

Store of the Month

Lowes Foods Simpsonville, S.C.

"Hot Fresh Bread!"

This chant, following a clanging bell, echoes throughout the store, enticing shoppers to follow the sound, and the aroma, to the bakery counter along the perimeter of the Lowes Foods supermarket in Simpsonville, S.C., one of the newest locations among the Winston-Salem, N.C.-based chain's nearly 100 stores.

Not far away, a visiting group of grade-schoolers stops by The Cakery to sample the luscious frosting and play the musical chairs-inspired cakewalk game for a chance to win their own cake square to take home.

Meanwhile, an animatronic poultry-themed chandelier suddenly comes to life, its "Cock-a-doodle-doo" summoning store associates to break into a chicken dance to celebrate the latest fresh batch of chicken to come out of the oven.

Many grocery retailers talk about experiential shopping, but few deliver the level of interactivity that Lowes does, bold examples of food theater that entice folks to visit the store and bring the young'uns rather than sit at home and order groceries online — which Lowes also provides, if you're not in the mood for breakfast, lunch or dinner and a show.

"It's all about 'retail-tainment' — the experience," the company's president, Tim Lowe, says during a visit to the store near Greenville.

First and foremost is the food. "It has to be quality," Lowe says, explaining the banner's 200 percent refund-and-replace guarantee on all items. "And we want it to be fun."

The Simpsonville store is the first of





On With the Show

New Lowes Foods store sets the stage for experiential shopping.

By Jim Dudlicek

Photography by Fred Rollison

CURTAIN CALL

From left: Brian Greenway, co-manager; Sami Kadhim, assistant brewer; Jessica Langford, lead Boxcar barista; Lisa Cope, Community Table manager; Lila Rannells, Pick & Prep clerk; Ezra Jones, Chicken Kitchen lead; Bobby Hames, co-manager; Molly Barker, guest service manager; Lisa Allen, assistant guest service manager; Bryan Saulpaugh, store director; Nicole Grogan, Breadcrumb lead; Dave Thomas, SausageWorks lead; Andrew Powell, lead wine steward; Cindy Cummings, Sammy's lead; Tim Lowe, president; Christina Clinkunbroomer, Cakery lead; Harvin Bedenbaugh, Beer Den master; John Beck, bakery manager; Richie Mckinney, produce manager; and Jeff Parks, division director

Lowes' supermarkets to feature The Cavern, an on-site microbrewery that creates beers that can be enjoyed in indoor and outdoor seating areas or at the bar of the Beer Den, which offers an extensive craft beer collection, including many Carolina brews.

Additionally, the Simpsonville market features a special destination concept, Lowes Foods Originals, encompassing fresh meat, produce, prepared foods, baked goods and specialty items: the Chicken Kitchen, SausageWorks, Pick & Prep (vegetable

butcher), The Cakery (cake bakery), Boxcar Coffee & Chocolates, Breadcrumb (bread bakery), Smokehouse (barbecue), Sammy's (sandwiches), Spice Bazaar, The Cheese Shop, and Sunmill Wines.

"All of our Originals are truly unique, and together they create a village of different shops, our community," asserts Heather George, Lowes' SVP of brand strategy. "What really makes the experience in our stores stand out is our hosts," how Lowes refers to its associates.

DELICIOUS DESTINATIONS

From the food to the decor to the displays and even to the choreography, Lowes Foods' signature departments are designed to excite and delight shoppers. The Smokehouse's fresh barbecue stimulates the olfactories, The Cakery's sweet treats are fun for all ages, and the Pick & Prep produce butcher makes eating more fruits and veggies simpler. And when the chicken's done, guests can join their hosts for a celebratory dance (bottom).



A focal point of the store is the Lowes Foods Community Table, where shoppers can gather to sample, enjoy and be inspired to prepare new foods.

And for those who don't have time for the show, the store offers the Lowes Foods To Go online personal shopping service, for delivery or pickup.

To be sure, Lowes has created a community inside the store designed to serve the one outside its walls.

Be Our Guest

The brand transformation and new store concepts were all inspired by customers, whom Lowes refers to as guests.

"We started by doing extensive research in the homes of consumers around our stores," George explains. "We determined that we needed to create an experience inside the store that made it worthwhile to come in to shop. We had an opportunity to build the experience around the idea of community. The heart of our store is to bring the community back to the table, and so the introduction of our community table was born."

