

Store of the Month

Fresh Thyme Farmers Market, Mount Prospect, Ill.



FRESH TEAM
(From left) Danielle Boyd, VP of human resources; Dave Bernier, VP of operations; Chris Sherrill, president and CEO; Bruce VanOverloop, Mount Prospect store director; and Sage Horner, SVP of merchandising and marketing.



TAKING ROOT

STARTING WITH ITS FIRST CHICAGO-AREA STORE, FRESH THYME AIMS TO MAKE PRODUCE EVEN MORE ATTRACTIVE.

By Jim Dudlicek

In a metro area already served by Whole Foods Market and Trader Joe's, what does Arizona-based Fresh Thyme Farmers Market bring to the Chicago suburbs?

Among other things, says CEO Chris Sherrell, "a healthy natural and organic shopping experience for great prices and value that the Chicago market does not offer today."

True to its name, fresh produce accounts for a quarter of Fresh Thyme's sales, and this newcomer to the evolving Chicago-area grocery market aims to "have the cheapest organic produce prices in the market," Sherrell says. "But more than just pricing and products, it's the overall experience. We don't have the intimidation factor of your big-box stores — we certainly don't have the pricing of the big-box stores — but just a friendly, old-fashioned kind of shopping experience."

That experience is coming on strong. This Fresh Thyme location, which opened last April in a former Sports Authority store in the northwest Chicago suburb of Mount Prospect, is the first of at least two dozen markets planned throughout the Midwest in the foreseeable future. Since this first location came on line, Fresh Thyme has opened another Chicago-area location in Deerfield, with further stores planned for Downers Grove, Fairview Heights, Joliet and Naperville in 2015. (In the July 2014 issue, *PG* selected the Mount Prospect location as a Best New Concept Design in its annual Store Design Contest.)

"We've got aggressive plans, no doubt about it," Sherrell said at the Mount Prospect opening. "We've got nine more stores opening this year, for a total of 10 this year. We've got 12 opening next year all over the Midwest. Right now, we've got 24 sites signed, and basically 10 to 12 stores opening a year for the next six years."

Fresh Thyme's website lists four stores opening in Indiana this fall and about a dozen others slated to open in Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin between now and 2016. A store in Columbus, Ohio, was expected to open by the time this issue went to press.





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—Chris Sherrell, CEO

“Compared to conventional markets, we offer natural and organic products they don’t carry,” Sherrell declares.

Produce at Center Stage

“Produce is our backbone,” Sherrell continues, and there can be no doubt about that when entering a Fresh Thyme Farmers Market. The center of the store is dominated by the produce department, with what’s typically known as “center store” pushed off to the side. Meanwhile, a richly populated fresh perimeter includes extensive meat and seafood offerings, an in-store bakery, and prepared foods — including made-to-order pizza, a salad bar and a specialty sandwich bar — to take home or eat in the store’s front end dining area.

“Twenty-five percent of our store is produce; 25 percent of our sales are produce,” Sherrell stresses. “We will not be beat on produce pricing. But not just produce — we’ve got a tremendous meat and seafood variety, natural products all the way around. We like to say we’re as cheap as or cheaper than a conventional market with natural and organic products.”

Fresh Thyme is employing what Colein Whicher, director of marketing strategy, calls “crazy pricing” in its mission to get shoppers to buy and consume more fresh produce. “We’re trying to get folks back in the kitchen preparing their meals,” she says. “We have our organic table right in the middle, and we dedicate half our wet rack to organic.”

The section also features fresh salsas, pre-shredded vegetables for recipes, and a fresh juice selection designed to be a destination department.

Close by produce is the extensive bulk food section, including one of Sherrell’s personal projects: bulk liquids such as olive oil, honey and syrup. “He loves the idea of

coming in to get olive oil in a reusable container,” Whicher notes.

The Fresh Thyme team does acknowledge, however, that bulk liquids have been slow to take off as consumers get used to the concept; they say that some shoppers have mistaken them for coffee at first glance, but some simple signage has clarified the message.

Fresh Specialties

Signage in the bakery highlights the store’s specialties: cakes, muffins and artisan breads, including a sea salt caramel pecan loaf, a bourbon-soaked cherry loaf, and a signature carrot-and-flax bread. The retailer partners with a Chicago-area commissary to make brownies, 8x8 cakes and some deli foods to Fresh Thyme specifications. The bakery also offers a special-recipe artisan granola, which, according to Whicher, “has a cult following — you don’t expect to find it in the bakery department.” A gluten-free bakery case features refrigerated breads, cakes, cookies and pastries, many from local vendors; they’re among more than



OVEN FRESH
PG Editor-in-Chief
Jim Dudlicek
checks out Fresh
Thyme’s signature
baked goods.



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1,100 gluten-free items available throughout the store.

