

# Breaking New Ground

By Jim Dudlicek

Coborn's launches its next-generation look with a new store north of the Twin Cities.

**F**or Coborn's Inc., a new store in a growing community was the perfect opportunity to create a bold new image and up its game in all of its offerings to shoppers.

The result is a supermarket that delivers pretty much everything a supermarket needs to have these days to be competitive, engender consumer loyalty and deliver a top-notch shopper experience.

Serving a community largely made up of 30-something professionals and young families, the Coborn's Marketplace in Isanti, Minn., is the culmination of a year of planning that included studying the latest shopping and eating habits, as well as researching other retailers in different parts of the country.

"We are a company that is constantly striving to appeal to the changing needs of our guests," says Chris Coborn, chairman, president and CEO of the St. Cloud, Minn.-based retailer. "We are excited to bring this new next-generation Coborn's store to the community of Isanti and to the surrounding area. I think that our guests will be just as excited about this store as we are. It definitely has a 'wow' factor about it."

To be sure, this 51,000-square-foot store and its offerings far outstrip those of its closest competitors in this rural community an hour north of the Twin Cities, to where many of its residents commute to work. The store shares an intersection with two gas station/convenience stores in an area just starting to see more development.

"The presentation of fresh foods, and the significant variety

Photography by Brandon Quesnel



**AIMING HIGH**  
The community has embraced the new Coborn's Marketplace format and its amenities that are unique to the area, according to Store Director Mary Kruck.



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—Chris Coborn,  
President and CEO

and assortment we've built into this store is impressive,” Coborn says. “We want guests to feel eager to come to our store and view it as a well-rounded experience rather than just a routine trip to the grocery store. The store really focuses on our fresh perimeter departments, yet has all the everyday essential grocery items that any guest routinely shops for at a grocery store.”

### 'Bold New Look'

The new format includes an upper-level mezzanine and community room, and an entirely new interior and exterior design concept, with boutique-style destinations located throughout the store to showcase the various fresh departments.

“Everything, from the exterior architecture to the interior signage, is a bold new look for us,” says Dennis Host, Coborn's VP of marketing. “We call this store Coborn's Marketplace to instill a sense of community in a more traditional market-like environment.”

The store has an industrial feel to it, with large windows, exposed beams, a two-story ceiling deck, and industrial/rustic characteristics like polished concrete floors and exposed brick. As Host explains, it has “an upscale feel, but our prices are affordable and competitive,” and provides a “wow factor” that creates a unique shopping experience.

“Our goal was to introduce new choices in full meal solutions, grab-and-go entrées and greater variety in more restaurant-like options as well as better-for-you items,” Host says. “Creating a pleasant shopping environment; offering items, services and

choices that appeal to the community; and being a full-service supermarket were all top of mind as we planned the layout and feel of the store.”

Shoppers coming in the main entrance have several options for starting their Coborn's experience in Isanti: They can head straight on into the produce department; they can veer left to the grab-and-go case, café seating area and Caribou Coffee; or they can belly up to the hot food bar.

“The store's focal point is a new centerpiece deli area called The Kitchen, serving made-to-order entrées that are packaged in-store for easy, convenient pickup and quick at-home preparation,” Host explains. “Brick-oven pizza, delicious sandwiches, and other grab-and-go breakfast, lunch and dinner options are just a few of the items guests will find in The Kitchen, in addition to a full salad and soup bar.”

Guests will find expanded produce offerings in the Farmers' Market, a high-ceilinged space decked out in rustic décor and trimmed with images and messaging that call attention to the local family farmers who supply fresh fruits and vegetables to the store, a feature that Host says “adds authenticity and credibility.” Organic items are prominent among the hundreds of products available.

A unique destination is the Chop Shoppe, which offers freshly cut fruits and vegetables. While many stores have a fresh-cut program, Coborn's takes it a step further, with cut-to-order service. Shoppers can have any produce item in



### MILES OF AISLES

The store's upper-level mezzanine provides sweeping views of the sales floor below.



the store sliced and diced to their precise specifications, from potatoes for hash browns and cabbage for slaw to crudités for entertaining.

