

Good Food Advocate



Liberty Heights Fresh's advocacy and commitment to good food sustain success in a competitive market

By Natalie Hammer Noblitt

Steven Rosenberg, Liberty Heights Fresh founder and chief eating officer.

A desire to create a high level of transparency for grocery shoppers — and provide great food finds no one else in the area would carry — drove Steven Rosenberg, founder of Liberty Heights Fresh in Salt Lake City to open his one-of-a-kind specialty store.

Those goals remain the cornerstone of the business today. As a pioneer in the retail world of fresh, organic and free-from foods, Rosenberg still runs his business like a humble food enthusiast: He simply wants to offer the best selection available for his customers.

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After launching the store more than two decades ago in a converted gas station in Salt Lake City, Rosenberg still proudly houses the store in the same spot and bears the very un-corporate title of CEO — chief eating officer. The store's last significant remodel occurred in 2000, but he continues to reset the space so that it feels fresh and appealing to its guests.

"Liberty Heights Fresh began as a fruit, vegetable and flower market, and evolved to offer a more vast selection of good food. As I traveled and discovered more, my vision became clearer for offering what people in Salt Lake City were, at the time, unable to source," says Rosenberg. "I was fortunate to discover good food makers in Europe and the USA, some of whom we still work with today."

Rosenberg grew up on a fruit farm in Southwest Michigan where his family still grows produce. That's where he first developed his love and respect for what he calls good food. After studying food marketing and agricultural economics, he worked for large wholesale grocery suppliers before attending film school and briefly working in the motion picture industry.

After settling in Salt Lake City, Rosenberg opened the store in August 1993 with a handful of staff. Now the roughly 2,350-square-foot single location requires a team of 22. Rosenberg and his staff members, whom he describes as food-obsessed, take the promises Liberty Heights Fresh makes to its shoppers very seriously. The store's team works to give shoppers the information they need and to provide suggestions that will make them genuinely satisfied. "Telling someone what he or she wants to hear is not telling the truth," he says. "The nature of the American food industry has often been to keep consumers purchasing the same items over and over again."

His knowledge of the food industry has helped Rosenberg appreciate finding great products and food producers. "Food should make you smile and contain ingredients that your great-grandparents would understand," he says. "We want people to know the truth about the food we sell. For us, integrity is a pretty black-and-white issue. That hasn't always been my experience working with traditional grocery stores."

But sourcing products and keeping a high level of integrity aren't always easy, especially when it means conveying that information to educated food shoppers in a competitive marketplace.

"Challenges we face today are numerous and constant, the greatest being additional specialty food retailers in our market area that provide our guests with additional shopping options and convenience," says Rosenberg. "We need to make sure every guest has a positively memorable experience."



AT A GLANCE:

Liberty Heights Fresh

Founded: August 1993

Owner: Steven Rosenberg

Location: 1290 1100 E, Salt Lake City, Utah

Size: 2,350 square feet

Employees: 22

Phone: 801-467-2434

Website: www.libertyheightsfresh.com

Retailer

Profile



Liberty Heights Fresh is a destination for specialty foods, including artisan cheese, local and regional produce, olive oils and more.

It's not just handwritten signs on the shelves or friendly discussions in the store that help keep customers informed; Liberty Heights Fresh also relies heavily on social media to introduce new producers to its shoppers and generate excitement. Facebook and Twitter accounts provide quick info on products and events, along with a blog, electronic newsletter and weekly website updates on store offerings.

"Social media is vital to our success, now more than ever," says Rosenberg. "It is very important to have everyone on our team aware and participating with the fast pace of change and new product knowledge necessary to serve our guests with accurate and timely information."

Social media provides a constant challenge for Liberty Heights Fresh, and Rosenberg can't manage it all alone. "We have a wonderful, good-food-savvy person who works freelance and keeps our social media up to date on an ongoing basis," he says.

Events also serve as a fun and educational tool to engage shoppers. The store supports both local and larger organizations, which vary from elementary schools to the Slow Food Movement to groups like Alex's Lemonade Stand, which works to end childhood cancer. "We are very active with local nonprofit events that promote eating well and team up with groups that help to build awareness about good food and the benefits of conscious eating," he says.

A Shift to Savvier Shoppers

Because of its carefully cultivated offerings, Liberty Heights Fresh draws a wide variety of shoppers who have myriad goals for the food they want —

everything from eating more organics to wanting to stay clear of genetically modified foods to avoiding animals raised on a feed lot. The store's offerings can also meet food allergy and other free-from dietary requests.

