

STORES

Creating an exceptional shopping experience is an essential element of generating loyalty at fashion retailers, but does it work in food?

John Ryan reports from Austin, Texas

Ingredients for great

'Experience' has been one of those touchstone words in retail for some years. The theory goes that if a retailer can offer a good in-store experience, shoppers will reward this through their patronage. Everybody will be happy – the retailer will have made a sale and the shopper will have something over and above the simple exchange of money for goods.

This tends, for the most part, to be the domain of fashion retailers and department stores. When it comes to big-box retailing, why would shoppers expect the same experience? In practice this can mean lacklustre environments in the worlds of DIY and food retailing (although Wickes is doing a lot to create stores where this is not the case).

But does it have to be this way? A mere 5,000 miles from the UK (give or take) lies Austin, deep in the heart of Texas. This is a hot place for much of the year. The capital of the Lone Star State, Austin is home to the University of Texas, Dell computers, a lot of music and around 900,000 people.

It is also the location of Whole Foods Market's head office, which has a massive store directly beneath it. It is also home to a large number of rival H-E-B stores.

The latter is a Texan phenomenon. The acronym stands for 'Here Everything's Better'. Like Whole Foods, it trades, for the most part, from large boxes in both urban and city-edge locations.

Both can be characterised as 'foodie' destinations and both, in somewhat different ways, attempt to provide a range of in-store experiences.

With a heavy emphasis on organic as one of the features of their ranges, these are retailers that take food and make its display interesting through a mix of visual merchandising and store design.



Whole Foods Market, Bowie Street

There are no fewer than nine Whole Food Market stores in Austin but the branch at 550 Bowie Street is perhaps the most significant inasmuch as it is directly beneath the company headquarters.

Trading from a single floor with a mezzanine level at one end that is home to a cafe, this is a big store

and, as typifies all supermarkets everywhere currently, the emphasis is on fresh.

Approach it from the road that runs past it and while it is obvious that there is a store at this location, the overwhelming impression is of a somewhat featureless office block, where the company's bigwigs and ops types do their

thing. Head into the car park, however, and the store becomes more apparent. One of the first things visitors will encounter are displays of living herbs billed as 'Good stuff from around here'.

Next to this there are large water butts – Austin may have the Colorado flowing through it but water is in short supply in large

More pictures of Austin's food retailers at
Retail-week.com/FoodInAustin



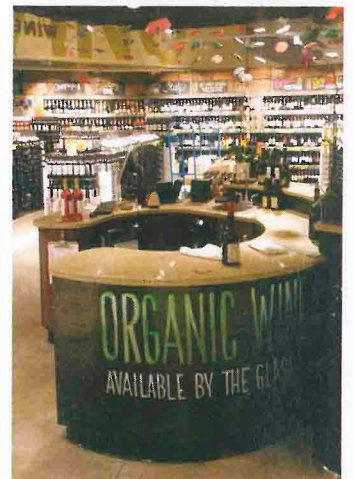
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AUSTIN BIG-BOX FOOD RETAIL

Large stores are the norm. Shoppers drive to stores. Counters and graphics play a more obvious part than in the UK.

Pause points Cafes and restaurants are central to the offer

Ambience Chilly – Texans air condition everything



Everything looks as if it has been hand polished and abundance is the key word

parts of this state. Head indoors and this is familiar Whole Foods Market territory, with a vast mid-floor display of fruit and veg where everything looks as if it has been hand polished and abundance is the key word.

The fresh displays are similar to those found in most equivalent large-format grocers in the UK, but housekeeping standards are

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► better. Around the perimeter and above the level of the counters is the first of many messages that Whole Foods presents to its shoppers, a graphic that reads 'Organic & Sustainable'.

Move beyond this and it is time for a beer or a glass of wine. Whole Foods has introduced bars into its stores in the past five years. They are now a common sight in many branches across the US. The outcome is that towards the back of this store on a Thursday lunchtime large numbers of Austinites were sat passing the time of day with a glass of something.

Directly next to this was the 'Organic' wine department where much of the fit-out was clad in wood, promoting the impression of a wine cellar. There is a separate beer room where shoppers are encouraged to join "Michael" every Thursday at 7pm to learn about hop-related beverages.

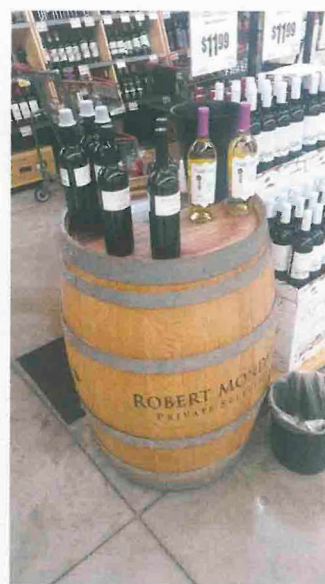
The rest of the store is a mix of eat-over counters and bars (the juice bar in particular, close to the checkouts, is noteworthy) and familiar supermarket category displays that are lifted by a degree of interaction and humour.

The 'Cooking' aisle typifies this with serve-yourself ingredients being available from bar optic-style dispensers accompanied by names such as 'Forbidden Rice' and bon mots such as 'No man in the world has more courage than the man who can stop after eating one peanut'.

Indeed, phrases with a sprinkling of humour pepper this store throughout, ranging from: 'There's no fakery in our bakery' to 'We aim to please with cheese'.

On arrival at the checkouts, there's still time to take a juice or perhaps a coffee before heading back to the car (nobody walks to this store – it's just too hot), having had an experience.

Whole Foods has introduced bars into its stores in the past five years



Personal service is at the heart of the H-E-B experience, which includes counters for almost everything



Why they never skimp on shrimp at H-E-B

Arriving from the interstate at this store is a mild relief, as the driver will have spent a fair while travelling past miles of light industrial and business park units, along with the usual US strip mall developments. The H-E-B store, by contrast, has clearly benefited from the attentions of a good architect and features a massive glass frontage and a curving canopy, all supported by wooden beams and struts. The petrol station that is part of this complex has the same curved canopy above the pumps and large SUVs were filling up.

In the store, it was once more a case of entertainment in the form of cafes and a restaurant, as well as counters for almost everything that the food shopper might care to think about. This may be a supermarket but it is also a food store where a high level of personal service forms part of both proposition and experience.

The perimeter counter units are rather less 'folksy' than Whole Foods but this retailer is not above using rhyme to get its point across: "We never skimp on our shrimp", and a wooden sign that reads: "Oink, Moo, Cock a doodle doo", being prime examples of this.

This is in fact a rather more workaday food shopping experience than the downtown Whole Food store but the emphasis that has been placed once more on abundance and trying to avoid too many uniform aisles is evident. It is also a store where shoppers can take their time or get through the place quickly, which may be what is required as this will be on the way home from the downtown commute for many people.

The Mueller cafe is named after the eponymous airport that stood on this site prior to its redevelopment as a supermarket and retail park, among other things. ■