

JULY 2008

SPECIALTY FOOD

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MAGAZINE®



WESTSIDE MARKET

ADVENTURES IN URBAN RETAILING WITH THE ZOITAS FAMILY

PHOTOS BY REBECCA MCALPIN

www.specialtyfood.com

Cover and editorial content reprinted from the July 2008 issue of *Specialty Food Magazine*.



Westside Market's expanded cheese counter features more than 450 varieties.

PHOTOS BY REBECCA MCALPIN

profile

BY NICOLE POTENZA DENIS

Re-Launching an Original

When the Westside Market on New York's Upper West Side had to close for three years, many thought it would lose all but its core customers. But—with specialty products galore—this retailer has reclaimed its neighborhood.

AMID THE CHAOS OF URBAN RETAILING, WESTSIDE MARKET KEEPS ITS COOL.

After 40 years of operating his family-owned Manhattan specialty supermarkets, owner John Zoitas and staff have learned not to worry about small spaces and encroaching competition. Instead, they focus on bringing casual organization and a familial atmosphere to their many locations in New York City and New Jersey. This approach was challenged recently when they had to shutter their flagship market for three years. Fortunately, the Zoitas family emerged with a refurbished store and a patient, loyal customer base eager to once again be greeted by a staff of relatives and friends and an upbeat 70s soundtrack. Along the way, the retailer even managed to open yet another location.

The Beginning

John Zoitas began his retailing career at the site of what would become the first Westside Market at 2840 Broadway in the Upper West Side neighborhood of Morningside Heights.

When Zoitas came to the U.S. from Greece more than 45 years ago, he worked as a produce clerk at a supermarket that stood at the location. After seven years, he had the opportunity to purchase the store. (Zoitas was so well liked that the previous owner worked out a payment plan to help him ease the burden of the note.)

What followed over the next 35 years were more stores: one further south on Broadway and another in Maywood, N.J.

A Store Shuts its Doors—Temporarily

In 2004, due to the construction of a high-

rise apartment building above the original Westside Market, the Zoitas family was forced to temporarily close that location. The store's hiatus was hard on customers who considered it a neighborhood fixture. "We would hear people saying that they could not wait until Westside Market opened up again. Customers even wrote messages on our boarded-up store saying how much we'd be missed," recalls John's son George Zoitas, owner and partner.

During this time, the family opened an additional location further downtown in the Chelsea neighborhood, but they remained concerned about losing their Morningside Heights clientele during the lengthy absence. "Supermarket customers are some of the

hardest to win over," notes Store Manager Ian Joskowicz.

In June 2007, the flagship store reopened to customers—both old and new. In addition to diehards, the clientele has been expanded due to the neighborhood's increasing gentrification that's brought in more families and faculty from

nearby Columbia University. A big part of the appeal, as with all of the Westside Markets, were the fresh fruits and vegetables on offer. "The store was built and revolves around the produce department," says Joskowicz. "That is what John knew best. If you have a good produce department, everything else will follow."

The return of an expanded cheese selection, specialty groceries and restaurant-quality prepared foods also lures back in the 6,000-plus shoppers per day. Additionally, the owners used the closing as an opportunity to improve the floor plan. Before the store closed, explains George, it was an L shape,

"My father always told me if you go to the other stores you create their ideas; if you don't, you create your own innovations. Our main focus is our own store."

Store Stats

WESTSIDE MARKET
2840 Broadway
New York, NY 10025
212.222.3367
wmarketnyc.com

YEAR OPENED: 1965

ON HIATUS: May 2004

GRAND RE-OPENING: June 2007

TOTAL AREA: 20,512 square feet

RETAIL AREA: 10,512 square feet

FULL-TIME STAFF: 40

PART-TIME STAFF: 40

CUSTOMER BASE:

University students, families

ESTIMATED SALES DISTRIBUTION

GROCERY & SPECIALTY: 20%

PRODUCE: 25%

PREPARED FOODS: 18%

DELI: 7%

MEAT: 5%

FISH & SUSHI: 5%

CHEESE: 10%

CATERING: 10%



PHOTO BY REBECCA MCALPIN

The retailer carries more than 250 types of beer, especially popular with nearby Columbia University students.

not conducive for easy movement. With some modifications, the layout is now more suitable for the flow of traffic and there are more departments like a salad bar and full-service fish counter.

Prepared food is one of the biggest draws, and got its start years earlier because John Zoitais wanted to help a friend. “The idea of prepared foods started when John first took over the store,” recalls Juskowitz. “A friend of his from Greece came to America and needed a job. John tried him out in a few places in the store. When nothing seemed to be a fit, he told him to cook something fresh. The rest was history.”

Today, under the direction of Maria Zoitais, John’s wife, and George Arias who has been with the retailer for more than 18 years, all the prepared foods are made fresh daily on-site. Three crews run 24 hours a day, preparing upwards of 600 fresh items for the case as well as grab-and-go. The counter boasts everything from rotisserie chickens—more than 150 sold a day—to wild baked salmon to Greek traditional specialties such as Maria’s Homemade Moussaka and spinach lasagna, all top sellers. In the grab-and-go section, grains rule; there are more than 20 varieties of homemade couscous salad, including coconut, and spinach and feta.

A catering operation, which accounts for 10 percent of store sales, is linked to prepared foods but housed in its own department. The menu covers breakfast to dinner, plus specials such as gift baskets or sushi.

Creative Cheese Displays

A bigger-and-better cheese counter, introduced since the re-opening, also catches customers’ attention. “We added about 100 or so feet to our cheese department,” says Arias, who does most of the purchasing. “We now offer more than 450 types of domestic and imported cheeses in almost 200 square feet of space.” Arias and his team hand-cut anywhere from 1,500 to 2,000 pounds of cheese per

day. Cheddars are in high demand as well as cheese from Holland such as Spiced Gouda (\$11.99 a pound) and Cotswold Cheddar with onion and chive.

