

# Harvest Natural Market STAKES ITS CLAIM

The stores strive to bring  
European shopping to Texas

By Katie Martin



Everything is bigger in Texas, as the saying goes. But Harvest Natural Market has modified the adage to fit its plan to offer a bigger, better customer experience in a manageable footprint. Its plans for the future are big indeed.

Harvest Natural Market currently operates two stores, in Katy and The Woodlands, Texas. Three additional stores are on the drawing board, with plans for more. "We're searching new land and new neighborhoods where we can open," says Inci Akpinar, designer and architect for Harvest Natural Market. "Our target is to grow, to open more in Houston, Dallas and San Antonio."

Katy opened in July 2015 and The Woodlands opened in March of this

#### LEADERSHIP

Left: Tolga Ugurdag, store manager; Deenita Chapman, founder/owner; Jason Ergen, VP of operations; and Lina Nuñez, manager.

year. The Woodlands store is 28,000 square feet, with a selling space of 24,000 square feet.

The size of the store needed to be "more human-sized," Akpinar notes. But a lot is packed into a small package. "We said, 'We're not going to be boring; the store needs to be more interactive.'"

Harvest Natural Market's concept is more in line with European markets that bring together the butcher, baker, greengrocer, etc., but do it all under one roof to provide a one-stop shop for customers. Each department is staffed with trained and knowledgeable employees and has its own look and design, allowing "people to feel different experiences in each point," Akpinar adds.

For example, the bakery evokes France, the seafood department has a Greek look, and the meat department is all Texas.

#### THE BISTRO

The Woodlands location features a Bistro with a coffee bar and seating. Customers can enjoy coffee or a freshly prepared meal from the food court in comfort.

What's most important, however, is that customers can do all of their shopping under one roof.

#### Product Selection

"Our concept is to create a one-stop-shopping experience," says Jason Ergen, VP of operations. "We have a lot of specialty items, a lot of organic, a

lot of gluten-free, products for a Paleo diet, all this good stuff, and we also have Oreo cookies." The product mix is 60 percent to 70 percent organic, natural and specialty items, with conventional SKUs occupying the remaining shelf space.

The product assortment also features a lot of international items that may

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—Jason Ergen



not be carried at a conventional supermarket, Ergen notes. “Our customers are very international, and what they used to cook with at home, they can find here,” he says. “Of course, we have a lot of Americans that come, and they like to try new things. They want to explore new tastes.”

The original concept for Harvest Natural Market was to provide enough variety to fit everyone’s needs. “We have natural, we have organic. We support our local farmers with local honeys. We’re conventional, but yet international,” says Deenita Chapman, founder.

The store wants to be able to serve



all of a household's needs; while one member may observe a specialized diet, for instance, not all of them might. "We want to eliminate multiple stops to finish your grocery shopping," Ergen adds. So, while Harvest Natural Market competes with natural food stores and conventional supermarkets, he says it's unique in its product mix, which allows shoppers to buy everything from organic produce to conventional spaghetti sauce to fresh meals prepared in-house, all in a dynamic, market-like setting.

The store is merchandised according to specialty diets. Gluten-free, Paleo or raw, and sugar-free each



### THE CORNER DELI

Customers can get the makings for a high-quality sandwich to prepare at home, or choose a freshly prepared grab-and-go option on bakery fresh bread.

are showcased in their own sections to make shopping easy for customers following those diets. However, natural and organic products are merchandised alongside their conventional counterparts.

"We didn't want to separate organic and conventional," Ergen says. The products are next to each other to make it easier for customers to see their options and make price comparisons. The only exception is in the produce department, where conventional and organic are separated.

### Customer Requests

The store's small size makes product procurement slightly tricky, but since the stores are so new, customers have a lot of say in what's stocked. "We want our customers to talk to us," Akpinar says. "We want to learn from them; that's why you see our lists."

If customers can't find the product they want, the store provides a request form at the end of almost every aisle for customers to write down

what product they couldn't find. If they provide contact information, then the store will let them know when the product is in stock. And if the customer lives close enough, the store will even deliver it to them, Ergen notes.

