

Store of the Month

Weaver Street Market, Carrboro, N.C.



Close to Home

The Weaver Street Co-op succeeds by making the needs of its owners — the surrounding community — paramount.

By James Mellgren

Throughout history, the marketplace has been thought of as the heart of the community. The need for food, especially fresh foods before refrigeration, made markets the logical sites for meeting friends, catching up on news, conducting trade or even fomenting revolution. Today, the choices for where to buy food are so vast — specialty shops, farmers' markets, supermarkets, big-box stores, the Internet, catalogs, convenience stores, etc.

— that even in small communities there is rarely a central market that acts as the soul of a community anymore. Many strive for it but few manage to achieve it. The people of Carrboro, N.C., and its environs are lucky enough to have such a store in the Weaver Street Market, a store that is not only the heart of the community but one that is actually owned by the community as well.

A Community-Owned Business

Weaver Street Market opened in June 1988 as a community-owned or cooperative grocery store. The original investments came via a loan from the Self-Help Ventures

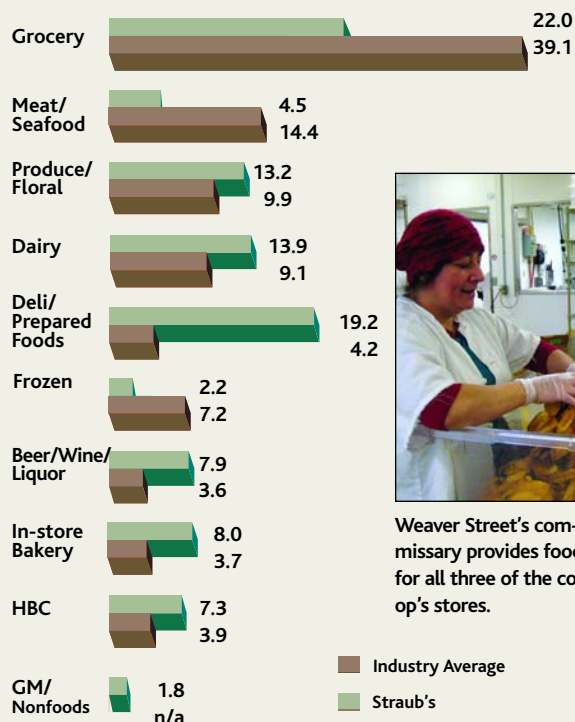
Fund, a Community Development Block Grant from the town of Carrboro, as well as individual investors from the community who believed in the idea of a community-owned business. The store proved to be an instant hit and quickly transcended its role as a purveyor of fine food to become what the town had hoped for, a central market that truly reflects the soul of the community. It has done this in part by providing a lovely place to shop for top-quality foods, but also through the countless community events it either hosts or cosponsors that have resulted in thousands of dollars donated each year to local schools and charities. Weaver Street

Weaver Street Market

101 East Weaver Street, Carrboro, NC 27510

Weaver Street Market vs. Industry Average

% of Sales by Department



Weaver Street's commissary provides food for all three of the co-op's stores.

Trade Area Statistics:

	1-Mile Radius	3-Mile Radius	5-Mile Radius
Estimated Population	15,077	58,009	85,813
Total Households	6,083	22,791	34,450
Available Grocery Dollars (Weekly)	\$649,200	\$2,641,370	\$4,260,920
Average Household Income	\$49,537	\$67,865	\$82,541
Average Age	33.0	34.0	35.4
White-Collar Occupations	30.3%	35.3%	37.9%
Service Occupations	30.6%	25.1%	23.1%
Blue-Collar Occupations	10.0%	6.2%	5.9%
Not Working	28.8%	33.2%	32.9%
Owned Housing	24.1%	36.9%	47.6%
White Adults (18+)	59.2%	72.3%	73.7%
Black Adults (18+)	19.2%	10.2%	9.3%
Hispanic Adults (18+)	12.9%	7.0%	6.2%
Asian Adults (18+)	6.2%	8.4%	8.7%
Other-Race Adults (18+)	2.6%	2.1%	2.1%

Source: The Nielsen Company



Grand Opening Date:	June 1988
Total Square Footage:	15,000
Selling Area:	9,600
Number of SKUs:	8,778
Total Weekly Sales:	\$270,000
Employees:	90
Checkouts:	Eight
Store Hours:	7:30 a.m.-9:00 p.m. Monday-Friday; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
Store Designer:	N/A

Market (WSM) offers back to the community more than donations, however, as it culls and selects produce, cheese, meats and other foods from many of the local farmers and artisans, giving the producers the opportunity to thrive at what they do and making their products accessible to the community.

Today, WSM is the Southeast's largest cooperatively owned grocery store, with over 10,000 consumer- and worker-owners. Its success led the cooperative to open Panzanella in 2000, a Mediterranean-style restaurant named for the thrifty and delicious Italian bread salad that typifies their approach to simple, great-tasting food. It has also

resulted in two additional North Carolina stores, one in the Southern Village community in Chapel Hill and one in Hillsborough. In addition, WSM has managed to expand the size of the original flagship store several times since it opened.

Located near Chapel Hill, site of the University of North Carolina, and just west of the capital city of Raleigh, Carrboro is home to a very diverse customer base, including a large university and medical research facility at UNC-Chapel Hill.