Made-to-order pizzas include toppings such as Buffalo chicken and pulled pork. A salad and soup bar is supplemented by clamshell salads and heat-and-eat soups for take-home consumption. The deli, offering Boar's Head alongside Fresh Thyme's own house-brand natural meats and cheeses, makes custom sandwiches, while pre-made Boar's Head-branded sandwiches are available for those in a hurry. Hot grab-and-go meal selections include stuffed tomatoes, chicken Florentine, roasted potatoes, meatloaf, pot roast, pot pies, quiche and spring rolls.

"We set up the décor to make it feel like every department is its own booth at a farmers' market," Whicher explains. "We call the meat department the Butcher Shop to create that feel of going to a butcher."

The meat and seafood department is "a test for us," she continues, offering "everything, from marinated to stuffed, that you can take

home and cook," including items like stuffed burgers and peppers, peppercorn tuna, and crusted tilapia, all aimed at providing shoppers with new and unique dinner options. Fresh sausage is "all made fresh in store every morning with natural meats and natural seasonings — no MSG," Whicher boasts. "This becomes a destination category for us."



DELI DELIGHTS

Prepared foods, made-to-order sandwiches and grab-and-go items are highlights of the Fresh Thyme Kitchen.



Case-ready meats include products from Nieman Ranch and Coleman, including organic beef and chicken; grass-fed beef, both fresh grinds and steaks; and all-natural pork and lamb.

One-stop Shop

While the inclusion of the words “Farmers Market” in the grocer’s name might suggest to some a selection limited to fresh food, it’s one of Fresh Thyme’s goals to be “a one-stop shop” for folks who want that experience, Whicher says.

Among the items rounding out the store’s whole shopping experience: craft beers, including mixed 6-packs; wines starting at \$2.99, with occasional 3-for-\$10 sales; natural pet foods; and health and body care.

The last of these has become a major focus, Whicher says, as shoppers have started to be as concerned with what they apply to their bodies as with what they put inside them. The store offers more than 7,000 vitamin and body care products, including a travel shelf set of mini items, sun care products

with the highest SPFs, and a destination set for makeup that Whicher attests is “less expensive than department store cosmetics, and so much better.”

Inviting Space

With its corporate roots in Arizona, Fresh Thyme’s Midwestern stores offer some unique attributes not shared by their Southwestern sister locations. For one, produce displays in the entrance vestibules; these spaces aren’t needed in the Western stores because of the warm climate, Whicher notes. But they’re used to full marketing advantage here in Chicagoland, offering shoppers a “first shot of fresh produce when folks walk in,” she says. Also in the entryway are posted sales fliers, chalkboards heralding store events, and social media info.

The fliers include “double-ad Wednesdays,” a new strategy unique to the Midwestern stores and one that sets Fresh Thyme apart from other grocers that drop circulars in the Wednesday paper. “It quickly became one of our busiest days of the week — shifting from Saturday to Wednesday, which is an interesting dynamic,” Whicher says.

The front end café is a “big new change for us,” Whicher says of the dedicated space featuring dining tables and

free wi-fi. Because of a new emphasis on prepared foods, she explains, “we wanted to create a space that was inviting.”

‘Hiring the Smile’

Dave Bernier, VP of operations, says one of the most significant challenges for the new store was familiarizing local shoppers with the concept.

“You say ‘Farmers Market,’ and a lot of people think you’re open on Saturday from 8 to noon with tents in the parking lot,” Bernier says. “We get over that hurdle relatively easily when we open the doors and people come in and see what we do.”

What was relatively simple, he notes, was tapping the local work force to staff the store. “There’s a few different levels of the process. It starts with a really good job fair, which we find is the best vehicle for us to bring the best



