall

Would you recommend this Co-op Cafe to others?

1 = no way, 5 = definitely

1 2 3 4 5

What did you like? What went well?

What would you do differently?

What topics would you like to discuss at future Co-op Cafes?

General comments / other