Fashioned of wood reclaimed from Carolina tobacco barns, the Community Table hosts local groups as well as the store associates' team huddle each morning. Wrapped around the table — as well as all of center store, as a device to drive traffic through the aisles — are the perimeter's destination departments.

The color and fragrance of produce, fresh-ground coffee and handmade chocolates greet shoppers at the entrance, but it's likely to be the rustic aromas emanating from the meat smoker out in front of the store that draw folks in and around the perimeter back to the Smokehouse for the ribs, pulled pork and other hardwood-smoked meats offered daily.

"We're creating an entirely new shopping experience within our Lowes Foods stores," says Chris Van Parys, VP of fresh sales and merchandising. "Our guests expect us to deliver unique, authentic, great-tasting products that they can also customize to meet their specific needs. Each of our concepts has a ready-to-eat component."

And each concept is built around a story. For example, the "proprietor" of Sammy's sandwich shop is a mustachioed character who travels the world in search of the best sandwich concepts, Lowe explains. In reality, the hosts behind the Sammy's counter draw from the store's other signature departments to build their creations, touted as "hot and fresh in 30 seconds."

"Veggies from our Pick & Prep, barbecue from our Smokehouse, cheese from our Cheese Shop," Lowe says. "A lot of stores have sandwich bars — we created a concept with a story behind it."

The stories are supported by a host of small details, many hidden in plain sight, that further enhance the experience, from PB&Js shaped like Sammy's mustache to the bear tracks on the floor leading to the Beer Den, to the rustic decor carried from the walls to



the end caps to the vendor partner displays.

"Our brand is metal and wood. A lot of burlap. Visual merchandising," Lowe says — appropriate for a store with a sign reading "Welcome to our farm" over the front door, and other decor that evokes the community's deep agricultural roots.

A new end cap display — a giant upside-down grocery bag that looks like it's spilling out product — is designed to catch the eye and promote the Lowes store brand that Lowe notes is clean label across the board. "We do a lot with our brand to catch people's attention," he says.

Lowes is catching kids' attention as well, from the musical cakewalk games and "magic" birthday candles they can blow out at The Cakery, to the chicken dances, to the pots and pans to bang on at the Breadcrumb bakery, and the gadgets and gizmos galore to play with at SausageWorks, right down to the free organic apples in the produce section.

"The rituals bring it all to life," Lowe affirms, explaining how the company hired former Disney trainers to advise them how hosts could more effectively interact with children. "It's something we work hard on all the time — if we can get it right with the kids, we can get it right with the parents."



JUST IN CASINGS
Dozens of sausage varieties made on site from house recipes are among the favorites of shoppers at Lowes Foods.

Store of the Month

Lowe's Foods, Simpsonville, S.C.



NO DODGING THE DRAFT

Guests of the Beer Den can sample a wide variety of local beers and wines, including beer brewed on site in the store's own microbrewery, seen at right, joining the region's active craft beer scene.



On Tap

Getting it right with the parents, as well as others over 21, is the Beer Den, supplemented for the first time at this location with The Cavern, an on-site beer-brewing operation.

From a seat at the bar or at a table in the adjacent dining area, guests can enjoy beer created just a few yards away, along with other microbrews, as well as Sunmill Wines, Lowe's own private brand. The Simpsonville Beer Den has eight taps — twice as many as at other stores to accommodate the house-made beers. Offerings change seasonally, and the retailer has created specific branding for each variety, most labels incorporating some variation on the den's whimsical mascot, the Beer, or a bear with deer antlers.

Beer also can be taken home in 32- or 64-ounce growlers, or in 32-ounce "crowlers" — cans that are filled and capped to order. The process reduces the amount of air in the container and lengthens the beer's shelf life, Lowe explains.

The glass-walled brewing room is visible from the indoor and outdoor seating areas, which also host tasting and music events (a schedule is posted at the bar). Rare among supermarkets, the operation is overseen by a brewmaster who also collaborates with craft brewers in the Carolinas' vibrant craft beer community. The beers use as many local ingredients as possible, although hops must come from other regions.

"This pipe is transparent, so people can see the hops move through the piping," Lowe notes during a visit to the brewing room, describing the feature as one of the store's "bits of theater, however small." Lowe's is working with local officials to get permission to sell Simpsonville-made beer at its other store locations.

