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Smart Shopping for Conscious Consumers
—By Julia Dodge



Sheryl Cohen and Anne Vollen, the creators of Green Zebra, have been friends for 20 years.

On a picture-perfect afternoon in San Francisco's Marina District, Sheryl Cohen pulls up to a table outside the Lettus Organic Café. "The whole purpose is to make buying green more mainstream," she says of the Green Zebra Guide, a new publication created by herself and long-time friend, Anne Vollen. "And we're hoping it will be fun, too."

Cohen is briefly interrupted by Vollen who, after ordering their sandwiches, returns to the table with a smoothie. "You got us a mango shake!" says Cohen with glee as she grabs the glass and takes a sip. "We share all our food," she humorously explains.

And that's not all they share. After 20 years of friendship, the Cohen/Vollen team has taken their passion for green living and made it a full-time project. The Green Zebra Guide, a directory to San Francisco's eco-friendly retailers and organic restaurants, is the first Bay Area green shopping guide and discount coupon book.

A resource tool for cautious consumers, the guide promotes healthy living and local shopping benefiting small businesses, the community, and the planet.

A Greener Society

“The U.S. is based on waste and excess. It’s a cultural issue to make people go green,” says Cohen, who along with Vollen launched Green Zebra this past October. “We just want people to be aware, read food labels, and make conscious decisions about what they buy.”

Vollen says she often gets noticed at the grocery store as “that lady who brings her own shopping bags.” “And I think: ‘Am I really the only one?’”

With 250 exclusive offers from San Francisco’s green businesses, the women of Green Zebra are linking intelligent shoppers with trend-setting businesses. “If they give it a try, then the business can live up to its standards and prove that they are as good as the conventional business,” says Vollen. “There are less toxic pest control companies, green dry cleaners... these options exist.”

A Green Business is a Happy Business

Alice Craven, the owner of Modern Tea, is happy to be part of Green Zebra. “I like what a positive light it puts on supporting green,” she says. “I think the more opportunities people have to see that they have a choice in their purchasing, and that the choice can make a difference, the closer we are to a better community.”

While participating businesses don’t necessarily have to be “green” to qualify for the guide, they are encouraged to promote eco-friendly products and services. Some may simply be local independents and thereby support the local economy, ease gas usage, and contribute to the vitality of the community.

“Some people are afraid to open themselves up to scrutiny,” says Vollen, who finds that sometimes businesses feel they aren’t “green” enough to participate. “That ‘gotcha’ mentality is not us at all. We don’t point fingers.”

“It’s about sustaining a community with local businesses, and so people can experience a different level of customer service,” Vollen says.

The Guide, besides offering coupons that amount to a total of \$12,000 in savings at organic restaurants and markets, also contains various articles to educate the consumer on a sustainable lifestyle — from how to make green weddings and home improvements, to “Ten Reasons to Shop at Farmer’s Markets.” These articles are designed to be quick references for green rookies looking to make changes in their habits.

International Orange, a San Francisco spa and yoga studio, is excited to participate in a woman-founded business. “I think San Francisco is on the forefront of the green movement,” says co-owner Amy Darland. “I think the guide will continue to focus buyers on buying green, and help them support with their dollars what their politics and hearts want — to be sustainable and healthy.”

The San Francisco Department of the Environment, happy to promote local green businesses, quickly hopped on board the Green Zebra project and thinks residents in San Francisco will be receptive to the concept.

“It’s a perfect place where people are ready to do the right thing,” says Debbie Raphael, SF Environment’s Green Building Program Manager. She believes there’s a sense of fun and sophistication to the coupon guide, and a directness that residents will relate to. “People don’t want to be lectured,” she says. “They don’t want the ‘why’ anymore — they want the ‘how.’”

Green Gives Back

While Green Zebra can be found grazing at natural food markets and independent bookstores, Cohen and Vollen have found it also serves as a great school fundraising tool.

Vollen, a mother of two grade-school kids, is monitoring the Green Zebra School Solar/Wind Power System Contest which will award an \$8,000 wind power system to the San Francisco school who sells the most 2007 guides. “We wanted to reward kids with something useful — not with crappy plastic toys,” she says.

Cohen believes that kids can have a tremendous influence on their parents. “If every child takes one home, their parents will use it,” she says.

Also, since Green Zebra’s mission is to help develop the next generation of socially responsible citizens, at least 10 percent of the profits from Green Zebra sales will go to the Conservation Connection Project, a public school program that educates grade school students on environmental awareness.

Women Get It Right

Vollen believes their gender influences their dedication to the environment and healthy living. “We’re nurturers. I’m not trying to stereotype, but we’re more concerned about preserving the planet,” she says. “And we’re both business people, but we do make emotional decisions.”

And, in case anyone wonders if Green Zebra practices what they preach, the guide is printed with soy-based ink on 100 percent post-consumer-waste recycled paper. “We leave a small footprint while making a big impact.”

For more information on the Green Zebra Guide, visit www.thegreenzebra.org .

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