



## NPA East's President's Letter The Year in Review

By John Garvey



I would like to wish all of our members a healthy and prosperous New Year from myself and the rest of the NPA East Board of Directors. I also want to thank Denise de la Montaigne for her outstanding contributions to our association during her tenure as president. Denise picked up the

gauntlet at a time when there was a vacuum in leadership caused by the unexpected resignation of her predecessor. She literally had to hit the ground running without the usual transition period and mentoring most presidents-elect receive during their first year at the helm. She not only kept the association on an even keel but was instrumental in significantly improving the comity among the NPA East Boards of Directors. Under her leadership, membership increased by more than 20%, and a

more effective in-house advocacy structure was built that resulted in the association saving more than \$30,000 annually by eliminating the need to continue to employ professional outside lobbyists. All of this was accomplished during one of the most devastating recessions in modern history. Thank you, Denise, for a job well done.

### The Year Ahead

As your incoming president, I see my job as building on the solid foundation created by Denise and

*continued on page 3*

## What's Inside?

*President's Letter*

*Retailer Spotlight:*

*Debra Stark*

*National Products*

*Day 2011*

*Advocacy Update*

## Retail Spotlight: Debra Stark

*Founder, Debra's Natural Gourmet, Concord, Mass.*

By Paul Kushner



Debra Stark mixes business with pleasure and has taught her staff and customers to do the same. She opened *Debra's Natural Gourmet* in October 1989

and instantly began fostering her sense of shared passion and community that has always been her dream. Her boundless energy, savvy instincts, and generosity have earned *Debra's Natural Gourmet* the distinction of being recognized as one of the country's top 100 natural products stores. She is the author of three cookbooks, the founder of Stark Sister's Maple Sweetened Granola, and is recognized in the community as a trusted resource for nutrition and health concerns.

**Q** You opened your doors more than 20 years ago. There are easier ways to make a living than working in retail and then

*specializing in natural products. What got you started?*

**A** Yes, there are easier and more lucrative ways to earn a living, but natural food and natural medicine has always been my passion from the time I was a little girl. I've always felt that if only we could get back to eating real foods and trusting what we know intuitively about healing ourselves, we'd be better off. Certainly, health care costs in this country would take a nosedive. In our kitchen, for instance, if someone cuts themselves, we've taught everyone to grab a jar of cayenne pepper and sprinkle it on the cut. No pain, really, no pain, and the cut stops bleeding immediately. Before

*continued on page 2*

## Contact Us

Join NPA East at  
[www.npaeast.org](http://www.npaeast.org)

Send inquiries to:  
NPA East  
29 Pickwick Drive  
Marlton, NJ 08053

or call  
856-985-5446

or email  
[pkushner@comcast.net](mailto:pkushner@comcast.net)

## Retailer Spotlight

*continued from page 1*

we started doing this, we had to rush someone each year to the hospital.

**Q** *If you had to pick one key “ingredient” that is responsible for your success and longevity, what would it be?*

**A** I believe it’s the sense of community we’ve been able to create. You walk into our store and feel as if living is a team effort, and we’re the place to come recharge your batteries.

**Q** *We continue to suffer through the worst recession since the Great Depression. How well are you weathering it and what, if anything, have you been doing differently, to make it through?*

**A** When we expanded and renovated our store two years ago, we made the conscious decision to increase our bulk bins with foods like lentils and oats, rather than with higher-end foods. But we’re lucky to live in a town where most people still have money to spend without counting pennies. So we also stock what we consider to be the best in every category, including new, fun foods that are more expensive. Raw is one example. However, we do count pennies at the store and try to be as thrifty and non-wasteful as we can.

Once again, people come through our doors because of the community feel, and comfort of our store. These factors have allowed us to continue to grow, even if it’s been at a slower pace because of the weakness in the economy.

