A Fresh Look At Bay Area Food Stores

By Mary Ellen Collins

Supermarkets Cater to Health-Conscious Consumers



Meat from hormone-free animals. Organically grown tomatoes. Cleaning products that don't contain a single unpronounceable ingredient. These items are flying from grocery shelves into the carts of area shoppers who might not have given them a second thought 10 or 15 years ago. The Tampa Bay grocery store landscape reflects the demands of an increasingly educated and health-conscious consumer.

"Natural and organic food is the fastest growing segment within overall food retailing," says Wild Oats Market spokesperson Sonja Tuitele. "Macro trends like the obesity epidemic, the concern over food safety, and the rapid growth of farmers' markets are fueling the interest in natural and organic products."

Wild Oats Market, a full-service natural and organic grocery store, will be the newest player on the local natural food scene, with a store scheduled to open in Tampa by summer. The company also plans to add a Naples store later in the year.

The Tampa store, located at Walters Crossing at I-275 and Dale Mabry, will be about 30,000 square feet, about 1/3 larger than the existing stores. It will offer a much larger selection of perishables, and an expanded prepared foods area for people who want to eat at the in-store café or purchase healthy "grab 'n go" foods. In addition to the Wild Oats private label products, the store also offers recognized brands such as Kashi cereals and Horizon organic milk and will stock produce from local vendors, including Sweetwater Organic Community Farm in Tampa and Worden Farm outside of Punta Gorda.

Although it's hard to describe a "typical" 21st century natural food shopper, Tuitele says company surveys indicate that level of education is the most common shared trait.

"Regardless of income, age or gender – the natural food consumer is highly educated and someone who reads the newspaper and uses the Internet to research different topics."

Down in Sarasota, a similarly diverse group of educated consumers frequents the Whole Foods Market, which just celebrated its first anniversary in December.

"Our shoppers range from college students to retirees," says marketing director Nicole Kaney. "One person might come in to buy a really special cheese they had in Europe, and some people do 100% of their shopping here. Others who work nearby like to be able to walk over and pick up lunch or eat in our café. … and when people who come to shop bring insulated bags filled with ice – we know they're not coming from down the street. People are willing to travel to shop here."

Whole Foods has become the world's leading retailer of natural and organic foods through mergers and acquisitions of a number of other companies, including Whole Food



Company, Bread of Life, and Harry's Farmers Market. Catering to the one-stop shopper, their extensive inventory ranges from perishables to wine and skin care products. They carry produce from Global Organics in Sarasota and Lady Moon in Punta Gorda; meats from animals that have never received hormones or antibiotics; and foods that contain no artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners, preservatives, or hydrogenated oils.

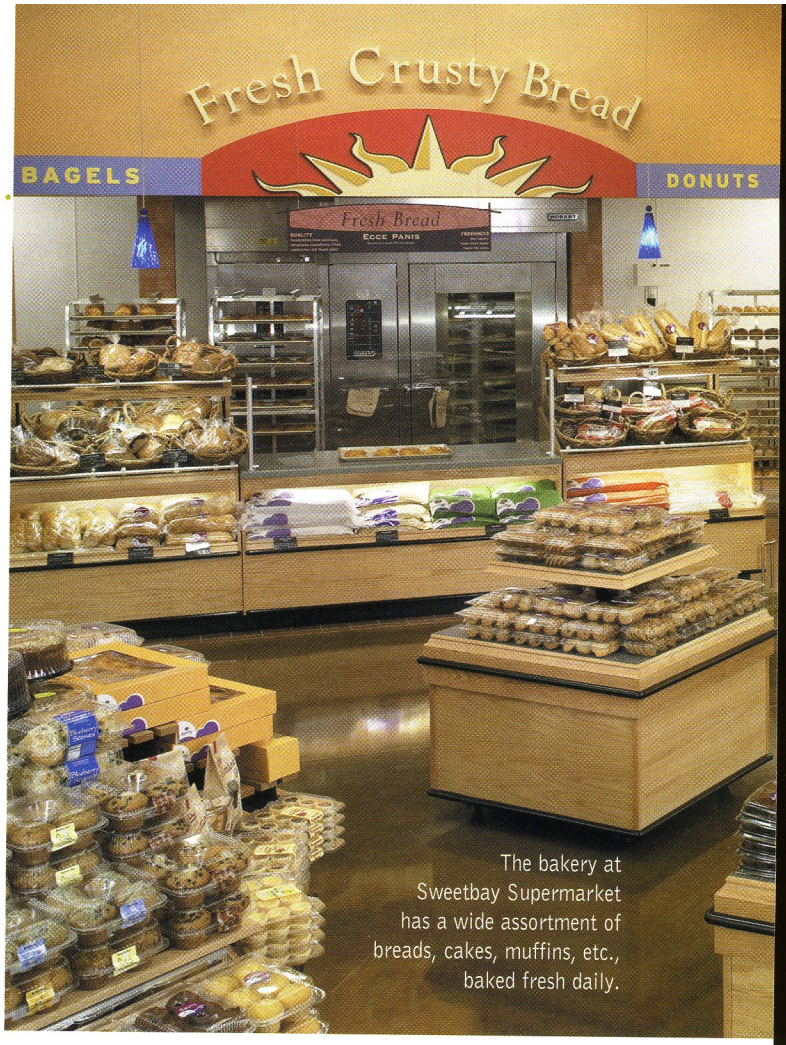
Because the company believes they have a responsibility to be "a good tenant of the planet," they donate 5% of all profits to the communities in which the stores are located.

