

A Taste of the Veggie Co-op

By Karen Weldon

What's your spirit kitchen appliance? may be one the first questions you are asked if you stop by for dinner at Macalester's Vegetarian Cooperative. The communal dinners five days a week are important to the members of the Veggie Co-op, a community centered on living a vegetarian lifestyle. However, for most of the 20 sophomores living in the Co-op, it's not the food, but rather the people, that are the most valuable. "The best part of the Co-op is definitely the people. It's so great to be with 19 other wonderful people that I might not have met otherwise," Ani Sigelko, one of the Co-op members, said. Karina Li, another Co-op member, agreed. "I love coming [into the kitchen] after a long day of going to class and doing homework, and seeing everyone relaxing and talking about all the things that interest them. It's a really nice way to engage with people," Li said. Food and meals have been crucial to building this sense of community. Each week, members of the Co-op spend two hours or more at a weekly meeting to discuss cooking, cleaning and shopping. In addition, members pair up to either make dinner for all 20 members or clean up after the meal. Grocery shopping for the group several times both semesters is also required. For Nola Pastor, shopping trips were an especially good way for her to meet with other members in the Co-op during the beginning of the year. The two-and-a-half-hour bike trip to and from the grocery store—with a baby carriage strapped to the back of the bike for all the groceries—was a great opportunity to be with Co-ops she didn't frequently spend time with. For Li, some of the best chances for engaging with other members of the community came not from the required chores but simply the impromptu searches for a late night snack. "I love midnight snacks and kitchen foraging," Li said, reminiscing about the time she another Co-oper bonded over a late night carrot. As Arielle Lawson explained, having a kitchen builds community in itself. Especially during meal times, the kitchen becomes a bustling place because everyone is eating and cooking. In addition to creating community at the Co-op, the Veggie Co-op tries to build community in the greater Twin Cities area through their food choices. The group has made the commitment to spend their money at local business Mississippi Market, which is a food cooperative that sells locally produced food. The Co-op also patronizes the Acme Deli on St. Claire as well as ordering fresh eggs from a farmer in the area. As a non-vegetarian who grew up eating her German father's meat and potatoes, for Sigelko the important ethical eating choice is not to commit to a meatless diet, but rather to commit to eating sustainably produced foods. Therefore, purchasing their food at a local business has been very important to Sigelko. "I love that we shop at Mississippi Market. We know that we're getting good food that comes from a good place," Sigelko said. However, the focus on food also posed a challenge for most of the Co-ops, many of whom didn't know how to cook before moving in, let alone how to cook for 20. Especially during the beginning of the school year, dinners with too little or too much food were frequent. "One week last semester we ended up having pasta three nights in a row because the cooks accidentally cooked way too much," Lawson explained. Co-ops have also faced the challenge of being isolated from the rest of the sophomore class. Since the Co-op is underneath the stadium on the opposite side of campus from the rest of the dorms, meeting up with friends can sometimes be difficult. "It's hard to keep up with the acquaintances that you had when you lived in the dorms. You don't cross as many paths with people as you would in a dorm. You have to already have set friendships," Lawson and Rachel Karlov, another Co-op member, said. "[Living in the Co-op] is definitely a different sophomore experience from the ones your friends may have," Sigelko agreed. Despite these challenges, these Co-op members believe they made the right choice in deciding to live in the Co-op; for them, the benefits of the tight-knit Co-op community outweigh the downsides. "I don't for one moment regret living here," Sigelko said. Students interested in living in the Veggie Co-op next year are welcome to attend the Veggie Co-op Open Tea House today from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m., or contact Ilana Master at imaster@macalester.edu     