A Community Effort

They say it's not uncommon for shoppers at WSM to see a farmer coming in the backdoor laden with fresh, just-picked produce to offer for sale in the market. WSM has the area's largest selection of locally and organically grown produce, something everyone prizes as a "direct link to the local community." It seeks out and buys many other locally produced goods as well, such as the artisanal pasta from Extru-

sions, a local pasta maker, and premium cured meats from Giacomo's Italian Market, which supplies it with Milano salami, pepperoni, Italian sausages and soppressata. It has also formed relationships with local dairies that supply organic milk, cheese and other dairy products. In addition to buying from local producers, WSM also makes many of its own products such as the hearty and healthful breads made throughout the day in its own bakery. It produces a variety of health breads made with natural leavening agents and organic flour, as well as delicious yeast breads such as chewy rustic breads, baguettes, ciabatta, whole-wheat and dense multigrain varieties. This homemade aspect of the market, combined with the many special products from local sources and from around the world, gives it a decided edge over the competition.

The staff at WSM is good at listening to its customers (many of whom are also owners), and the product selection reflects that. For example, like many Americans, its customers are interested in products that are healthful for them as well as the environment, products that are locally grown and processed, and goods that meet various special dietary needs (i.e. all-



Listening to its customers is key for WSM staff; many of the customers are actually store owners, giving them a vested interest in the store's success.

natural, gluten-free, etc.). And while it's responsive to customers' needs and to food that tastes good, it also makes selections based on values it has established as a co-op, that is to say quality products that are sustainably produced, artisanal, local, healthful, humanely raised and that reflect fair-trade practices. In keeping with its customers' desires, it carries many foods that are convenient, less expensive choices, and foods that might be important to the local culture and tastes. Selections are based on ongoing dialogues with the community that take into consideration the market's buying ability, product and supplier attributes, and consumer requests.

WSM learned early on that unless its local suppliers get paid a fair price for their goods, they cannot survive, and it has seen some of its best producers go under. With that in mind, WSM pays top dollar for the meat

and endangered seafood. Recently, it even made the bold move to stop carrying foods made with trans fats or high-fructose corn syrup.

Giving Back

While most stores and businesses keep a close look at the bottom line, WSM actually has three bottom lines to consider: financial, environmental and social — all of which are required to be sustainable. WSM has consistently led the way in finding ways to conduct business in the most environmentally friendly manner possible, including exploring new avenues for green energy for its delivery trucks and facilities. It hired a recycling coordinator whose job is to find new ways to improve the recycling program. The third bottom line, the socially sustainable one, may be the one that connects it most to the community. The most direct

Advantage Program that is organized by the National Cooperative Grocers Association. It's a national buying program for co-ops that allows them to be price-competitive with other large conventional grocers. It also routinely builds end cap displays (changed every two weeks) that feature sale items mixed with local and new and/or seasonal products it wants to support and promote. Merchandising at WSM isn't just to increase sales but also to talk about many of the policies that make up its profile. It uses branding posters and signage that promote products that it believes in because they are high-quality, locally produced, fair-traded, environmentally friendly or possess some other admirable attribute. Its goal is not just to present a product, but to tell the story behind that product or company. It also has weekly demos



WSM's three locations serve up \$460,000 in sales weekly. Its newest location, in Hillsborough, N.C., opened in June of last year.

it buys. For example, it pays up to 18 percent more to its pork producers than the next-highest paying buyer. How does it manage to keep these fair-trade meats affordable? By purchasing whole animals and doing its own butchering at its new Food House facility. There, the WSM butchers cut and wrap meat for all three stores, making its meats price-competitive. The Food House is designed to provide the proper amount of storage, a climate-controlled processing room and high-grade sanitation. And because the Food House is co-located with its prepared foods kitchen, it can use cuts of meat not normally sold in the stores. It has invested in state-of-the-art packaging equipment to offer vacuum-packed meats, making the operation more efficient with less waste and, ultimately, better prices.

Perhaps just as important as what it carries is what it doesn't. For example, it has a policy against carrying certain products for societal or health reasons, such as tobacco products, meats produced with antibiotics or growth hormones, foods with harmful additives,

and the outcome of this policy is that far more of the dollars spent at WSM stay in the community, as opposed to money spent at a big chain store. Also, it finds many creative ways to invest in the local, artisanal operations that are important to the product selection at WSM and to the health of the community.

Most important to many of the area's residents are the hundreds of events either sponsored or cosponsored by WSM throughout the year, many of which take place in or on the grounds of the market. Events include weekly outdoor concerts in the spring and summer months, Friday night wine tastings, open-mic night on Mondays, farm tours, and all sorts of holiday events and art exhibitions. Many of these events serve to raise money for local charities and other worthwhile organizations. When WSM talks about a healthy bottom line, it isn't just talking about money. Rather, it's infusing the entire community with its spirit and making everyone's lives a little better in the process.

Merchandising Cooperatively

WSM takes advantage of its cooperative status in merchandising as well. For example, it has a monthly promotional flyer called Cooperative

to showcase local vendors and new products, and, of course, hosts many huge and fun events like the twice-annual Wine Shows that go a long way toward promoting sales and goodwill.

If You Feed Them, They Will Come

WSM really epitomizes the spirit of a cooperative venture. On its Web site, it spells out its mission in a way that is perhaps reflective of the future of retail: keeping control and profits within the community, and benefiting the community; the need to maximize local resources and support local producers; working in harmony with the ecology rather than exploiting it; putting the needs of the community ahead of profits; being accessible to the whole community; and playing a major role in educating the public about the foods they eat and the issues that affect everyone.

It seems to have been very successful in all areas of its primary mission statement, while also maintaining a work environment that's both fiscally and physically sound. It also sounds like a very nice place to work as well as to shop. In all of these regards, Weaver Street Market truly manages to reflect its community in everything it does. ■