

March April 2023 ISSUE 164

CAMBRIDGE ORGANIC GAZETTE

# COUrgette



## *year anniversary*



CAMBRIDGE  
organic

[cambridgeorganic.co.uk](http://cambridgeorganic.co.uk)

## Comment from Duncan:

### Founder and owner of Cambridge Organic

Yes, you read the front cover correctly, The Cambridge Organic Food Company has indeed reached the milestone of 25 years' trading. I'm pleased to say we still have some box scheme members who have been with us since year one, and who will remember me driving round in my 'D' reg Bedford Rascal van; you know who you are, and hopefully you know we love you for it. We've come an awfully long way in that time, and yet we also have an awfully long way to go before having the kind of impact I really want to achieve. So that is the theme of this newsletter; its as much about looking forward to the future as it is about looking back over our history.

In a first for the 'Courgette', I actually find myself to be the subject of an interview, so I'll keep my editorial brief. But before breaking off I'm going to pose the following question to myself... 'has it been worth it?' Well, seeing the stats about the impact we've had over the past 25 years I'd have to say an emphatic 'yes'!

## An Interview with Duncan

**Duncan Catchpole is not only the founder of Cambridge Organic but also the author of the book 'Local Food Ecosystems'. We talk about the history and the drive that has kept Cambridge Organic running for a quarter of a century.**

It was the 4th April 1998 and the racehorse Earth Summit had just won the Grand National. Duncan, along with his father and uncle, opened the doors of the business that would become Cambridge Organic. That was a shop: it was originally named 'Farmer Giles' and was an outlet dedicated to selling 100% organic food. It was here that Duncan, barely out of his teens, first started selling veg-boxes. He would handpick produce from what they had in that day and deliver it out to the local area. It started as just a handful of boxes to some early adopters of the organic ethos; it's fantastic that some of the early members are still customers to this day.

The shop closed a year later but Duncan continued the veg-box delivery service. He changed the name to Cambridge Organic Food Company (COFCO) and moved into a corrugated iron shed at his family's organic orchard in Risby. With a dilapidated static caravan as an office and the back of a refrigerated van as a cold store, he continued to connect local organic produce with eager customers. As a one



Early days at Farmer Giles, Mill Road

man-operation, he spent 6 years doing everything himself: completing all the admin, while packing and delivering from morning to night.

Duncan continued in this way until the growing demand compelled him to take a big step forwards. In 2004 COFCO became a limited company, signed the rental contract at Penn Farm in Haslingfield and employed its first 3 staff members. After that, the company quickly grew in size and became what it is today; an operation of 29 staff members and around 1,500 members.

This story is no easy feat. The sustainable food industry is notoriously difficult to make a living from. Up and down the country box schemes are struggling, especially in the wake of the cost-of-living crisis.

**I ask Duncan how Cambridge Organic has managed to succeed and sustain itself over the past 25 years?** He admits "it's been 25 years of constant stress and struggle....we do 1000+ veg boxes a week but I have very little to show for that personally in terms of wealth". This brings up the whole notion of what it means to 'succeed' and this is something that he touches on in his book: "To most people when you hear the word success you immediately revert to financial success whereas to my mind I think that success is achieving objectives".

**So what has driven him, and those that work in Cambridge Organic?** "The drive has come from a deep-seated belief that it's the right thing to be doing and also that it's [sustainable food's] time will come. The industrialised, capitalist way of doing things is the root cause of much of the world's problems at the moment and that way of doing things cannot sustain."

For Duncan, Cambridge Organic is a company with a purpose much greater than making profit. It's a company integral to supporting a local food ecosystem. He believes the pandemic was a precursor of things to come with the inevitable consequences of climate change. In that time of crisis, Cambridge Organic was resilient and in high demand. Not only did it continue to serve all customers with no disruption, at a time when supermarket shelves were bare, it also doubled capacity in a matter of weeks. In this way Duncan explains, Cambridge Organic is an example of what a hyper-local, resilient food system could be.

[continued on page 5](#)




Original team members; Duncan, Dave, Jemma and Rob.

## Connecting around 50 local farms, shops and businesses

Cambridge Organic works hard to connect and support local growers, food producers, independent shops, cafés, caterers, businesses involved in the Green Coffee Scheme and community hubs where we take donated and surplus produce etc. All these entities connect together to create a local food system that is resilient, sustainable and of course connected to you, our veg-box members.



**Over £2,500,000 direct to local growers**

We  local and at our core is the drive to support as many local organic growers and producers as possible regardless of their size. We pay our growers fairly for their produce so they can continue to do what they love, looking after the soils and environment that surrounds our homes.

## Over 56,000 kg of coffee grounds recycled

Since July 2019 The Green Coffee Scheme has been collecting used coffee grounds from participating businesses around the Cambridge area and delivering them to local farms to be used as compost, or to Bio Bean near Huntingdon where they are transformed into Coffee logs (which you can buy through Cambridge Organic or at various independent vendors around Cambridge). It's all part of our aim to achieve circular systems through collaboration between local businesses.



**25 years of positive impact**

## Over 500,000 veg-boxes delivered

You healthy lot have consumed over half a million veg boxes over the last 25 years, that equates to over 18,750,000 portions of fruit and veg!