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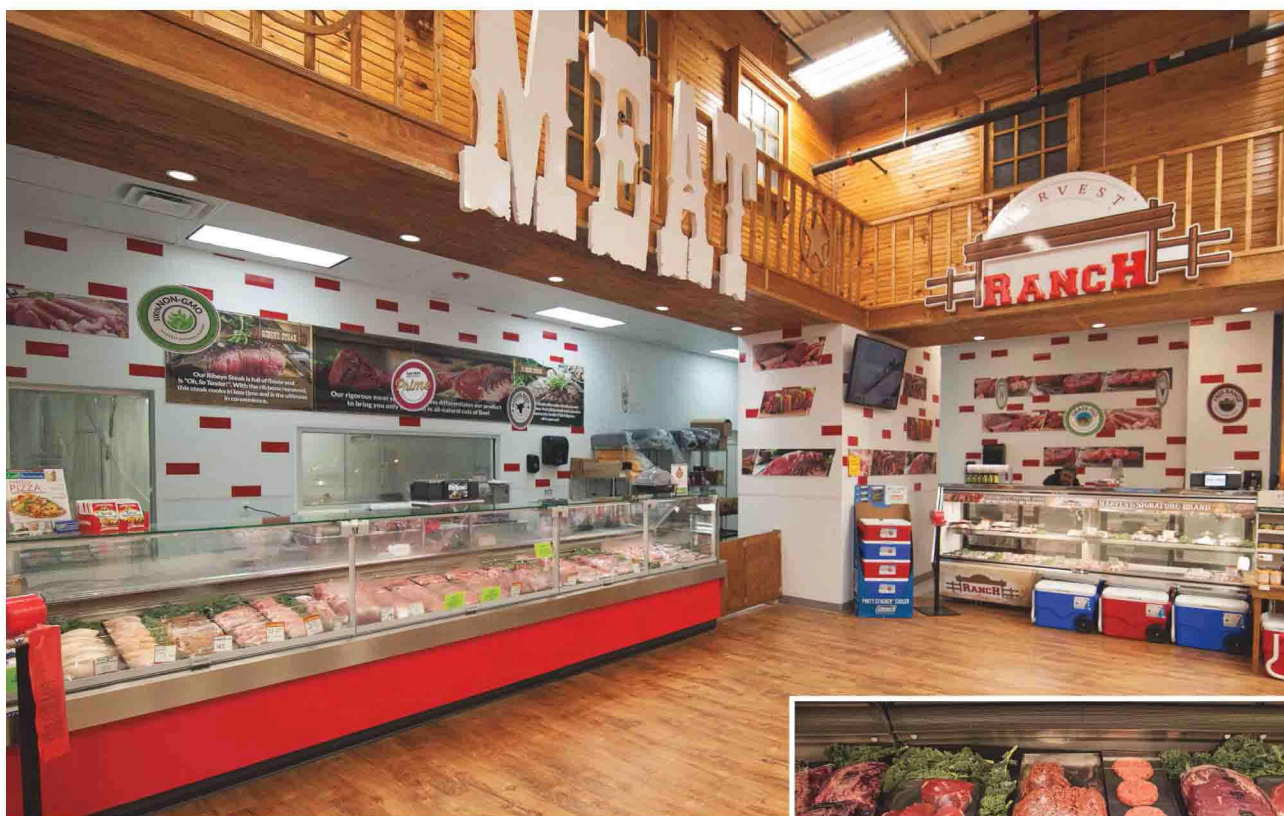
"We do more customer service [than a typical supermarket]," he adds. "We want to make the experience of shopping more convenient for customers."

### Time Sensitive

The store was specifically designed for customers to be able to complete their shopping in about 30 minutes. "People don't have

time," Ergen says. "I want them to spend two to three hours in our store, but you have to be realistic. We love you, but we respect your time as well."