“Shoppers are aspirational,” Host says. “It’s all about aspiration with ease.”

Also available is an extensive line of fresh juices, made on premise from fruits and vegetables, using recipes targeting specific nutritional demands. Plus kids can grab a free apple or banana from a kiosk, standing at the perfect height, to snack on while shopping with their parents.

The Flavors of the World cheese case features a huge variety of domestic and international offerings, curated and administered by a cheese-monger, while the Sushi Kabar counter offers a variety of sushi prepared fresh daily.



#### **MARKET DRIVEN**

**High ceilings and rustic trim set the tone in the produce department, making the Farmers' Market true to its name.**

#### **Ready, Chef, Go!**

Enhancements continue into the full-service meat department. Isanti's Meat Market boasts a 65-foot counter, “our largest service meat case in the company,” Host says. Among the items are Certified Hereford Beef selections, plus an in-house pitmaster mans the smoker that churns out ribs, chicken,

*Continued on page 48* ➤



# COBORN'S MARKETPLACE

209 6th Ave. NE, Isanti, MN 55040

**Grand opening:** Aug. 17, 2016

**Total square footage:** 51,101  
(45,608 main floor, plus 5,493 mezzanine)

**Selling area:** 26,456 square feet

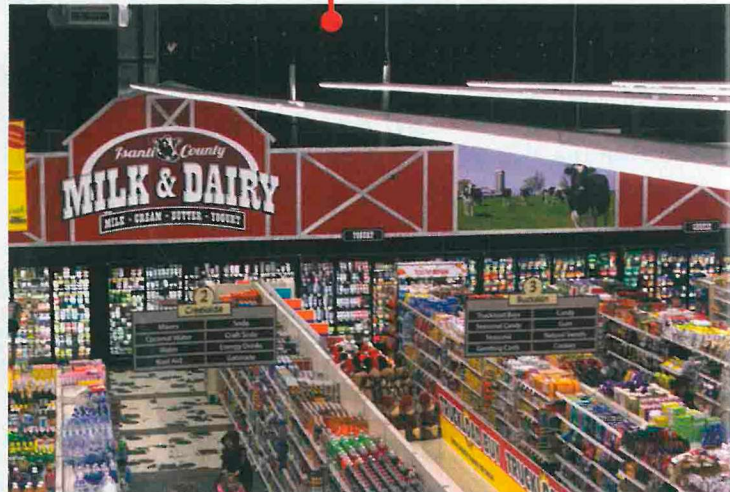
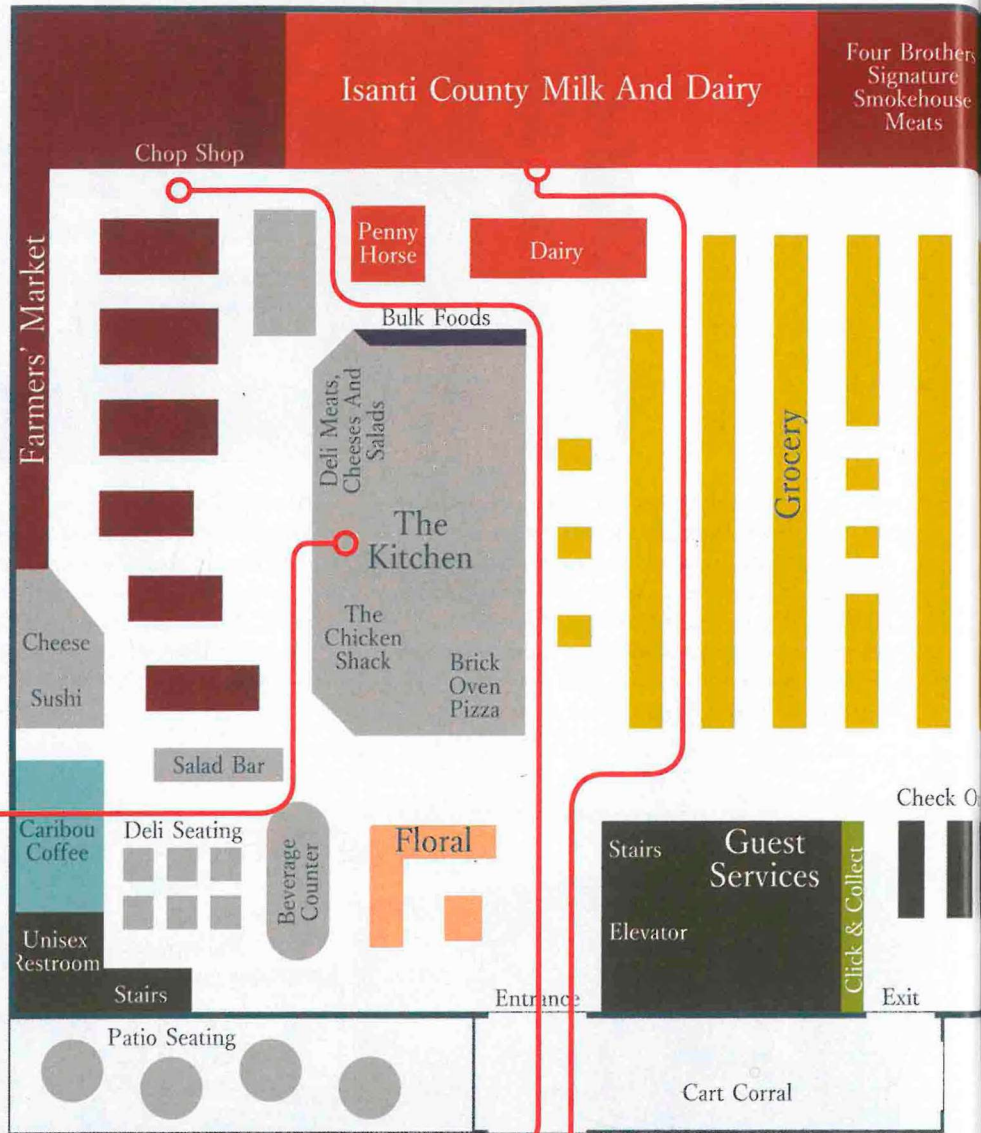
**SKUs:** About 50,000