Creative merchandising, born from an error, helps to make the cheese stand out. Many cheeses are cut in a triangle and positioned so they stand up on the wheel. “The display came from a cutting mistake I made a while ago,” notes Arias, “but the merchandising has been a successful selling tool for us ever since.”

Growing Up

With a little more than 10,500 square feet of selling space, real estate is prime inside the market—every product fights for a home. “Sometimes we have to turn down items because we just do not have the space,” remarks Juskowitz, who maximizes the store’s sales floor by building up. “It’s not ideal,” he notes. “Once in a while customers complain, but it is our way of growing. I’d rather grow up than not carry something someone wants.” (Of course, keeping customers happy also means making sure someone is always there to get an item down if a shopper can’t reach it.)

Every inch of spare space is used for subtle, but creative, merchandising. For example, a two-inch shelf was recently added to the salad bar to house popular pre-packaged cakes; in another instance a trash receptacle was moved to make room for a grab-and-go hot case that now sells more than 150 breakfast sandwiches a day.

John Zoitais’ knack for product placement has proven to be merchandising genius. “One day, he saw some empty space in the store and told me to stock apple cider there,” recalls Juskowitz. “I wasn’t sure why but, believe it or not, the cider became one of our top sellers. He just knows.”

Space constraints, however, force a well-edited buying style. We buy on instinct, say both Zoitais and Juskowitz. “We will not try an item at all of our stores at once. We know our customers in each area and know what will sell.”

In Morningside Heights, Columbia University students, who make up 10 - 15 percent of the clientele, are a platform to experiment with new items. “Because a large percentage of students come from abroad, we test a lot of products on them,” says Zoitais who attributes the success of Vita Cocoa Coconut Water to high student sales.

Columbia also offers its students a flex account to shop at the store. “Students were polled and they chose Westside Market as their favorite place to shop and where they’d like to

spend their flex dollars,” notes Juskowitz.

Keeping Focus—Their Way

Surrounded by a D’Agostino supermarket and a handful of specialty stores, Westside Market’s owners tout their independent sta-



PHOTO BY REBECCA MCALPIN

Store Manager Ian Juskowitz maximizes space by building up with products.

tus as helping them to grow and evolve. “When we want to do something, we usually implement it right away. We are not afraid to make changes—it helps make us better,” says George Zoitais.

“We don’t consider the stores around us competition nor do we worry about what they are doing,” he continues. “The big guys come to see what we are doing, we don’t go there.”

“My father always told me if you go to the other stores, you create their ideas; if you don’t, you create your own innovations,” adds Zoitais. “Our main focus is our own store.” ■

Store Scorecard

BEST-SELLING BEVERAGE:

Vita Coco Coconut Water

POPULAR PRODUCE: Organic sunchokes

LOCAL SHOUT OUT:

Adirondack Creamery Ice Cream

CATEGORY SURPRISE:

More than 250 types of beer

FIRST SPECIALTY PRODUCT

INTRODUCED: Twinings Tea, 1970

HOW THEY GO GREEN:

Bio-degradable bags; corn-based packaging

FUTURE FORECAST:

More organic items; private label

BIGGEST HIGH OF THE DAY: Rush hour:

“You work all day just to experience the rush—the time when the store is flooded with people and you can barely move in an aisle. That’s what makes it all worth while.”

—Ian Juskowitz, store manager



DISCOVER WESTSIDE MARKET AND EXPERIENCE THE DIFFERENCE.

As a specialty retailer of grocery, cheese, bread, prepared foods, deli, fruits, vegetables, and sweets, Westside Market's Zoitas family has known what it takes to please its customers since 1965.

Fresh Produce: Crisp, succulent, sweet, bursting with flavor... As connoisseurs of fresh produce, we understand the importance of superior quality and freshness. Our experienced buyers hand-select only the best that money can buy, so that you can choose from a wide assortment of fresh and delicious fruits and vegetables.

Prepared Foods: Our chefs prepare all entrées, sides, and salads on premises, applying their unique skills and experience to produce a wide array of dishes, including vegetarian and ethnic fare. All prepared food is of superior quality, since we have the resources to secure the freshest meat, produce, and unique ingredients. Creativity is encouraged, with innovative new dishes prepared daily. Selections are also varied to satisfy customer requests. George's mother, Maria, prepares all food in the same way she has prepared it for her family for the past 25 years, using fresh ingredients and recipes passed down by her Greek ancestors.

Specialty & Imported Cheeses: "Say Cheese" With an immense selection of more than 500 imported and domestic varieties, distinctive hors d'oeuvres are a foregone conclusion. Pair your choices with our quality caviar or pâté, and enjoy!

Gourmet & Organic Items: The vast selection of gourmet, organic and hard-to-find products is made possible by Westside's long-term supplier relationships. This, combined with their flexibility, allows them to satisfy customer demand for new specialty items.

Full-Service Catering: At Westside Market, endless possibilities are in store because we cater to your needs. Our extensive menu is designed to accommodate any gathering, whether formal or casual, corporate or private. You can rely on our professional catering staff to guide the decision making process while making every effort to accommodate special requests.



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www.wmarketnyc.com

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77 Seventh Avenue
@ 15th Street
212.807.7771

2171 Broadway
@ 77th Street
212.595.2536

2840 Broadway
@ 110th Street
212.222.3367

NEW JERSEY LOCATION:

Maywood's Marketplace
78 West Pleasant Avenue
201.843.8361