**Avoided 6,000,000 + pieces of plastic packaging**



All organic produce sold through supermarkets has to be wrapped to keep it separate from non-organic food. At Cambridge Organic we minimise the use of plastic packaging as much as possible, only using it where we feel it's necessary to avoid food from otherwise spoiling and being thrown away.

## Avoided 69+ tonnes of CO2

Since 2015 Cambridge Organic has been growing it's fleet of electric vans. We now have 5 beautifully decorated zero carbon-emitting vehicles delivering our rounds. To date that equals over 225,000 miles of veg and fruit delivered with zero emissions! That's 9 times round the world!



As Duncan talks to me about his story, it is clear that he is passionate about people AND the planet. He is focused on both the needs of the farmer and you, the customer. The ability to marry these two together may be one of the secrets to Cambridge Organic's longevity.

One of the driving values of Cambridge Organic is to always pay its organic farmers fairly and say yes to small local producers who can only supply small quantities. Duncan explains, "we have to reach a situation where it is possible for a small-scale market gardener or a small-scale food processing business to set up any type of small-scale enterprise with a realistic expectation that they can make a half-decent living for themselves".

Duncan is also customer focused. The traditional concept of the box scheme was a way of marketing the produce of a single



farm in a very 'farmed' way. The customers got what the farmer wanted to give them. This concept inspired our 'Original Box'; it's both cost-effective and minimises waste for the farmer. However, this 'take it or leave it' approach only appeals to a proportion of people. As Cambridge Organics' customer base grew, it needed to become more flexible to allow stipulations of likes and dislikes, hence the introduction of the 'Choice' box. As Duncan explains, "I like to think there's now a veg-box in our range to suit every household. If there's somebody out there who wants to buy locally grown organic fruit and veg I don't want there to be anything about our offering that is a barrier to them".

**I ask Duncan what is it he loves most about the business?** "A lot! Aside from the stress! I love meeting the growers. I've got so much respect for our local growers in particular. I'm in awe of anybody that produces food sustainably, organically.

I love our customers. It's an absolute joy to arrive at somebody's doorstep and be greeted by someone who appreciates you turning up there with a box of veg for them. They are more than customers. There is a very specific reason why we refer to our customers as members...they are buying into something more than veg, they are buying into a concept, into a collective effort to improve the food system locally.

And I love the team. Wonderful individuals who demonstrate week on week that they care about the business, they share the values."

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The aspiration is to have a greater impact than we are having at the moment.”



**What are Duncan's future aspirations for the company?** "The aspiration is to have a greater impact than we are having at the moment. That's what the vision for the Cambridge Food Hub is all about. If we want good food in our society we have to make it possible for these food entrepreneurs, these local producers, to be able to do what they do and be adequately rewarded for that."

The Cambridge Food Hub currently runs as an operation within Cambridge Organic. It connects local producers and growers with independent vendors, restaurants, caterers, community hubs etc. with environmental sustainability as the main objective. However, the vision of what CFH will become is much bigger. The vision is a physical building, made from sustainable materials and using innovative green technologies, which will be an epicentre for the local food ecosystem. We need more support from local authorities to make this vision a reality, but each member of Cambridge Organic is helping to drive this initiative forwards.

### Vegan Aubergine Cup Cakes

**At Cambridge Organic we have a good number of vegans on the team and we wanted everybody to be included in these celebration cup cakes. These are rich, chocolaty and fudgy, so perfect for everyone to enjoy. For the vegan chocolate we used local producer Ombar's 70% dark chocolate bar broken into bits. The recipe was adapted from okonomikitchen.com**

#### Ingredients

- 2 aubergines (300g raw) chopped
- 75 grams vegan chocolate chips
- 80 ml maple syrup
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 tsp balsamic vinegar

- 60 grams cacao powder
- 70 grams plain flour
- 2 tbsps corn flour
- 30 grams ground almonds
- 1.5 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp baking soda
- 1 chia egg (1 tbsp ground chia seeds 2 tbsp water)
- ½ tsp salt

#### Frosting Ingredients

- 200 grams vegan butter, softened to room temperature

- 360 g powdered sugar
- 2-3 tbsps non-dairy milk
- 2-3 tbsps cacao powder
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract



## **Cup Cake Method**

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1. Preheat oven to 180 C
2. Chop the aubergine and steam until tender (around 5 minutes)
3. In a large bowl, sift and mix in the cocoa powder, plain flour, corn flour, ground almonds, baking powder, baking soda and salt
4. In a blender, add in the cooked aubergine, chocolate chips, maple syrup, vanilla and vinegar and blend until smooth
5. Pour mixture into the bowl with the dry ingredients and mix
6. Half way through, add in the chia egg and fold to mix
7. Divide into 12 cupcake cases in tins
8. Place into oven for 20 to 30 minutes or until toothpick comes out clean
9. Frost when cooled

## **Frosting Method**

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1. Using an electric hand mixer, beat the butter until smooth.
2. Gradually add the sugar and 2 tbsps of cocoa powder, and beat until combined
3. Add 2 tbsps of milk and vanilla and beat on medium speed for 3-4 minutes, until everything is well combined. Scrape the bowl as needed.
4. If the frosting seems too thick, you can add more milk, 1 tbsp at a time. If the frosting is too thin and runny, simply add more powdered sugar or cocoa powder, 1 tbsp at a time.