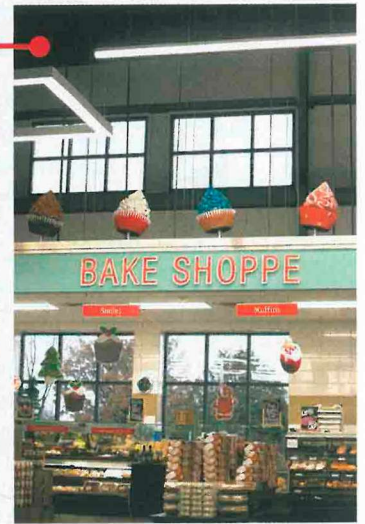
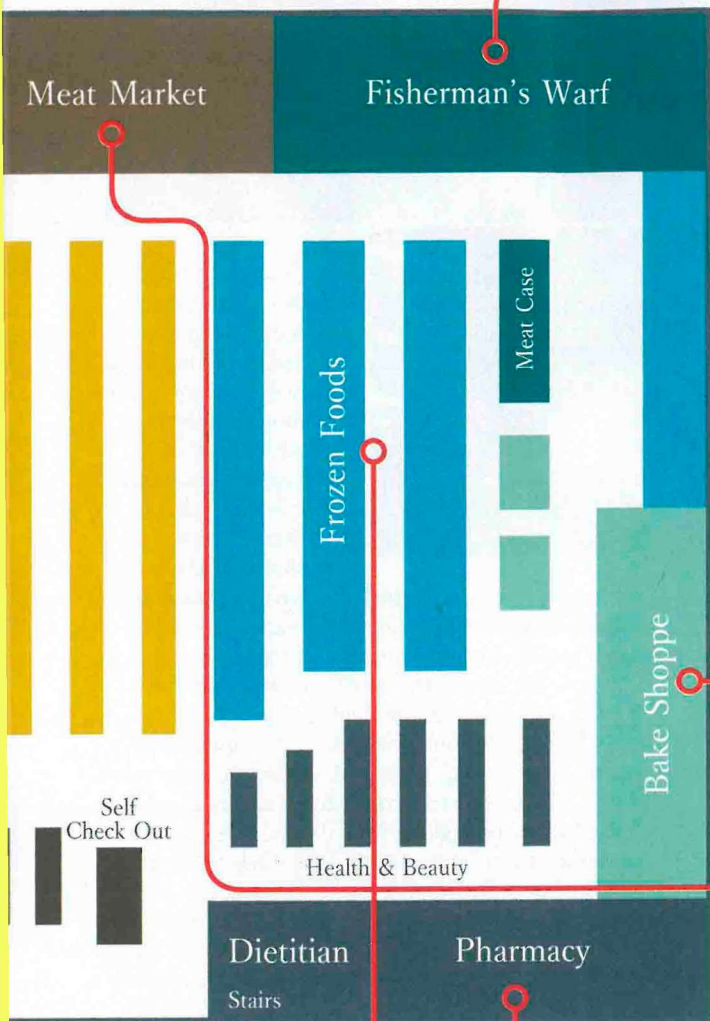
**Employees:** 135