Many area shoppers know Liberty Heights Fresh as the place to go to for fun and quirky ingredients they can't find elsewhere in the area, like watermelon radishes or locally or regionally grown produce. The cheese selection is another reason many shoppers seek out the market.

"We clearly have the gamut of well-educated and sophisticated

shoppers," Rosenberg says. "They have a wide range of needs they come to us to fulfill. For some it is food allergies or intolerances and for others it's a lifestyle choice. In Salt Lake City there are a lot of people on the forefront of the Paleo diet."

The people who frequent Liberty Heights Fresh have evolved along with the store over the last two decades, Rosenberg says. Paleo, a dietary and lifestyle option with the goal of avoiding processed food in favor of eating more like our early human ancestors, didn't exist when the store first opened. But now Paleo eating has become widely accepted across the country and among Salt Lake City-area residents. Some of the notable local Paleo practitioners include the authors of the very popular "The Whole 30" cookbook, Dallas and Melissa Hartwig, who Rosenberg says are shoppers at Liberty Heights Fresh.

"Our guests have changed as much or more than the good food retail landscape, in that people are generally better informed today," he says. "The availability of good food in our market area has made us better merchants. We continue to strive to provide Salt Lake City with the most authentic, traditional food and offer certified organically grown, humanely raised and fairly sourced options to Salt Lake City."

Prepared foods, made with ingredients far better than in many traditional offerings, are very popular and in great demand. People want to know what is in their food, even when they are looking for convenience, he says. "We are committed to providing transparency along with our selection of good eats. Younger consumers are far more aware of their options and want to support merchants that walk the talk," Rosenberg adds.

Retailer

Profile



Liberty Heights Fresh has 22 employees who are as “food obsessed” as the customers they serve. The store’s CSA program has about 60 active customers.

Because today’s consumers find it can be hard to get the right information in the marketplace, Rosenberg’s team must work diligently to choose offerings carefully and go the extra mile to educate shoppers. For example, “natural” doesn’t mean what it did 10 years ago, Rosenberg says. Large stakeholders in agribusiness often avoid the transparency he hopes to achieve at Liberty Heights Fresh. “There’s a lot of misinformation out there. We work really hard to keep industrial GMOs like soy and corn out of our store,” he says.

Rosenberg sees eating organic, sustainable and local food as an investment in health from which his customers will reap rewards in the long run. He supports labeling of food products that include GMO ingredients and is committed to carrying certified organic produce. “We are likely the only store in our area that carries 100 percent certified organic produce, even though other retailers do stock organics.”

Making In-Season Easier

Liberty Heights Fresh offers an innovative community supported agriculture-style (CSA) subscription service called the Sustainably Farmed Food (SFF) Program. This expansive subscription program began as a traditional CSA program — where small farms grow food, pre-sell it and then deliver it on a weekly basis.

More than five years ago, when Rosenberg and his team found their customers wanted CSAs to meet their specific dietary needs, the customized

SFF was born. The program coordinates the resources of a number of family farms, ranches and food artisans throughout Utah and the western United States to promote sustainably farmed food.

While the store works to source as locally as possible, and often buys from Utah farmers, the program accesses about 30 to 40 farmers in Utah and California who provide outstanding produce. Liberty Heights Fresh defines regional food as products that can “easily travel to the store by truck between breakfast and lunch or lunch and dinner.”

Participants in the program pick up their baskets every Thursday at one of three designated locations. SFF members enroll in a 13-week, 6-week or week-by-week option in full- or half-share options, depending on family size. Each week members receive an email detailing the contents of the next bag and access to delicious recipes using its contents.

Statistics show that CSA participation is down coast to coast, says Rosenberg, but the program is still strong at his store. When participation is at its highest, nearly 60 subscriptions are active. “It’s a great way to eat if you want the freshest and most in-season produce,” he says.

Shoppers who subscribe to the SFF Program receive both a cost savings and a good variety of food that fits their needs. The program can be tailored for households that stick to vegetarian, vegan, omnivore or Paleo diets. And it’s not just produce; the SFF basket can also contain upgrade options for cheese, eggs, meat and other specialties like chocolate.

A willingness to educate shoppers, and to welcome customers with a variety of dietary desires, has served

Liberty Heights Fresh well over the past two decades. As more consumers search to find less processed and “real food” options, Rosenberg, his staff and the store’s good food offerings have led to solid success in the Salt Lake City market. Looking ahead, the store plans to add more prepared foods and pastries, Rosenberg says. “We want to continue to be the ‘go-to’ good food store in Salt Lake City for people who care about the integrity of what they eat.” **TGR**

Rodrigo Hernandez shows off some of Liberty Heights Fresh’s bounty.

