

# CONNECTING WITH THE FREE-FROM CONSUMER

Hy-Vee, 4th Generation, Liberty Heights Fresh, Natural Grocers and ThePlate Boutique are prime examples of retailers that are leading the way in terms of marketing and merchandising free-from products to make shopping more convenient for their customers. Here's how they are connecting with free-from consumers

## Hy-Vee

In-store dietitians, an expanding HealthMarket section and a new composting program put the focus on healthful living

BY DANIELLE MURPHY

On a typical day, Hy-Vee store dietician Shelly Asplin might be taking a new mother on a tour of the store for products that fit into a milk-soy-protein intolerance (MSPI) diet prescribed by her physician. Her next client might need guidance for a special diet such as celiac or diabetes.

"We work together to optimize the health and wellness of our customers and employees," says Asplin, registered dietician at an Omaha, Neb., location of Hy-Vee supermarkets.

Whether in the store or in the community, promoting healthy lifestyles is a top priority for the employee-owned chain, based in West Des Moines, Iowa.

Hy-Vee's in-store chefs and dietitians offer such services as: preventative health assessments and screenings, guided shopping tours, cooking classes, community presentations, monthly newsletters, and individualized medical nutrition plans for customers with food allergies or other nutritional concerns. For Celiac Awareness Month, the Omaha store hosted a Gluten-Free Extravaganza, including a tasting event.

"One of the things we're really proud of is that our dietitians don't just set out a box of crackers," says Tally Mertes, store director for the Omaha location. "We make the brownies and allow the customers to try them."



Asplin says her store aims to be a destination for adults and kids alike, offering kids classes and summer kids cooking camps. "This year we also received a grant to have a community garden where we will be partnering with a local childcare center and teaching the kids about the process of planting, harvesting and preparing fruits and vegetables for eating," she says.

This Omaha location also recently increased space in its HealthMarket section, which is located front and center in the store. The area, which has traditionally featured natural and organic products, has increased space for free-from and special-diet products in order

to accommodate increased consumer demand in this area.

"Rather than organics and naturals, because many of those are getting integrated into our regular aisles, in the HealthMarket we've really focused on food-disease sections and allergy sections," says Mertes. "We're also really expanding on nutritional protein items for the health needs of individuals not getting enough protein from meat sources. We've found organic and natural are more (mainstream). We partner so much with our dietitians that we wanted to do things that were meeting their customers' needs."

If a specialty product is not found in the store, Hy-Vee takes special-order requests from customers. Mertes says that they will find a way to order a requested product online or will work with their distribution center to get the product.

Because the company also believes that part of a healthy community means taking care of the environment, Mertes and team are test-piloting a composting program. In one month, the supermarket has been able to divert 6,000 pounds of food and plant material from the landfill by collecting fruit and vegetable trimmings and peels from its salad bar, floral trimmings from the floral department and unsold food from its produce section.

"The program really goes full circle," says Mertes. "We separate the perishable items. A company picks it up and takes it to Prairieland Dairy in Firth, Neb. Then they compost it and bring it back to use in our gardens and stores on site. In the fall, customers will be able to purchase the compost.

"We will have this in all the Nebraska stores by the end of the month," says Mertes. •



# 4th Generation Organic Market

Carrying on a family tradition

BY JAN FIALKOW



Chef Colin Cook (yes, that's his name) started out as a med student who moonlighted as a line cook. His belief in the healing power of raw and vegan foods led him to abandon medical school to pursue his passion.

Chef Claire Measel specializes in vegan, raw and gluten-free baking. Chef Ricardo Arias, who has been with 4th Gen since its inception, prepares both hot and cold foods. Chef Adilson Andrade, also on board since 2009, prepares traditional organic hot foods as well as non-vegan desserts.

On the day TGR visited 4th Gen, only one dessert, a cheesecake, was vegetarian rather than vegan. Vegan entrées and sides are in one display case and those containing organic meats and seafood are in another. Raw vegan specialties include "cheese" made from cashews and/or macadamias. Shoppers can choose from six to eight hot dishes daily.

Besides its wide selection of organic grocery items, 4th Gen also offers a variety of organic beers and wines, organic house-made raw vegan ice cream, organic pre-packed house-made salads and sides and organic frozen foods. And true to its roots, the organic produce selection is bright and inviting. During a lull in shoppers coming through the

Boca Raton, Fla., is known for many things: sunshine, beaches, gated communities and well-heeled retirees. For the last five years that list has also included 4th Generation Organic Market, the only 100 percent organic market in Boca Raton and the only location in Palm Beach County catering to vegans, vegetarians and raw foodists.

