



The cafe/lounge at Metcalfe's Market in Madison, Wis., is designed to encourage relaxation and casual conversation.

# A sense of place

*Distinctive design strategies can help grocerants create their own ambience.*

BY LYNN PETRAK



Laser-cut lighting and furniture made from reclaimed lumber set the style for the cafe at Jackson Whole Grocer in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

**If a grocerant is literally a blend of a grocery store and a restaurant, it should look and feel like it.**

That's the consensus of experts tasked with helping supermarkets define and distinguish their grocerant areas through the design of those spaces. "[Grocerant design] sets the tone and communicates a message to customers that they can have quality food there for lunch or take it home and have it for dinner," says Steve Mehmert, president of Mehmert Store Settings, Sussex, Wis., which provides retail project solutions including store design and equipment. "It's part of the total store need, as we are now creating that kind of hybrid."

Michael Lehman, vice president of marketing and product management for ConTech Lighting in Northbrook, Ill., underscores the importance of ambience for attracting—and keeping—customers in the grocerant area of a supermarket. "You get into creating an environment for the experience of it. That's what Starbucks does—people buy coffee and hang out there. Why can't grocery stores do the same thing?" he says.



## It's important to physically highlight the difference between the grocerant space and other merchandising areas, say experts.

"The longer you stay [in a grocerant area], you may say something like, 'I think I'll go get a cupcake,'" agrees Mehmert. "So it also opens things up in terms of sales because people stick around longer and buy more."

Just as a grocerant's products can elevate the supermarket from a food and beverage standpoint, the physical space can do much to boost a store's reputation among consumers.

"When it comes to design/décor, grocerant areas have become a platform to edify the value of the store's brand with an interactive, participatory look and feel," says Steven Johnson, consultant and owner of Foodservice Solutions in Tacoma, Wash.

"Depending on the retail outlet, it includes display kitchens, custom-made salad stations, personalized made-to-order pizza and local craft microbrewed beer on tap with a growler station. Each elevates consumer interactive [experiences], freshness and sustainability in the mind's eye of the consumer," he says.

Suppliers and designers who provide services and products to grocerants say that because this retail segment is newer, they're seeing a dynamism and openness to what can be achieved through interior design.

"Yes, it can be very exciting. Many of them are venturing in a new area to transform the customer experience and their bottom line as well," says Jerri Traflet, retail marketing manager for Boston-based Current, powered by GE.

### Lighten up

However and wherever a grocerant is located within a store, it's important to physically highlight the difference between that space and other merchandising areas, say experts. "Many stores want [the grocerant area] to feel separated out, so you can see there is a transition from the general grocery store," says Mehmert.

One way to accomplish that distinction is through lighting. "The general store has linear light, while areas with grocerants can have a layering and lowering of →

Metcalfe's Market in suburban Milwaukee displays local students' artwork for a personal touch.







lighting, with things like wall sconces and decorative pendants,” he says. “There is adequate lighting, but the space feels different.”

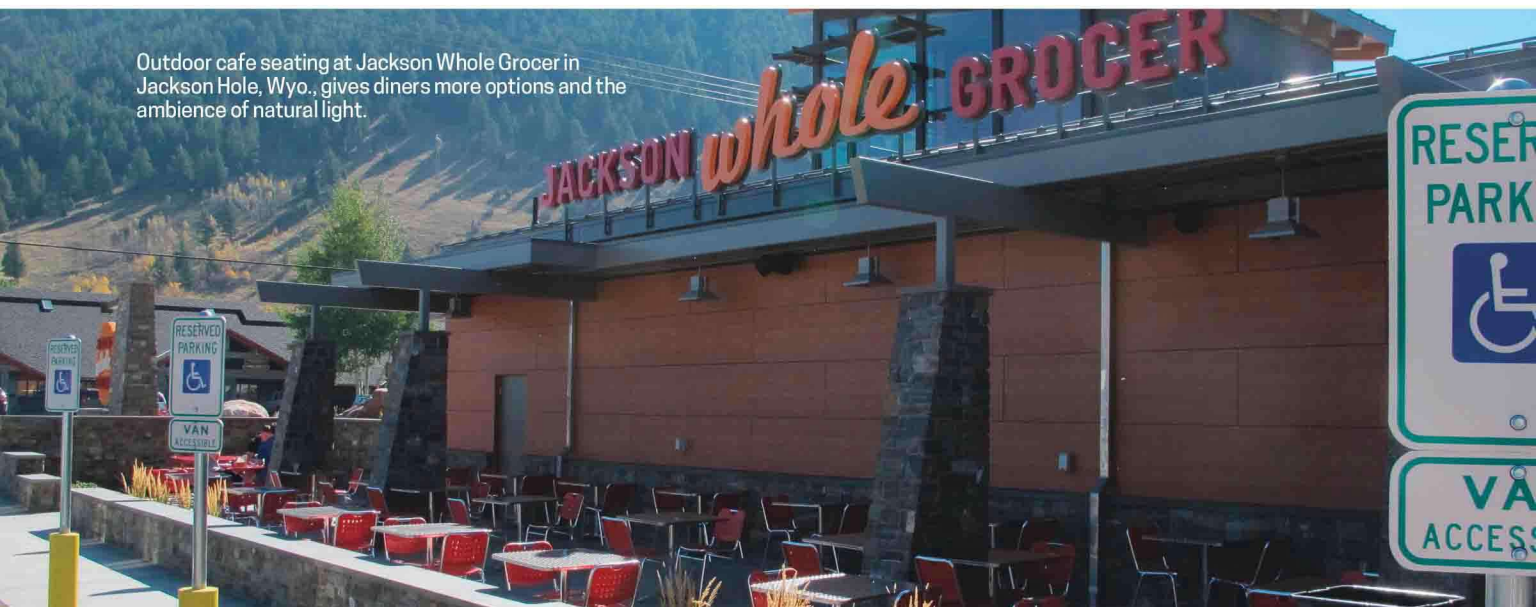
The role played by light in creating atmosphere is underscored by Traflet, who says just like home lighting, a store’s lighting is personal, based on needs and use.