**Checkouts:** 12 (five cashier lanes, four self-checkouts, two at guest services, Café checkstand)

**Hours:** 24/7

**Designer:** Rice Building Systems, Sauk Rapids, Minn., in collaboration with Dennis Host, Coborn's VP of marketing, and Brandon Anderson, Coborn's graphic designer







**LOW AND SLOW**  
A pitmaster mans the smokehouse, turning out ribs, chicken, brisket and sausage.



Seafood is flown in daily to Fisherman's Wharf, which also offers value-added items such as bourbon-glazed salmon on a wood plank, crab-stuffed cod and lobster-stuffed Norwegian salmon.

Rounding out the fresh area is the Bake

► *Continued from page 45*  
sausage and brisket.

Also featured are signature smoked sausage varieties sold under the Four Brothers label, which Host explains is a nod to history, honoring the Coborn brothers who founded and grew the company. Other selections include marinated beef, pork and poultry; kabobs; beef patties; and brats. "The variety and presentation of choices allow guests to try new things and expand their horizons," Host observes

Coborn's natural meat selections include grass-fed beef and pork, Just Bare poultry, and grass-fed bison, lamb and veal.

Of particular interest for time-pressed consumers is Ready-Chef-Go, the store's line of heat-and-eat meals, priced at \$4 to \$7. Ready in four to six minutes right in their microwaveable bags, the meals feature a protein with complementary vegetables. Varieties include salmon with asparagus and pecan-crusted chicken with broccoli — again, all packaged in house.

"Where else can you get such a healthy meal that's ready in five minutes for four bucks?" Host remarks.

Shoppe, featuring fresh-baked artisan breads and rolls, custom cake options (decorated by hand or with edible imaging), muffins, cookies, bars and pies. Consumers can order their bread sliced to order, guided by an on-counter thickness gauge.

"We added some whimsy to our signage to make things fun," Host says, noting the huge pastel blue-green industrial mixer that's the focal point of the bakery area, along with the spinning cupcakes overhead and signage with quips such as "Be the office hero — bring donuts."

Coborn's operates a central bakery at its St. Cloud headquarters to supply all stores with conventional goods like cookies, bagels and some cakes. Last summer, the company opened a dedicated gluten-free bakery. "Fresh-baked gluten-free offerings have been really popular," Host notes.

The design package for the dairy aisle aims to create a destination here as well. The Isanti County Milk and Dairy department comes complete with a talking cow and a red barn that pays homage to the county's rich dairy-farming history.

“We actually had people crying because they were so happy we brought a store of this caliber to their town.”

