

# Now They're Cooking

Strack & Van Til ups its grocerant game with a northwest Indiana remodel focused on customer service. **By Jim Dudlicek**

**"T**here's nothing here that we won't cook."

That's Chris Bengtson, VP at Highland, Ind.-based Strack & Van Til (SVT), outlining the enhanced prepared food services now offered at the 20-unit chain's newly remodeled store in Schererville, Ind., during

a recent midday visit. "If someone asked us to smoke a turkey for dinner tonight," he said, "we could do it."

That speaks to the banner's renewed focus on a full-service shopping experience, from the Café to the front

end to the concierge who helps customers with meal and party planning.

"We set out to create the region's most extensive fresh offering, with a focus on the customer through an expanded full-serve offering and a commitment to customer service," explains Bengtson, whose purview includes public relations, community affairs, customer service and corporate inventory control.

"This wasn't just another refresh — it was really a pivotal store remodel for SVT," he continues. "We looked to set the stage for who we want to be. This was our chance to jump in feet first with what our customers were asking us for. We'll continue to evaluate and, moving forward, we'll implement components in future store remodels."





The Schererville remodel provided an opportunity to launch some new signature offerings unique to the store.

The Sweet Shop features candy from two local companies, Albanese Candy Factory and South Bend Chocolate Co., along with fresh store-made popcorn. There are also fresh-cut fruit and a fresh-squeezed juice bar, and skilled chefs prepare made-to-order sushi.

Joining customer favorites like fried chicken and store-baked cakes are in-house smoked brisket, fresh-made pasta and pizzas, fresh-made peanut butter (made in-house), a hummus and olive bar, and a destination natural and organic department.



#### AT YOUR SERVICE

From left: Sandy Janda, deli manager; Bob Bonham, assistant store director; Chris Bengtson, VP; Randy Cootee, store director; Ken Bair, director of operations; Paul Neumann, produce manager; Chris Kocoj, head chef; and Kevin Bynum, assistant bakery manager



**FRONT AND CENTER**

From top: Fresh floral brightens the front end and encourages impulse purchases; Bengtson points out key features of the store to *PG* Editor-in-Chief Jim Dudlcek; each day's count of organic offerings is posted in the produce section.

"Our associates and the shoppers love to talk about the food," Bengtson says, "and there's a lot to talk about."

**Freshness Blossoms**

For regular Schererville shoppers, perhaps the most striking difference since the remodel is seen the moment they enter the store.

Previously, visitors coming in the front door were greeted by a warehouse-style "wall of values." This was torn down to create a wide, open space for the new vibrantly colored produce section.

"Everyone thinks we expanded, but we just took down the wall," Bengtson remarks. The produce section includes expanded organic offerings, with a daily tally of how many are available. "Just the produce is a new experience for our shoppers."

An extensive fresh floral department was added

at the front of the store as well. "We know it's an impulse buy, and there's no better way to steer shoppers to fresh-cut flowers than to put them up front," Bengtson explains.

Nearby is the sweet shop, where a store associate offers samples of a new popcorn flavor — pumpkin spice — from a recipe she created herself. "Everyone coming in walks by and grabs a sample of popcorn," Bengtson notes.

Produce is also home to SVT's new expanded fresh-cut fruit program, along with fresh-squeezed juice, a pet project for the banner. "We're the first to do it to this extent in northwest Indiana," Bengtson

## Store of the Month

Strack & Van Til, Schererville, Ind.



### SWEET TRUTH

**A highlight of the remodeled Schererville store is the Sweet Shop, offering confections from local companies and house-made flavored popcorn.**

Next along this inner perimeter is the sushi bar, where chefs make selections to order of “true restaurant quality,” says Ken Bair, SVT’s director of operations, who notes that sushi sales have soared by double digits since the addition of the in-house chefs. “The theater really drives sales.”

Bengtson, leading the tour around the bend into the specialty cheese department, notes, “We went back and forth for months on how to arrange the departments.” The staffed cheese counter is always busy, with shoppers

says. “A lot of what you see here is at the request of our customers. Nobody else around can do combinations like we can, on the spot. If someone wants beets with lemonade, we can make it.”

stopping to chat with the cheesemonger about the latest selections and get advice on wine-and-food pairings. “You can taste anything you want,” Bengtson says, indicating the international selections, cross-





#### THE MEAL DEAL

A new salad bar concept brackets traditional offerings with wings and soups (above). The Café offers everything from sandwiches to pastas to a carving station.

merchandised with wines, jams, crackers and other complementary products.

These are perfect opportunities to upsell, Bengtson acknowledges, and SVT's vendors appreciate the chance to enrich sales here. "They have as much stake in this as we do," he says. "They're working hard to partner the right items, because we want to take this [concept] to the next store."