**Q** *No matter where you are, it has become virtually impossible to avoid competing with mass market retailers. You can rarely beat them on price or selection. What’s your solution?*

**A** We still have wonderful, hard-to-find items that the big boxes don’t carry, because these items are not in the top “100.” On the flip side, we don’t carry many items because

they don’t meet our ingredient standards, and our customers know that and trust us to do their due-diligence for them. We are on the cutting edge and introduce products to our customers long before they’re in general distribution. We get excited and enthused about things, and we try to communicate those feelings to our customers. Our newsletter and our staff differentiate us from the chains in noticeable ways.

Cleanliness, cozy colors on our walls, even lace curtains on the windows, help define our store as a place that is warm and inviting to our customers. I want everyone who walks into our store to feel welcome and comfortable. It’s also an atmosphere not easily replicated by a big, impersonal chain.

**Q** *I can see from your web site and the emails I’ve received from your store that you feature product promotions and sponsor special store events on a regular basis. Which ones have worked best for you in terms of drawing customers into your store? Are some more effective for existing customers, while others work better for prospecting?*

**A** Our customers love all of our events. The most popular annual event is our Early Bird Sale. The second is our Annual Birthday Party, which is a giant food fair resembling a mini trade show. These work for customers who already know and love us. The talks on topics such as Bone Health, which we also promote in the local papers, work better to attract new customers. But I have to say, over the years, our customer base has grown through word of mouth and referrals from the local hospital and doctors. I’ll be the guest speaker on foods that keep women happy, healthy, and sexy in February, during the local hospital’s heart health month. My son Adam speaks annually to doctors and health care professionals at one of the universities in Boston on the efficacy of herbal medicines and other natural products.

**Q** *Most independent retailers consider good employees—finding them and keeping them—as a critical component for continued success. Yet every retailer also seems to have their own formula for employee recruiting and maintenance. What’s yours?*

**A** We don’t have any formula for recruiting. We put signs on the doors and place ads on Craigslist. We look for intelligence and kindness in prospective employees.. Half of our staff is older, with established roots in the community, so they tend to stick around. We have quite a few staff members in their 60’s and 70’s who have been at the store for more than 15 years. The other half is young folks who stay with us long enough to catch their breath or earn some money before taking off to launch their careers. We always have a couple of teens as well. It’s a fun mix, and everyone has to pull their weight. How do we energize our staff? We lead by example. Constant learning keeps us all on our toes. To me, this means not only mastering the game of business but becoming knowledgeable about ingredients and our products. We challenge and we delegate. If someone shows a particular passion for some aspect of the business, we encourage them to learn more about it and become our in-house “expert.” It’s good for them, it’s good for the store, and it’s good for our customers, a real win-win situation.

**Q** *Employee training is another challenge for independent retailers. Well-informed employees are essential for you to compete on every level, but it can be expensive, and there’s no guarantee that once you’ve invested in training, employees will stick around long enough for it to pay off. What kinds of training do you provide? And how do you decide who of your employees is worth the investment?*

**A** Every paycheck contains a staff memo where I share some of the things I’ve read or learned, and

I encourage all staff members to contribute as well. We send our people to trade shows, pay for their registration fees at consumer talks, and bring in folks from companies who offer staff training for their products. In the early years, we paid for tuition as well. Unfortunately, many didn’t continue with their studies or stay with us once they completed their education. So now we cheer our students on but don’t pay tuition. I’d have to say that we encourage a constant culture of learning. Our staff regularly shares with us articles they’ve read or food and supplements they’ve tried. We give everyone a small amount of money each week to try something in the store. Samples from vendors are gratefully received and tried by everyone around the lunch-room table.

**Q** *Can you identify one decision you made over the years that you can point to as a turning point for your business?*

**A** I can’t recall anything specific, but I would say that it’s imbued in our culture to treat everyone who comes through our doors as if they are one of our best friends sitting on our living room couch. We also try to include our customers in any relevant conversations that we think they may find interesting and useful.