“From our experience, grocers have specific design styles that they are looking for in their restaurant areas. We work directly with their store design team to find the right aesthetic and ambience for their specific need,” she says. “In some cases they are looking for a brighter,

well-lit area, which is common in quick service areas, and softer down lighting or specialty lighting in their full-service restaurant locations.”

Lehman also recommends “comfortable” lighting for grocerants. “You want more of a warmer color, at a lower level and with more decorative elements, like decorative shades and pendants,” he says. Lights on tables also add intimacy to a sit-down eating area, he adds.

Lighting functionality, of course, goes hand in hand with design. “For easy maintenance, we have LED pendants that give omnidirectional light, and there are up to 55 different





shades that you can put on it,” Lehman says. Another option for grocerants is curved rail lighting, commonly used for residential lighting, which offers a soft look with a variety of finishes.

To help determine what kind of lighting would work to best define their space, grocerants can turn to their lighting suppliers or look for designers or consultants specializing in the retail industry.

Schenectady, N.Y.-based Price Chopper, for example, enlisted the help of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s Lighting Research Center when the chain opened a new store in Latham, N.Y., that includes a grocerant area called Market Bistro. Based on the center’s input and assistance, the new Price Chopper store installed a variety of theatrical lighting to highlight the role of each particular section.

Meanwhile, there’s something to be said for the ambience that can be provided by natural light, says Mehmert. “Another thing we’re working hard at is getting seating areas around the perimeter of store in natural light. It’s nice to look out during the day to see sunshine or, at night, to see street lights,” Mehmert says.

## Dining decor

In the “traditional” part of a supermarket, shoppers are used to certain aesthetics such as bright lights, merchandising materials like clings, rail strips and other signage pieces. Music played on the store’s sound system sets a certain tone.

Grocerant areas, however, offer a broad and different set of décor possibilities. Here, mood is everything. Traditional interior design elements like furnishings, flooring, color and decorative accents can provide both style and substance to a space where customers can sit down and have a cup of coffee, share a meal with friends or read a book while they eat a prepared salad.



Like lighting, color and furnishings give personality to a retail space, along with a brand identity. Colors in grocerants generally need to emphasize the area’s role as a place to eat, enjoy and connect, says Mehmert. “If we’re looking at accomplishing a tranquil and peaceful place for people to eat, we let the colors, materials and fabrics lend themselves to a dining experience,” he says.

Accessories also provide a personal touch that can highlight the store’s role in the community. “We really want to embrace local themes and do so right in the store,” says Mehmert. In one local store in the Milwaukee area, Mehmert worked with the retailer to include photos of historical significance; for another store in Jackson Hole, Wyo., the team suggested accessories that evoke themes of mountains, wildlife, skiing and other local pastimes and pursuits.

Visual interest can be created or enhanced in other ways, according to Johnson, who cites some examples of stores with an outside-the-box approach to grocerant design and layout. “I like Winn-Dixie’s new concept store in Jacksonville [Fla.], Green Zebra Grocery [in Portland, Ore.], Metropolitan Market [in the Seattle area], Whole Foods, Wegmans, Ikea and Central Market [in Texas], to name a few. They each offer a variety of tables, chairs and elevations, and encourage visceral meal preparation, relaxing [in an ongoing, interactive way].” <sup>9</sup>

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