In 2009, the Litowich family established the market as the next phase of a 105-year-old family business that began in 1910 when Ben Litowich parleyed \$200 he had borrowed into a produce business in Benton Harbor, Mich. By 1945, the company had become Ben Litowich & Son. In 1962, Bud, the son, had begun seasonal operations in Pompano Beach, Fla. His son Ben joined the company in 1975, and in 1988, they began Ben-Bud Growers, focusing on importing and distributing produce. In 2005, Ben's children Bryan and Ashley — the fourth generation — joined the company.

The current store is 3,000 square feet and packed with organic products. According to manager Richard Lewis, this is a one-stop grocery offering only organic items. Then he adds that seafood cannot be classified as organic, but it is all sustainable. More than 90 percent of the items carried in the store are gluten-free and a "significant amount" of the items are raw.

4th Gen, as it's known locally, does a brisk business in prepared foods. Lewis says the prepared food/grocery split is 50/50. There are four chefs on staff, one of whom specializes in raw food.



register, associate Amanda Kantz took advantage of the opportunity to rearrange a display of sweet potatoes to make them more enticing.

The store's website offers tips on buying and storing fresh produce (natch!) and information on gluten-free choices. In addition, an archive of 4th Gen newsletters contains information on topics as diverse as why organic is important, fair trade coffee and how to grow sprouts.

A second 4th Gen is currently under construction. The 12,000-square-foot store is scheduled to open October 2015 in West Boca Raton. •

## Natural Grocers

Strict product guidelines and nutritional coaches make it easy to find out which foods are free-from

BY DANIELLE MURPHY

Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage Inc., headquartered in Lakewood, Colo., is transparent about what products it does and does not sell. There are no products with artificial colors, flavors or sweeteners; no bleached flour; no cloned animal or animal dairy product; no GMO salmon or animal/seafood products; no hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils; no irradiated food; and nothing with MSG.

So what do they sell? Groceries, body care products and supplements from natural food growers.

All of the produce in this 95-store chain is organic. This decision was based on the company's concern about commingling



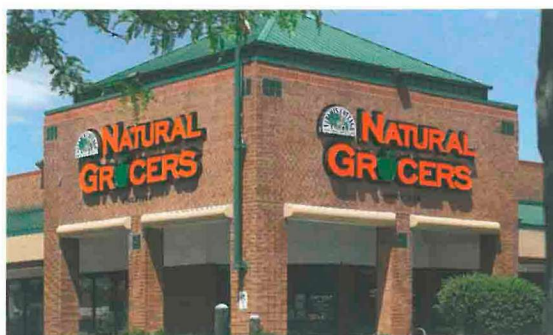
## RETAILER SNAPSHOTS

and cross-contamination and on simply making it easier for the consumer, who does not have to distinguish between organic and conventional produce.

“We incorporated produce into our stores in 1989 and have only ever sold organic produce — one of the few retailers who do this,” says Jeremy Jones, brand engagement manager. “It was important to us and our customers to avoid produce that contains chemical pesticides, fertilizers and other genetically modified chemicals that can be harmful to our environment and the planet.”

Natural Grocers recently finished the rollout of its new pasture-based dairy standard. The stores no longer sell any dairy products that come from confinement dairies, and the animals at dairies they use must graze for a minimum of 120 days per year.

These decisions exemplify the



company’s commitment to making sure its consumers are getting exactly what is marketed, something which is especially important to the free-from community.

The stores offer a selection of gluten-free breads as well as gluten-free grab-and-go options and similar special diet-oriented options. They also have a number of fermented and non-fermented dairy alternatives.

Some of the free in-store classes include: Healthy Gluten-free Living, Taking Gluten Free to the Next Level:

For the Holidays, and Taking Gluten-free Cooking up a Level. Stores also have the option to host a gluten-free health fair.

“Nutritional health coaches also are educated on allergen-free eating via our in-house nutritional health coach training program,” says Jones. “We have a 10-page educational document geared specifically toward dealing with food allergies

and sensitivities, and customers can schedule free coaching sessions with the nutritional health coach to go over any dietary questions they might have.”

The chain’s nutritional health coaches offer other complimentary services including answering questions for consumers in the store, nutrition classes and cooking demos, and speaking at community events.

The website features an Ask the Health Coach section, as well as in-store deals and recipes. •

## RETAILER SNAPSHOTS

# Liberty Heights Fresh

A pioneer in healthy food retailing

BY NATALIE HAMMER NOBLITT

**A**s a pioneer in the retail world of fresh, organic and free-from foods, Steven Rosenberg of Liberty Heights Fresh in Salt Lake City still sounds like a humble food enthusiast who wants to provide the best selection of tasty goods available for his shoppers. He founded the store in 1993 and gave himself the very un-corporate title of CEO — Chief Eating Officer.