—Mary Kruck,  
Store Director

## About Coborn's

Coborn's Inc. began in 1921, when Chester Coborn opened a single produce market in Sauk Rapids, Minn. Today, the St. Cloud, Minn.-based, employee-owned company operates 55 grocery stores and 70 convenience, liquor and other retail locations throughout the Midwest.

Coborn's employs about 8,000 employees, including five generations of Coborn family leadership, and is currently led by fourth-generation President and CEO Chris Coborn. The company's grocery store formats, located across Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois and

Wisconsin, include Coborn's, Cash Wise, Marketplace Foods and Save-A-Lot. Besides its brick-and-mortar grocery stores, Coborn's operates CobornsDelivers and Cash Wise Delivers, online grocery-ordering and home delivery services.

Coborn's also owns and operates 35 liquor stores under the Coborn's Liquor, Cash Wise Liquor and Captain Jack's banners. The company further encompasses a fuel and convenience division, a pharmacy division, an in-house grocery warehouse and distribution center, an in-house central bakery, and Tops Cleaners. Coborn's additionally operates Ace Hardware, Caribou Coffee, Country Floral, Dunn Bros. Coffee and Subway locations.

And everything in the store is available online through Coborn's click-and-collect shopping service. Guests can place orders online on any mobile or desktop device and select a pickup time window, during which their order will be waiting in the staging area at the front of the store.

### Skills Versus Personality

The community response to the Isanti store has been overwhelming, according to Store Director Mary Kruck.

"We actually had people crying because they were so happy we brought a store of this caliber to their town," says Kruck, who will celebrate 21 years with Coborn's in May. Her second-in-command, Assistant Store Director Michael Hauglie, began his career with Coborn's as a produce clerk at age 16.

Host says the biggest issue revealed since the store's grand opening has been "the learning curve of settling into all the new offerings that are new and different than those that we've traditionally offered in our other stores. With more fresh offerings, we have a keener sense of what our guests are wanting and are flexing to meet those needs."

That flexing affected the way Coborn's went

about hiring associates for the new store. "We have not been immune to the significant challenges of finding qualified talent to fill key roles, but have been truly impressed with the store team we've put in place," Host says. "Many of our store associates in this location really had no previous experience in grocery retailing, much less specialty areas."

In fact, Coborn's opted to "hire for personality and train on skills," Host explains, indicating "people who can sell, are engaging and enthusiastic with our guests and have a passion for what they do. We've trained them on the technical or hard skills. It's the soft skills we were most looking for, to create a much more dynamic shopping destination for our guests."

Bringing a next-generation format to market "has been incredibly rewarding," he continues, "and as with anything new, there are always some challenges to work through. Most rewarding has been our guests' acceptance and enthusiasm for the store. Our biggest challenges probably have been just the settling into the new norm of how the store will perform consistently. Just understanding what that looks like from week to week can sometimes be challenging, but thus far, we are very happy with the results, and performance has been solid."

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—Dennis Host,  
VP of Marketing

### Store of the Month

Coborn's Marketplace, Isanti, Minn.



**FULL SERVICE**  
The Isanti store's cheesemonger offers advice to a shopper looking for the perfect specialty cheese.

So much so, in fact, that Coborn's has already incorporated features from the ground-up Isanti store into the "very comprehensive" October 2016 remodel of its Sartell, Minn., store, which first opened in 2006.

"As consumers' choices have widened and their wants and needs evolve, we are evolving with that. Today's consumers have many choices, and their interest in quicker, healthier meal options continues to grow. We've positioned this store to meet that demand," Host says. "So, as consumer demands and choices are evolving, we see the need to strategically position ourselves differently to meet those demands and evolve our formats to continue to be relevant."

And in doing so, Coborn's Marketplace in Isanti offers the community a special shopping experience. "The look and feel of the store is unique, and our store team is highly engaged



with our guests," Host says, "supporting them with terrific food options as well as deep knowledge about what we sell." **PG**

Read about dietitian services at  
Coborn's Marketplace in Isanti at  
[progressivegrocer.com/CobornsRD](http://progressivegrocer.com/CobornsRD).