PHOTO BY LOUIS HERNANDEZ

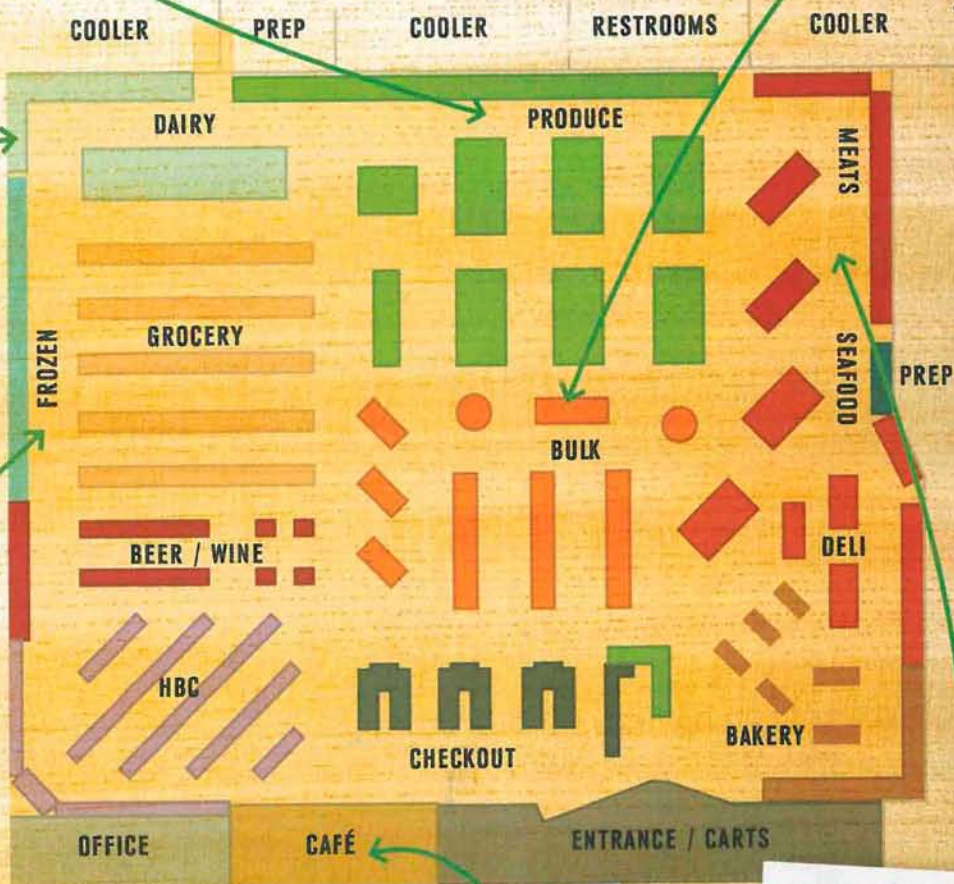


PHOTO BY LOUIS HERNANDEZ

local candidates in,” he explains (the store was taking applications on the day of PG’s visit). “We always talk about ‘hiring the smile.’ It’s not necessarily someone who’s been in the industry their whole life. Sometimes we find those folks who just have the ability to engage customers and fit who we are as a company, what we believe in ... they understand who our customer is and what our customer is looking for. That interaction is very important for us.”

FRESH THYME

FARMERS MARKET



Fresh Thyme Farmers Market

211 W. Rand Road
Mount Prospect, IL 60056

Grand opening:
April 23, 2014

Total selling area:
23,000 square feet

SKUs: 24,000

Employees: 102

Checkouts: 8

Store hours:
7 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily

Store designer:
api(+), Tampa, Fla.



PHOTO COURTESY OF api(+)

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Bernier acknowledges that the process can actually be a great way to cultivate new industry leaders. "It's not necessarily the experience. It's coming in, getting to know our team. We're a pretty dynamic team, we have a lot of experience, a lot of great personalities in the retail world, and when they get in and get around us, they realize that this could be a great option to grow in their career," he says. "Some folks are short-term with us — they're going to college or high school, and they need a part-time job. But after that, they realize, we can sell groceries and make a pretty good living."

The overall experience at Fresh Thyme, according to Store Director Bruce VanOverloop, is "the culture that we exhibit and the smiles that we hire." Van Overloop concurs with Bernier on the personality-over-experience factor. "I think if we can build that culture internally," he says, "we can provide an experience second to nobody for our customers."

What's the message Fresh Thyme wants to leave

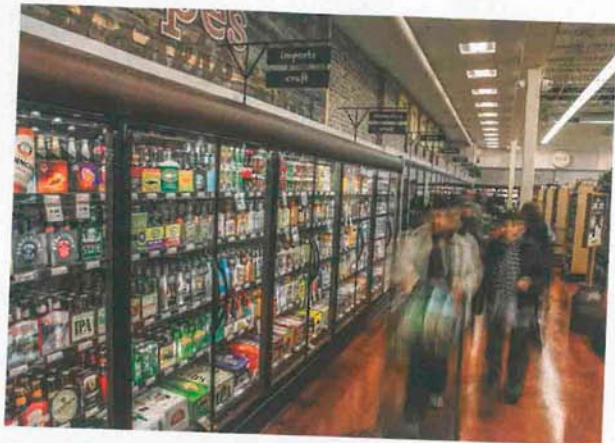


PHOTO BY LOUIS HERNANDEZ



IN GOOD SPIRITS
Fresh Thyme offers an extensive selection of local and craft beers, in addition to a diverse wine department.



customers with when they come to shop? Says VanOverloop: "Leave happy, leave satisfied, and we're havin' fun to get you to that point." **PG**



For video interviews with Fresh Thyme Farmers Market executives and more information about the chain's Chicago-area launch, visit Progressivegrocer.com/FreshThyme.