**Q** *You send regular blast emails to customers. Do you use any outside media to promote your store as well? If so, which ones have been the most effective?*

**A** The only outside advertising we employ is our monthly newsletter, which we send to about 4,500 customers via email (in the days we mailed out a hardcopy, we mailed 10,000 copies out each month – people responded to that hard copy more than they do to the email, but it cost us a pretty penny). Occasionally we’ll run a joint community ad or place a coupon in a community calendar, but our newsletter has always been our voice and remains the primary vehicle for how we try and touch our customers on a regular basis. We have received a

fair amount of media coverage over the years, because we are active in the community and have received a number of awards. Both Jim Leahy, our store manager, and I write for the local paper. Jim has written a regular column for years. Mine, "Self-Care," is new. I recently won the Commonwealth Institute and Boston Journal Top 100 Women-Led Businesses award, and I suspect that will bring us more attention in the community, which always helps!

***Q*** *If anything independent retailers will be under even greater pressure to differentiate themselves from larger competitors. What advice would you give your colleagues on how they can stay viable in the next five years?*

***A*** For me, the only way to stay viable to your customers is to know who you are and what fires you up. We stay true to those principles and work hard to communicate these beliefs to our staff and customers. When each of us retailers opened our stores, we had a picture in our mind of what we wanted to accomplish. The trick is to remain true to that vision. I believe that if we can remain engaged and excited, success and fulfillment will follow.

## President's Message

*continued from page 1*

the NPA East Board of Directors. I'm especially interested in continuing to expand our advocacy efforts. What follows are some of the major areas the NPA East Board of Directors and I plan to focus on during the coming year.

### Advocacy

This is an extremely valuable, although often unappreciated, benefit of membership in NPA East. One bad bill, should it get past our safety net, could permanently damage our ability to do business by restricting access to our products and services and making us live with unnecessary new regulations. The NPA East Advocacy Committee is already an active and effective team that covers the legislative activities of the 11 states that comprise our region. At least weekly, the members of the committee monitor the activities in these states for potentially harmful bills that are often brought to life without warning. By detecting potential dangers early, the Committee has effectively stopped many of these bills from becoming law. It's an arduous and time-consuming task, but it is also one of the most important services that your association provides to its members. Even now, there are

signs that the legislature in the State of New York is planning to resurrect a bill that would require additional labeling for all supplements sold in the state stating that these supplements are not approved by the FDA. This unnecessary requirement could increase costs to manufacturers and suppliers that would be passed along to retailers and customers. We have already beaten back this bill three times, and we are prepared to take on the New York Legislature again if the bill gains traction.

### Education

We are already working with New Hope Media to develop the educational program from Expo East 2011 in Baltimore. Yes, we're back in Baltimore! The convenience of the Inner Harbor, both from a cost and market perspective, is a positive change for both retailers and exhibitors. As in previous years, the Education Program will focus on the specific needs of independent retailers. Members of the NPA East Board will be taking on even a greater role in developing the Program, which is being designed to address the specific needs of independent natural products retailers. For more information on Expo East 2011 and to register, you can go directly to their site: [www.expoeast.com](http://www.expoeast.com).

## Membership

The good news is that membership in 2010 grew by more than 20%. Our challenge is to double that number in 2011. When it comes to advocacy, there really is strength in numbers, which is why we work so hard to not just maintain but grow our membership every year. I encourage you to talk to your colleagues about the benefits of joining NPA East. You would be amazed by the effect even a few dozen more faxes or emails sent to your local legislators can have on convincing them to kill a bad bill or support a good one.

## New Initiatives for 2011

As I noted earlier, I plan to focus even more energy in developing our advocacy efforts, especially through increased grass roots efforts. This means we will be calling on you and your fellow members to join us in the daily fight against bad legislation by getting in the face of your local legislators and letting them know in no uncertain terms that you vote and your business provides job opportunities and a significant tax base for your state. Let them know where you stand on a bill, and I guarantee they'll listen.

I also want to encourage you to take more advantage of networking opportunities. Have a problem or question about any phase of your business? Let us know. If we can't answer your questions, we'll put you in touch with a member who can. If you can avoid a pitfall or take advantage of a colleague's success, you'll have paid for your membership in NPA East many times over.

