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Online grocery ordering and home delivery move to organic market

More services now offer delivery of organic foods along with traditional staples

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Relay Foods (Kenneth K. Lam, Baltimore Sun / April 23, 2013)

By Karen Nitkin
For The Baltimore Sun
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Nate Weiner used to do most of his grocery shopping at the Wegmans in Hunt Valley and the Giant near his Hampden home. Now he orders most of his groceries online from Relay Foods and picks it up at designated spot on Sundays.

"I get most of my produce from them," said Weiner, 26, a mechanical engineer and part-time student. "The local stuff is picked that morning. They're some of the best vegetables I've ever had."

While the aspect of fresh and local food is an attraction, the real selling point for him is convenience. "My days are pretty long," he said. "By the time I'm done, the last thing I want to do is go grocery shopping."

Relay Foods is one of several grocery delivery services operating in the Baltimore area, each with a different niche. Giant-affiliated Peapod home-delivers some 12,000 items that can be found in Giant stores to nearly 400,000 customers. Hometown Harvest,



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Relay, founded in Charlottesville, Va., in 2009, is a combination "farmers' market, artisanal market and grocery store," selling some 40,000 items, said Layton. Consumers can get locally grown produce, hard-to-find artisan treats, and the Diet Coke and diapers they can't do without. Because the company doesn't pay to build and staff brick-and-mortar stores, the prices are comparable to the big chains, said Layton. For no extra charge, Baltimore shoppers can pick up groceries in designated spots; home delivery is \$20 a month.

Gretchen Anderson, who lives in the Tuscany-Canterbury neighborhood, chooses home delivery. "It's just a very useful service," said Anderson, 40, who has a job at a management consulting firm, an 18-month old daughter and precious little time for strolling through supermarket aisles.

The company expanded delivery to the Baltimore, Washington and Philadelphia markets after acquiring Arganica Farm Club, another Charlottesville-based grocery delivery company, in August. The merger combined the product range and technology of Relay with the broader distribution footprint of Arganica.

Relay seems to be off to a good start in Baltimore. Both Anderson and Weiner said they rely on it for about 75 percent of their groceries. "I moved here from New York 21/2 years ago," said Anderson. "In New York, more things are delivered in general. I've been using Peapod, but I like [Relay's] delivery model combined with health food items."

So far, Relay has two Baltimore pickup spots: Mount Washington on Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Hampden on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Expect more, said Layton. Baltimore, he said, is a "difficult market, to be honest. You have pockets of high interest, surrounded by areas of people who have yet to be interested. It's a challenging but exciting market for us. Not a lot of competition, but there is demand for local food."

The company raised \$8.25 million from investors to fund growth plans, including new pickup spots, a warehouse in Washington, D.C., and a commercial kitchen in Virginia, where chefs will prepare meals with health-conscious, busy people in mind. Relay may eventually expand to Annapolis or Williamsburg, Va., but doesn't plan to add cities beyond that, Layton said.

Shoppers can search for items by category, by vendor, or by search terms such as "gluten-free" or "nut-free." A map shows that most suppliers are within 150 miles of Baltimore, and some, like Zeke's Coffee (Baltimore) and Michele's Granola (Timonium), are much closer. Information about the vendors adds a personal touch.

One local vendor is B'More Organic, founded in 2010 by Andrew and Jennifer Buerger. The company sells its high-protein drinkable yogurt line through Relay, as well as in specialty and health-food stores throughout the Mid-Atlantic. "The more places that people can get it, the better," said Andrew Buerger. "Obviously, it's great if they can get it at Whole Foods or Wegmans, but it's even better if it's delivered to their door."

Relay's website is organized to encourage people to choose local, sustainable and artisan products. "We are trying to convince you in a very soft way," Layton said. The first offering in a category is nearly always a local product. The sustainable option will be second, followed by the conventional option, he said.

So, for example, a shopper who wants to buy a quart of milk will first see offerings from the Homestead Creamery in Burnt Chimney, Va. and the Trickling Spring Creamery in Chambersburg, Pa. Clicking on the "show more" button leads to a page with well-known organic dairy brands Stonyfield Farm and Organic Valley. Additional clicks lead to conventional brands.

For \$40 (\$45 for the organic version and more for larger sizes), Relay customers can get a Bounty Box filled with whatever's in season. Because of the box, "last week I had leeks for the first time," said Weiner.

Anderson also ordered a Bounty Box recently. "It was amazing," she said. "It had these amazing, really delicious

based in Frederick, delivers locally grown produce and is adding meats, dairy products and even salmon.

Abby Brusco, who founded Hometown Harvest in 2009 with husband Tony, said the business had about 200 customers early on and now delivers local produce to 1,000 homes a week and has a waiting list of customers it hopes to service when it gets more suppliers. It delivers to Virginia, D.C. and Maryland. Each week, customers are emailed a list of what's available and can choose what they want.

Brusco said grocery delivery services, particularly of local food, are becoming more prevalent, connecting small farmers with shoppers who crave locally grown, unprocessed food. "There's enough population in this area for many of us to succeed," she said.

But Relay, which began delivery in Baltimore in November, may be the only one with the ambitious plan of total grocery domination in its communities.

"Our goal is to be 100 percent of every consumer's shopping," said Caesar Layton, senior vice president of marketing. "We give them no excuse to go to the grocery store."

He declined to state how many customers Relay has but did say, "We double our customer base pretty much every quarter." The company's short-term goal, he said, is to add 40,000 customers.



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bright yellow apples, sweet potatoes, a whole bunch of kale, and quail eggs — oh, my gosh, my box had quail eggs in it."

Anderson said her once-a-week deliveries from Relay encourage her to pay attention to cooking and eating so the food doesn't go to waste. "It's very old-fashioned, knowing your groceries are going to come once a week," she said. She estimates she spends \$75 to \$100 a week on Relay-delivered groceries, and supplements her purchases with visits to farmers' markets and occasional Trader Joe's runs.

Anderson said one of her favorite things about Relay is the Tricking Springs milk, which is delivered in glass bottles. "Even if they canceled everything else," she said, "I would keep it for the milk."

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