The Sarasota store is the second largest of the eight Whole Foods Markets in Florida; and the company's statewide expansion plans include adding a store in Naples in the next few years.

The corporate entities aren't the only choice for local residents who want healthier food on their table. Roni Levy and his brother, David, recently opened their 16,000 square foot Village Health Market in South Tampa. The full-service grocery offers natural and organic products, including vitamins that are always discounted 30%. The store also includes a café and deli in the back for customers who want to dine in or pick up food to go.

Levy believes they can differentiate themselves from the larger stores by emphasizing personalized customer service and providing a convenient option for their neighborhood clientele.

"Ninety-five percent of our customers are from South Tampa, and people who live in South Tampa want to stay in South Tampa to shop. We recognize them and know them because they come in all the time. We can greet them and be on a first name basis."



The bakery at Sweetbay Supermarket has a wide assortment of breads, cakes, muffins, etc., baked fresh daily.


Fresh Market's produce section carries only the freshest fruits and vegetables in season.

Levy believes that the mainstream crossover to natural foods is still in its beginning stages, and says that after being open for only six months, customer response and feedback about his store has been "very positive."

The Fresh Market takes a different tack at providing wholesome, high-quality products to people who love good cooking and good eating. Comparing the specialty grocer to "a bunch of little European markets under one roof," director of communications Eric Blaesing explains that the store doesn't have a 'mandate' to carry only organic foods.

"We go for the top of the line, the best taste and the highest quality product in any season. We carry organic only when it's the best tasting option."

The stores feature departments including an old-style butcher shop and fish market, bakery, produce and floral stands, a delicatessen, and an array of specialty ingredients and spices that appeal to food afficionados.

Fresh Market does not carry things like baby food, toilet paper, or health and beauty products, which Blaesing sees as a good motivator to make them work even harder to perfect what they do offer.

"Many of our customers come in three to five times a week, and because we know they have to go somewhere else

to get their staples, that raises the bar for us. Our customers don't go to Fresh Market instead of another grocery store, they go in addition to another store."

The family-owned, privately held company has 13 stores in Florida, including one in Tampa and one in Clearwater. Plans include 4 more Florida locations, including South Tampa.

The conventional, full-service grocery stores have also responded to the public's demand for healthier options. Publix began to add natural foods to its shelves about ten years ago, according to Shannon Patten, media and community relations manager.

"We listened to our customers and what we heard was that it would be very convenient if they could go to one store to get everything they needed." Five years ago, the store created the GreenWise Market concept, which included a special section in the store devoted to wholesome, natural and organic foods. They also created the free, GreenWise Market Magazine, which is available in the store and online and contains helpful articles about nutrition, diet, exercise and health.