For time-strapped customers, Harvest Natural Market makes it easy. If customers know what they want and where it is, they can be in and out in five minutes, he notes, but if customers have more time, the staff tries to ensure that they enjoy all of the time



### LOCAL MEAT

The meat department features a branded Harvest Ranch showcase, which sells meat raised at the company-owned ranch.

they spend in the store.

"You can spend two hours here doing your shopping, eating your ice cream, dining," Ergen observes. "You can do everything."

Along with product selection and customer service, Harvest Natural Market also differentiates its market from the chains or big-box stores by the type of locations it selects. All of the stores, both the ones opened and the ones in the planning stages, are located in neighborhoods away from busy main intersections.

"Within communities is what we like," Chapman says. Customers often walk, bike or even rollerblade to the stores, and employees easily get to know the shoppers. "Everybody is a customer, a friend and a neighbor. They're not

a number," Chapman adds.

"We want to interact with our customers; we want to be the grocery store in the community."

### Customer Satisfaction

The store's whole training program is geared to customer satisfaction. Employees, no matter the depart-

ment to which they're assigned, are encouraged to engage and interact with customers. Every customer they see, they should speak to, Chapman notes. In the service departments, staff actively promote sampling.

Any bread or gelato can be sampled before a customer purchases it, or even a hunk of meat can be grilled to show a customer how good a cut is.

"Our training is based on how we



can make our customers happy, how they can leave our store happily and want to come back," Ergen says.

The small size of the store also makes shopping more convenient while still managing to provide everything a customer may need. The market-style concept makes it easy for shoppers to move from department to department. In the vestibule of the store is the floral department, and directly inside the doors is the produce department.

The bakery department produces French and Italian breads from scratch, with fresh product coming out of the ovens every 30 minutes to an hour. All products are made with certified-organic or all-natural ingredients, and never contain

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—Inci Akpinar

hydrogenated oils, preservatives, artificial flavors or colors, which is in line with the store's overall focus on natural products. Additionally, the patisserie, which is staffed by a pastry chef and two assistants, makes products like macarons, cakes, cookies and cupcakes from scratch.

The bakers and pastry chefs are given a lot of room to experiment with new offerings. Aside from the 10 to 15 items that are musts, they're free to do such things as add pine nuts to the banana bread.

### Branded Ranch

The meat department features traditional products, but a section also features cuts called Harvest Ranch. The meat in this line comes from cows that are all grass-fed, antibiotic- and hormone-free, and also GMO-free. Harvest Natural Market operates its own ranch to ensure that the animals sold under the Harvest Ranch brand are raised according to strict standards. Harvest Ranch processes, cleans and packs the meat before it's distributed directly to the stores, to minimize the time between process-

ing and sale, for added freshness.

Harvest Natural Market is highly involved with what happens at Harvest Ranch. Chapman even goes so far as to name some of the animals. "I have a bull named Mr. Harvest," she admits.

"We feel so confident serving that meat to our customers," Akpinar adds. "We know there's no antibiotics or no hormones. We know that their meat has the best quality."

The store also features an extensive prepared foods department. The Harvest Express section offers organic fast food in four categories: sushi and ramen, Italian, Mediterranean, and Mexican. The Chef's Pick station features a variety of chef-selected items prepared fresh daily. The menu changes weekly, and the meals are offered in both individual and family sizes. About two dozen meals are available for grab-and-go purchase. Customers also can make selections from the meat department and have them prepared in the store to be ready to eat once they get home.

"Right now, people don't have enough time. They don't want to cook," Ergen says. "So they are here



### START FROM SCRATCH

Harvest Natural Market's bakery offers a tempting array of scratch-made items.

doing their shopping, and they can grab their lunch, breakfast or dinner. It's kind of a gift to our customers that creates an experience."

And the experience is what Harvest Natural Market is all about. "Once you go into our store, it's very unique," Ergen says. "It gives you a good vibe. People are friendly. You talk to them, and then you try new things." **PGI**

## Harvest Natural Market, The Woodlands, Texas