In addition to tasting events, the store hosts a "Brewniversity" to teach people about beer. "When people try new things, they expand their palate and get a fuller experience," Harvin Bedenbaugh, Beer Den master, remarks while working the taps during *PG's* visit.

As if that weren't enough, the store's beer cooler boasts the longest beer run in the county — 47 doors over 94 feet, Lowe points out, with a huge variety of both mass-market and craft beers. "We're using beer and wine as



ROLLING OUT THE DOUGH
Breadcrumbs creates hearty loaves of fresh bread, some of which is wheeled up front to tempt shoppers.



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Lowe says. “Why do we do crazy things? It’s a celebration, and it gives people permission to try something new. It’s a chance for us to interact with them.”

One of Lowe’s newest solutions, found at the meat counter, is Ready. Chef. Go! Launched this past spring, the oven-ready bags of chicken, beef or pork with vegetables, which also can be prepared in the microwave or on the grill, are “taking off like

wildfire,” Lowe says. “It’s a quick meal solution, and it’s all put together right here.”

The offering is another way of making life easier for customers, for whom Lowe’s openly expresses its gratitude in myriad ways, such as walking meat orders around to customers, rather than handing them over the counter. “It’s a gesture of openness,” Lowe says. “It’s saying ‘thank you’ to the customers.”

Staying Fresh

Lowe’s efforts to up its game on shopper engagement have paid off; response from the community has been overwhelmingly positive. “We’ve been welcomed into the community by local vendors, leaders and neighbors,” George says. “Prior to entering the market, we held a vendor fair to invite local producers to share their products with us. We also partnered with the chamber of commerce to host a dinner called Eat Like a Local.”

Additionally, the grocer sends gift boxes directly to the homes of area residents, filled with locally made products and Lowe’s signature items. Local vendors are also invited to demo their products at Lowe’s stores, another foot in the door toward getting on shelf.

“We have a commitment to supporting our local vendor partners,” notes Jason Ramsey, VP of center store. “This means thinking differently about community outreach and finding those unique, local, family-owned businesses that have a passion for what they do. We have a long history of helping these vendors reach a broader audience through our stores and our wholesale team. Altogether, we can help a local vendor reach over 450 retail stores in 12 states.”

As the retailer declares on its website, “You can’t fake local,” and that goes for all 2,500 local products available in every one of its stores.

Admittedly, some suppliers may be challenged to keep up with Lowe’s pace of innovation. “We continue to work together with our

vendors to ensure they are engaged in the earliest ideation phases of our new concepts,” Van Parys says. “Looking at SausageWorks, just the flavor profiles for 54 unique sausages was a huge undertaking that takes test batching and formulation changes to ensure it’s just right before our guests ever taste their first bite.”

The Greenville region is significant to the company’s growth strategy for two reasons, George explains: “First, this was the first new market that we entered with our newly developed concepts, without the history of being a standard supermarket. Second, this was the first location where we were able to bring the concepts — our Originals — around the perimeter of the store.”

By all accounts, the strategy is having the intended effect; the challenge will be to maintain the level of quality and service to continually overdeliver on shoppers’ expectations.

“Certainly, there is nothing more exciting than opening a new store,” says Mike Clawson, SVP of operations. “As you can expect, this brings a great deal of work and anticipation. In each case we bring our guest — whether a new one who has never experienced a Lowes food store, or a longtime shopper — something new. But the words that make us the happiest are when we hear that something is different, not just the new paint and equipment, but our people.

“We spend a considerable amount of time coaching and training friendliness, and the idea that everyone has a part to play in the show,” he continues. “When we see it happen, we know it was worth the effort. Of course, the biggest challenge is continuing to invest in differentiated experiences to keep us fresh in the eyes of our guests over time.”

The southeastern United States has become a highly competitive grocery market, with German hard-discounter Lidl the latest to tread on territory held by Lowes as well as Aldi, Bi-Lo, Kroger’s Harris Teeter, Publix and Walmart, among others.

But Lowe says he worries less about the competition than he does about pleasing Lowes’ customers.

“The goal is to be the best retailer in America — that’s what drives us,” he asserts. “We won’t stop until we’ve built the best retail environment, not

just the best grocer — the best retailer overall. Ask people where they want to go, we want Lowes Foods to be at the top of their list.” **PG**

Learn more about Lowes Foods and its new Simpsonville, S.C., supermarket at progressivegrocer.com/lowesfoods.