#### Building Meals

SVT has significantly ramped up its prepared food program at the Schererville store. The Café, led by head chef Chris Kocoj, offers everything from deli sandwiches to full meals, aimed at delivering easy solutions for shoppers. "We're

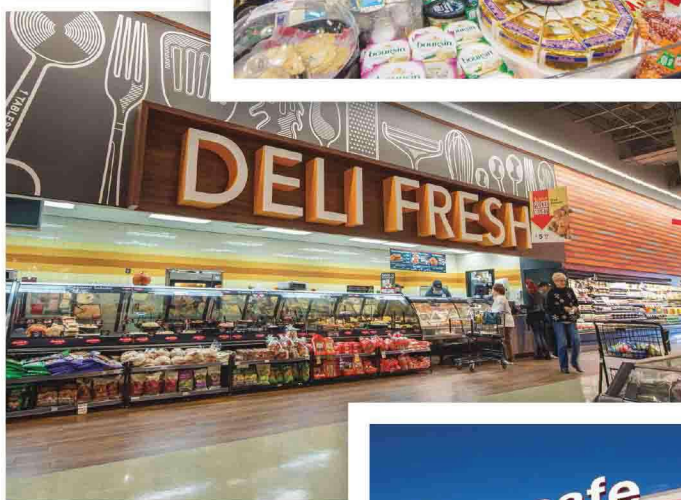


learning that's what people want," Bengtson says. "The idea is to allow people to build their meal."

Order a custom-made sandwich, or pick up a grab-and-go item. Ask for a slice of pizza, build a whole pie to exact specifications, or buy one to bake at home. Enjoy smoked-on-premise pulled pork and beef brisket with a range of sides, try Asian entrées, or sample a selection of carved meats. For

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## Strack & Van Til

1515 U.S. Highway 41  
Schererville, IN 46375

**Grand opening:** Aug. 5, 2015

**Total square footage:** 87,000

**Selling area:** 55,000 square feet

**SKUs:** 37,000

**Employees:** 270

**Checkouts:** 13

**Hours:** Open 24 hours

**Designer:** CIP (décor); internal layout design by Strack & Van Til executive management team, led by Director of Construction Russ Webber







#### A CUT ABOVE

In-house smoked brisket is carved to order for sandwiches (above). The new olive bar adds a fresh and vibrant touch to the perimeter.

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just \$6, choose an entrée and two sides, or try a \$3.99 pasta bowl, with your choice of noodles (made fresh daily), sauce, vegetable and protein.

"This has become our private label," Bengtson says of Café offerings. "We love that."

Also available at the front-positioned café are ready-to-cook seasoned meats, which shoppers can take home or have prepared before their eyes. "We're doing a ham for a customer on Sunday," Store Director Randy Goo-tee noted during *PG's* visit on a Friday afternoon.

The store's new salad bar concept offers traditional greens and toppings, flanked on opposite



ends by an assortment of chicken wings and soups.

Over at the full-service deli counter, shoppers can get sliced-to-order lunchmeats and a range of salads, the most popular of which are also offered in grab-and-go packaging. The scratch bakery now features a wider array of upscale cakes, as well as



fresh bread. “We have great cake decorators that we weren’t using to their full potential before the remodel,” Bengtson says.

The store’s meat department used to be entirely self-service, but now a full-service butcher counter, along with an extensive seafood department complete with lobster tank, not only provides custom cuts but will cook anything that’s for sale. Equipped with ovens, fryers and steamers, the department offers a range of seafood dinner specials, and the store works closely with its seafood vendor on how best to merchandise products.

Not far away, shoppers can pair their meat or fish with the perfect libation at the store’s expanded beer and wine department. Featuring a selection of local wines and beers, including products from northwest Indiana’s wildly popular Three Floyds Brewery,



**DAILY GRIND**  
The full-service meat department offers many value-added selections.

:the section offers mixed 6-packs of craft beers and discounts on wine purchases of six or more bottles.

### **Destination Departments**

Outside of a general refreshing, center store was fundamentally unchanged, with two notable exceptions.



## Store of the Month

Strack & Van Til, Schererville, Ind.



### HIGH SPIRITS

The remodel brought an expanded wine department. Opposite page: Evelyn Schwitters, the store's concierge, offers a product sample to a shopper.

First, the destination natural and organic section, which includes refrigerated, frozen and grocery items all in one area, was added. The concept has proved popular, and SVT is so committed to it that the grocer created the position of natural and organic department head to oversee it, Bengtson notes.

Second, along the wall at the far end of this section is an array of bulk food bins, containing nuts, candies, seeds and grains. The bulk section “has done a lot more than I thought it would,” Bengtson admits, calling its placement at the end of the organic aisle “a brilliant merchandising decision.”

Further changes included retrofitting the dairy cases with doors to conserve energy, and installing LED lights in refrigerated and frozen cases. “We have reduced energy consumption quite a bit,” Bengtson says.

There are 13 checklanes at the front end, all



staffed. “We actually took out self-checkout,” Bengtson declares, noting that the store got “more positive feedback for taking them out than putting them in.”

He continues: “Our focus is creating a unique experience, with emphasis on full service. We want our cashiers to thank every single one of our customers.”





SVT takes customer feedback seriously, to the extent that one planned part of the remodel was scrapped: The retailer was going to remove the awning at the front of the store to create more retail space, Bengtson explains, but customers voiced their opposition, favoring the sheltered area for drop-offs and pickups on shopping trips.