Finally, if you want to know what's going on at your association or if you have suggestions for how to make NPA East more valuable to you as an independent retailer, contact me directly or get in touch with the NPA East Executive Director, Paul Kushner at 856-985-5446, email: [pkushner@comcast.net](mailto:pkushner@comcast.net).

## Natural Products Day 2011

Washington, DC • April 6, 2011

Natural Products Day is a fun and effective way to connect with those who represent you in the U.S. Congress. This full day offers you an opportunity to not only meet and mingle with your representatives and their staff during formal meetings and our evening reception, you'll also have plenty of time to network with your industry colleagues. So that you can relax and enjoy your day on Capitol Hill, NPA takes care of everything for you: breakfast before our lobbying workshops, transportation to Capitol Hill, pre-scheduled meetings with legislators, a gala evening reception and finally returning you to our host hotel. And because we value your time and effort to travel to Washington, there is no cost to attend Natural Products Day.

To register and for more information, go to <http://www.npainfo.org/> and click on the heading NPA Rolls Our Welcome Mat for Natural Products Day.

# Advocacy Update

## Energy Drink Ban Proposed for Teens on Long Island

The Suffolk County, New York, Legislature has proposed a ban on non-alcoholic energy drinks for all teenagers under the age of 19. This proposed legislation would be the first of its kind in the nation, according to bill sponsor, county legislator Lynn Nowick. While NPA East does not endorse the consumption of energy drinks by teenagers, we are concerned that, if the bill passes, it could lead to more unnecessary regulations and limit access to other products carried by independent retailers. Therefore, NPA East's Advocacy Committee has proposed to the NPA East Board the following response:

We oppose Suffolk County resolution 2210-2010.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's clear ability to regulate dietary supplements under current federal law makes this bill at best redundant and at worst, a needless burden by creating an unwarranted double standard for those who do business in Suffolk County. All dietary supplements are regulated under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act. Therefore, there is no such thing as an unregulated dietary supplement, and the language of

the resolution must be changed to render it valid.

If the focus of this bill is on the reduction of caffeine in younger people then you must realize that a brewed cup of coffee has 95 to 100 milligrams of caffeine per cup which would put a cup of coffee within the caffeine limits of the regulation. Will you be requiring coffee houses and fast food restaurants to check ID's also?

Finally in terms of safety, the FDA has demonstrated its awareness of issues related to caffeine consumption with its recent ban on caffeinated substances containing alcohol. The safety record for dietary supplements is well established, and the question remains as to why this bill is even necessary.

### Please add your voice

Please contact the bill sponsor, Ms. Lynne C. Nowick, Suffolk County Legislature email her at [lynnec.nowick@suffolkcountyny.gov](mailto:lynnec.nowick@suffolkcountyny.gov). You can copy our letter above and add your name, business address and phone number. If you would rather call her directly, Ms. Nowick's phone number is 631-854-3900.

### Labeling Bills Re-Introduced by Ortiz and Lavallo

On January 5, and for the third year in a row, New York State Assemblyman Felix Ortiz and Senator Kenneth P. Lavallo have reintroduced bill number A01396. It reads as follows:

No person shall manufacture, sell or expose for sale any product which shall be termed as a dietary supplement or nutritional supplement without branding or labeling such product with a statement which is clearly discernible to a customer that the product has or has not been tested by the United States Food and Drug Administration.

NPA East, with the support of our membership, has successfully killed this bill two times, in 2009 and 2010. NPA East's Advocacy Chairman, John Montague and Executive Director, Paul Kushner, have been in contact with the bill's sponsor, Felix Ortiz, in an effort to kill the bill before it gains any more leverage in the New York Assembly. Should the offices of Assemblyman Ortiz and Senator Lavallo continue to support this bill, NPA East will take appropriate action to convince the sponsors to kill it, as we have in the past. Please check the NPA East Website at [www.npaeast.org](http://www.npaeast.org) for the most current information on bill A01396.

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29 Pickwick Drive  
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