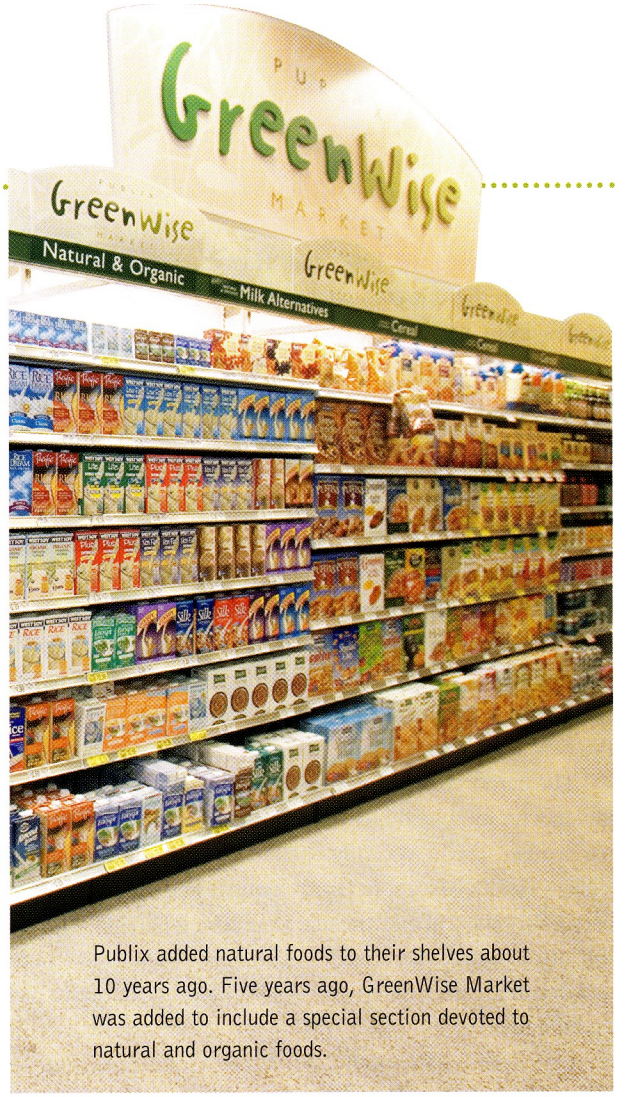
Two years ago, Publix developed the GreenWise private label products which contain no artificial ingredients, colors, flavorings, additives, pesticides, growth hormones, or antibiotics. All 119 Publix stores in Pinellas and Hillsborough counties have Greenwise Markets, which contain about 5,000 products, including the Greenwise label and other labels.

Sweetbay Supermarket, a new concept developed by Kash n' Karry, is a relative newcomer to the grocery store scene, with stores in West Tampa, Seminole, and St. Petersburg. Consumer demand for healthier options prompted a store design that includes a section called "Nature's Place," an alternative store within a store. The Nature's Place products range from organic produce to health beverages and herbal remedies.

"We devote a lot of energy to being all about the food," says Sweetbay Supermarket communications manager, Nicole LeBeau. "We might have 20 different types of tomatoes, and associates who know and are passionate about those 20 types of tomatoes," says Steve Williams, director of produce and floral at Sweetbay Supermarket.

Although organics have historically had a higher price tag than non-organics, the price difference is getting smaller as demand grows and manufacturers and producers become more efficient.

"People expect to and are willing to pay more, but as the consumer demand goes up, the price has come down," says Williams. "Five years ago, a conventional head of broccoli might have been $1.99, and the organic was $3.99. Today, the difference is more like $1.99 for conventional and $2.69 for organic."



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In addition to attracting "typical" health conscious consumers, Jim McWade, director of meat and seafood for Sweetbay Supermarket, mentions a somewhat surprising customer base for this market.

"A number of vegetarians or vegans are electing to 'come out of the closet' and eat meat because it's organic. With the controls available today, we can attract consumers we couldn't before."

Although it's too soon to predict a complete turning of the tide among non-meat-eaters, Williams says, "In one year, we've doubled the amount of organics we carry because of consumer demand and positive response."

By the end of 2006, all Tampa Bay Kash n' Karry stores will be converted to Sweetbay Supermarkets.

The rest of the world is finally catching up to the lifelong health food devotees who recognized the benefits of soy and granola decades before mainstream magazines and news programs began to report on it. And as the consumer base for natural and organic products continues to expand, the supermarket industry has the only logical response: let's give the people what they want.