

# The Good Life Grocery

Striving to serve its neighborhoods.

BY BETSY ALEXANDER



KAYREN HUDIBURGH & REBECCA JONES

Kayren Hudiburgh and her husband, Lester Zeidman, own two small, neighborhood grocery stores in two different San Francisco neighborhoods. The larger of the two Good Life Grocery stores is located in the Bernal Heights district. The other is on Potrero Hill.

Hudiburgh says she and her husband own 70 percent of both stores and the employees, many of whom are women, own the other 30 percent. "We're very progressive," Hudiburgh says. "We have a stock ownership program."

Bernal Heights is located at the southern edge of the Mission valley, served by only a few city bus lines and perched atop a steep hill. It is a quaint urban village of small markets, cafés, fruit stands and barbershops that populate the main shopping strip of Cortland Avenue. The area also has trendy boutiques and innovative restaurants scattered among its storefronts. The area is attractive to young families looking for a first home and quiet streets.

On Potrero Hill, residents can relax in brilliant sunshine while watching fog engulf the rest of the city. The neighborhood is relatively isolated by freeways and large tracts of industrial landscape, giving Potrero Hill its own pace and a feeling of distance from San Francisco proper.

The Bernal Heights store has been in operation since the 1940s. Hudiburgh and Zeidman bought the then run-down grocery store in 1991. They opened their second store in Potrero Hill in 1974. Today the store supervisor is Rebecca Jones.

"We try to serve our neighborhoods," Hudiburgh says. "The Bernal Heights store has a lot of young customers with children, but all ages come here. We give the people in the neighborhoods what they need. There's no need to go across town for what they need."

The stock at the Bernal Heights store reflects Hudiburgh's environmental consciousness. Shoppers find organic produce, recycled paper products and shade-grown coffee beans. Unlike some strictly vegetarian grocery stores in the area, Good Life Grocery has a meat counter. "A good one," she says.

The cheese and wine sections also please neighborhood foodies.

Hudiburgh buys on the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market. Her co-buyer is José Mejía, who has been with her for 12 years. "He's great, I'm lucky to have him," she states.

"I prefer to buy organic unless it's not available or the price is too high. Organic quality is no longer the issue it used to be." If she cannot get organic, Hudiburgh prefers to buy from small local farmers because they use fewer pesticides. Her third choice is organic/traditional produce. "It takes three years for transitional farmers to become certified," Hudiburgh notes. She will sometimes support transitional produce over organics because "the farmers are trying to make the change." As a last resort, she will buy conventional produce.

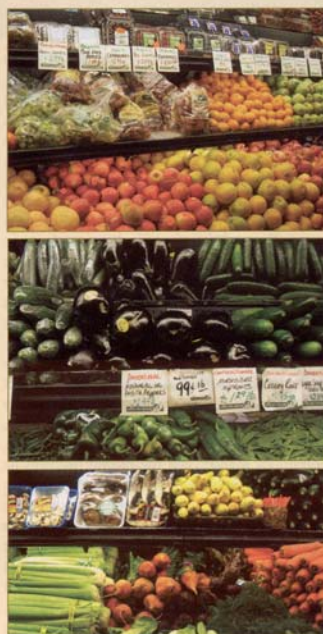
What are her challenges? Hudiburgh says it is a challenge to be an independent in a market with giant stores such as Safeway and Whole Foods. "They bring their semis into the market and take all the pallets," she complains. "There aren't so many little stores going into the market, and there are very few medium-size stores like Good Life Grocery."

"We have a niche that keeps customers loyal by giving them what they want and the best service you can give," she continues. "We work on our strategy every day to deal with such problems as Whole Foods taking the entire category of produce — heirloom tomatoes, for instance."

"Whole Foods will be eight blocks away from the Potrero store. It's hard for a small store that doesn't have the buying power or capital," she maintains. "We have to figure out what we can do better. We can compete on price to an extent, but if Whole Foods wants to low-ball us, they can. It's up to Good Life Grocery to keep our customers."

The Bernal store does 15 or 16 percent of its business in produce, according to Hudiburgh. "This store is growing. Our customers love organics and Good Life Grocery is trying to keep the prices reasonable. You shouldn't have to be rich to buy organic," she states emphatically.

Hudiburgh "pretty much" buys everything from the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market. A stray farmer now and then may come in with, say, Meyer lemons, but she "loves the market" and buys on it four days a week. She has one organic supplier she buys from who is not on the market, but close to it. On the market



very few people are allowed in the coolers, but Hudiburgh has been around so long they respect her. "I don't ask — I just go in," she says.

"Produce on the market is so much fresher. The market has a newsletter and merchants keep customers up to date on what's available. The newsletter tells what's going out and what's coming in. The merchants have the integrity to tell me what's good and what's not," Hudiburgh says appreciatively.

She does not feel uncomfortable going to the market in the dark, usually 4:30 to 5:00 in the morning. "It's a hard job down there. I have so much respect for the guys."

She brings big boxes of cookies to the workers — not the owners but "the guys who load my truck for me."

Both the Bernal and Potrero stores were in bad areas. Now the Bernal area is upcoming. Young people with small children are moving in. "I call it the Bernal Baby Boom," Hudiburgh says with a laugh. **pb**

## The Good Life Grocery

448 Cortland Ave., Bernal Heights

415-648-3221

Open daily

8:00 am — 9:00 pm

1524 20th Street, Potrero Hill

415-282-9204

Open Monday to Saturday

8:00 AM — 8:00 PM

Sunday

8:00 AM — 7:00 PM