"If they don't like what we're doing," Bengtson

says, "they're not spending their money with us."

The Schererville store serves a diverse customer base, with a broad demographic and income profile. "We border on many demographics, so we can sell anything," Bengtson says, calling the store's location, at the junction of Highways 30 and 41, "the heartbeat of northwest Indiana."

What's more, in the short time since its unveiling, the newly refurbished store has already amassed a devoted following. Notes

Bengtson: "I have neighbors who pass two of our other stores to shop here."

### **Heartbeat of Customer Service**

With a staff of about 200 associates — up from 176 before the remodel — SVT is clearly aiming to enhance its customer service.

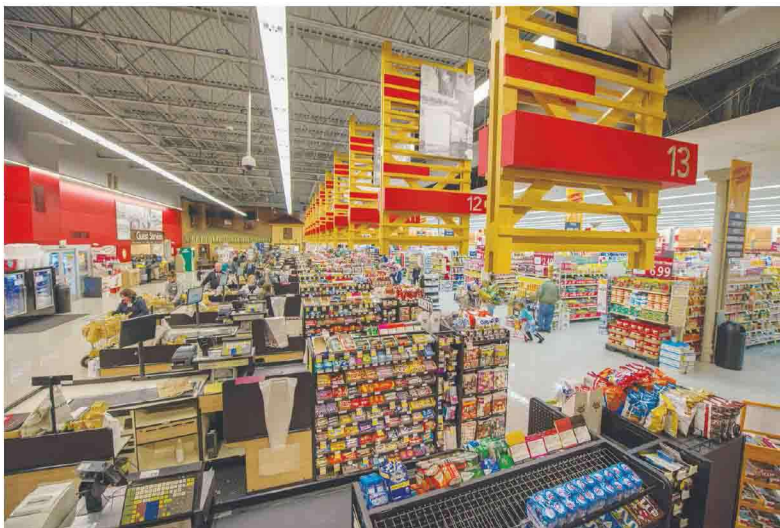


## Store of the Month

Strack & Van Til, Schererville, Ind.



**HISTORY CHECK**  
Displayed above the front end are photos depicting the grocer's past in northwest Indiana.



Leading the charge at the Schererville market is Evelyn Schwitters, the store's concierge. An SVT employee for 34 years, Schwitters conducts product samplings, provides recipes, helps customers plan parties and is otherwise the banner's liaison to shoppers.

"She knows our customers by name," Bengtson says. "She helps tie everything together for them."

During *PG's* visit, Schwitters was sampling smoked ham, a favorite in her own home, she told shoppers. "I love my customers," she declares.

Bengtson adds: "She's the heartbeat of customer service for this store."

That effort is paying off. "Without a doubt, the most rewarding part of remodeling the store has been the positive feedback we've received from our shoppers,"

Bengtson says. "This store is an important store for us, located in the heart of northwest Indiana. We knew that if we didn't provide them with what they were looking for, they would tell us about it. Since we opened the doors, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. I've been blown away."

The store team continues to learn how to adapt to a whole new level of service. “Since the grand reopening, we’ve realized that the demand in our café has meant that we need to bring on more people in the department,” Bengtson explains. “It’s very much a full-service department that requires a lot of interaction between our associates and shoppers. It’s a balance between getting them out in a timely manner and still providing them with a fresh, full service experience. Making that work requires great people, and a lot of them.”

There’s a lot at stake, despite the loyalty of northwest Indiana shoppers. The Schererville store operates around the clock to better compete with the Walmart in the same shopping center. And with a new Whole Foods Market that opened last fall just 2 miles away, SVT can’t pull any punches in this battle for fresh.

“We are fortunate to have Central Grocers as our main supplier,” Bengtson says of the Joliet, Ill.-based wholesale distributor, of which Strack & Van Til is a subsidiary. “They’ve been extremely supportive of us through the remodel process and stand to grow as we continue to grow our offering — all of our suppliers do. We introduced so many new items in Schererville, many of which are available only in

this store. Our suppliers all have skin in the game here. They know that if it works, we’re going to do more of it in future remodels.”

Bengtson also credits the store’s team for its success to date: “From our store director to our freight crew, this team moves in the same direction. We put them through a lot during the remodel. We moved every single thing in the store, and through all of it, they’ve remained positive and excited about the change. There’s no doubt that our customers’ positive reaction to the remodel has been driven in large part by our Schererville store team.”

One of Bengtson’s favorite design features of the store is a décor package that includes a series of photos taken during the company’s early history in northwest Indiana. The current company, with roots reaching back to 1930, was created when grocers Ernie Strack and Nick Van Til merged their operations in 1960.

“We value the history we have here and are proud to showcase it,” Bengtson says. “Every once in a while, we have a shopper that comes to us, identifies a person in one of the photos and reiterates the fact that they’ve shopped with us since then. We value that loyalty and are proud to be that grocery store in this community.” **PG**

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**—Chris Bengtson, VP**