“Food should make you smile and contain ingredients that your great-grandparents would understand,” says Rosenberg. “We have a high level of transparency in our store. We want people to know the truth about the food we sell, not just what they want to hear. For us, integrity is a

pretty black and white issue.”

The promises Liberty Heights Fresh makes to its shoppers are taken very seriously by Rosenberg and his staff, who explain the market’s approach to food on

the website: “We only sell food that meets our strict standards — authentic hand-crafted cuisine that honors generational traditions, never takes shortcuts, where unflinching commitment to quality and methods of production is paramount, and that most importantly, every single bite is delicious.”

For this reason, the store draws a wide variety of shoppers who have myriad different goals for the food they want — everything from just eating

more organics to wanting to stay clear of genetically modified foods or avoiding animals raised on a feed lot.

“We clearly have the gamut of well-educated and sophisticated shoppers,” Rosenberg says. “They have a wide range of needs they come to



Photo credit: Rachel Sanders





us to fulfill. For some it is food allergies or intolerances and for others it's a lifestyle choice. In Salt Lake City a lot of people are on the forefront of the paleo diet."

Some of the notable paleo practitioners in the area include the authors of the very popular "The Whole 30" cookbook,

Dallas and Mellisa Hartwig, who are shoppers at Liberty Heights Fresh.

Another innovation shoppers at Liberty Heights Fresh can participate in is an expansive CSA-style subscription called the Sustainably Farmed Food (SFF) Program. It is based on traditional community supported agriculture (CSA) programs where small farms grow food, pre-sell it and then deliver it on a weekly basis. Customers were looking for CSAs to meet their needs, and so the SFF was born, Rosenberg says. The program coordinates the resources of a number of family farms, ranches, and food artisans throughout Utah and the West to promote sustainably farmed food and offer customers both a cost-savings and a good variety of food. The program can also be tailored to the needs of shoppers, such as those who are sticking to diets that are vegetarian, vegan, omnivore or paleo. •

kitchen electrics that will help them meet their healthy eating goals. "We choose all of our products with healthy eating in mind and have three registered dietitians on our team ready to work one-on-one with our customers who are looking to take their eating habits to the next level," explains Mora.

One of the store's popular items is the Gurgle Pot, a ceramic pitcher that makes a gurgling sound when pouring a beverage. According to Mora, the Gurgle Pot is "great for getting kids to drink water, is very popular with all ages. It's unique, fun and makes a great gift."

ThePlate is an active member of its community and has developed partnerships with the local farmers market, local grocery stores and surrounding schools to provide healthy eating classes and services.

The concept has been so popular that ThePlate Boutique opened a second location in Grand Rapids, Mich., in February. True to ThePlate's mission, that store is managed by a registered dietitian as well. On May 16, ThePlate Boutique participated in the ninth annual Gluten Free Food Fair in Grand Rapids, which attracted about 75 vendors and hundreds of consumers.

"In our community, we've established ourselves as the premiere resource for all things kitchen- and nutrition-related," says Mora, pictured left. The business "is growing every month." Mora and the ThePlate Boutique remain active on social media and use videos to encourage

customers to adopt healthy habits. (Because of Mount Pleasant's remote location, she also uses video conferencing with sales reps.)

"Given that we are in a town with a population of approximately 25,000 ... I believe this is a testament to how strong our digital integration is," says Mora. Before opening the Grand Rapids location, ThePlate had 1,245 Facebook fans and 192 followers on Twitter, a healthy following. **TGR**

## ThePlate Boutique

Helping people eat healthier, one plate at a time

BY ANNA WOLFE

**T**he desire to help people eat healthier led Kati Mora, a registered dietitian, to open ThePlate Boutique, a housewares store in Mount Pleasant, Mich., in 2012.

Mora's passion for healthy eating, and blogging about it, led to the "crazy notion of opening a kitchenware store," she explains. "Our business started out as a food and nutrition blog, AroundthePlate.org, in 2009. From there, we continued to answer the question — how can we help people eat their healthiest while having fun at the same time? As we pursued the answer to that question, we realized that learning to love your kitchen was an important piece of the puzzle. So, in 2012 we launched ThePlate Boutique — the first nutrition-inspired kitchen store."

ThePlate's mission is to inspire people to cook healthy delicious dishes. Mora, her staff, including three registered dietitians and some interns from Central Michigan's registered dietitian program, help customers by providing sound nutrition advice and assisting them in selecting gadgets and small

