

WILLY STREET

Locally Focused

WISCONSIN-SOURCED PRODUCTS ARE A BIG DRAW

• By Katie Martin •

Like any 40-year-old business, Willy Street Co-op has seen its fair share of changes. The co-op was started in 1974 by a buying group looking to source food that they couldn't find elsewhere, namely organic and natural. The venture paid off, and the co-op opened its third location in Madison, Wis., in August 2016. It also has grown to 34,500 members/owners.

The new North location is the largest at 20,000 square feet, twice the size of the other two locations, which meant an expanded product line. In order to find out what types of products the new neighborhood wanted to buy, Willy Street initiated a receipt drive asking consumers to drop off their receipts from other stores, which provided about 2,000 product recommendations for the new store.

The co-op team also turned to other co-ops that had undergone expansion for some advice. A co-op in Minnesota recommended that the new store only stock about 85 percent of products and fill in the shelves after opening with customer requests.

FILLING SPACE

"We had spaces on the shelves with signs that said 'What should go here? Please let us know. This is your store,'" says Brendon Smith, director of communications. "That was really important to us because we wanted to be responsive to the needs of the community and our owners. This is a store that belongs to the people who shop here, and they have a voice in how we do business and what we carry." The store received about 500 requests and brought in most of them, which led to a shift to more conventional products. "That was new for us, and we're still learning to work with that," Smith adds.

The shift to more conventional products in the North store is partly a result of the additional space in the third location, but also partly due to more conventional supermarkets carrying a large organic selection, so Willy Street is having to compete more than ever for customers. "Maybe we have to kind of meet more in the middle,"



says Anya Firszt, general manager. "We're mindful that people shop at other stores. What can we do to get more of your grocery dollars, but do it in a way where we're not completely selling out?"

The request for more conventional products was really more of a code-word for lower priced, Smith notes. The co-op has worked to find those lower-priced, conventional items that still meet other goals of the co-op, like local or sustainable or clean label, even if it's not an organic product.

Among the three stores, only about 30 to 40 percent of the product is the same, says Megan Minnick, director of purchasing and produce

At A Glance

Founded: 1974

Owners: Cooperatively owned by members; Anya Firszt, GM

Locations: 3 in Madison, Wis.

Size: North, pictured: 20,000 square feet. West and East: 10,000 square feet

Number of Employees: 366

Phone: 608-709-5445 (North)

Web: willystreet.coop

RIGHT: The new North location (most of the staff pictured) has more conventional products than the other two locations.

LEFT: Anya Firszt, general manager



category manager. “We spent a lot of time figuring out what should be in this store,” she adds. “When we opened we were very clear with people that this wasn’t a finished product. It’s really been an ongoing process of trying to do our best to really reflect what people shopping here want to buy. It’s still a work in progress.”

CUSTOMER COMFORT

As part of that work, the co-op partnered with the nearby University of Wisconsin to conduct a focus group. The university students ran the focus group and created a proposal of actions to

be taken from the feedback. Some of the suggestions included more events at the store and a printed store map as the store is not laid out in a typical supermarket format.

Most of the feedback centered on “doing more things so people can feel comfortable before they walk in,” Smith says. “No one wants to feel either unwelcome or like they don’t know what they’re doing, but in a co-op, some people think they have to be a member to shop. No one wants to appear ignorant, so giving people some of those tools beforehand, so they feel more comfortable walking in.”

Willy Street has focused a lot of its community outreach on the educational component, such as anyone can shop at the store, not just members/owners. The co-op is teaming up with the Neighborhood Navigators, part of the Northside Planning Council of Madison, to find out what members of the community need to live a better life and connect them with the broader community. The Navigators will help spread the word about the co-op.

THE EDUCATIONAL COMPONENT

All locations of the co-op regularly offer educational classes — more than 123 in fiscal year 2016 — with topics like how to go grain-free, how to eat healthy on a budget as well as more specific cooking classes like knife skills or how to cook Indian cuisine. The West and East stores have large community rooms to house the classes; aside from store tour classes, North worked out an agreement with the library next door to use its facilities for the classes.

The stores also offer Kids in the Kitchen classes for children to learn easy-to-prepare recipes as well as the Simply Series, which are tour-based classes that teach consumers how to shop the store or a specific department. For example, Simply Bulk takes the mystique out of shopping the bulk department, Simply Meat

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teaches about the different types of meat that the co-op carries, and Simply Labeling shows people how to read food and nutrition labels.

Willy Street also has a presence at several community food fests and health fairs. “From small health fairs at a company or state agency all the way to major festivals, we’ll either send food or have an information table,” Smith says. “I think events are really important for us because of having to explain you don’t have to be a member to shop.”

For another fun outreach program, the co-op teamed up with the Madison Mallards, a collegiate summer baseball team, which will give people seated in a pre-selected seat a gift card when two players “cooperate” on a double play. The stores will give away up to \$3,700 in gift cards over the course of the season.

SHIFT TO LOCAL

The co-op may have began as a source for organic products, but the more conventional shift also has coincided with a focus on local products. According to the annual report, in the last fiscal year, Willy Street brought in 28 new local vendors company-wide. The three stores sold 75,002 gallons of local milk, 52,891 pounds of local carrots and processed 7,657 pounds of local produce that was canned for sale in the winter.

Local often takes precedence over organic for customers when given a choice. “We have different levels of local because we found that our customers wanted to know a bit more than just is the company local,” Smith says. Products labeled



▲ When local products are not available, Willy Street consumers demand fair trade products. The co-op partners with several fair trade producers for housewares and food.

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Fast Fact

200+

The number of stores 147 retail food co-ops operate in 38 states.

SOURCE: NATIONAL CO+OP GROCERS

as Locally Prepared means that the company that made it is local, Essentially Local indicates that at least 50 percent of the ingredients are sourced locally, and 100 Percent Local is as its name suggests and is most often found in the produce department. “Our owners really want to know that difference,” he adds. For reference, Willy Street defines local as anywhere within Wisconsin or within 150 miles of Madison, which also encompasses parts of Minnesota and Illinois.

The store helps drive that local message home by showcasing its local producers with signs located throughout the store, especially in the cheese department, which sources about 90 percent of its product among the three stores from local producers. The new store carries about 175 varieties of cheese. While there isn’t a cheesemonger per se in the North location, the staff’s enthusiasm for the department helped build the selection.

“Even though we’re not quite the full-service department here as we are in the other stores, anything that’s sold by weight, we can open it for sampling,” says Robert Halstead, owner resources coordinator. “We often encourage people to open up anything and try it. We’ll take the rest of the cheese and sample it for other people or find some way to promote it.”

The local focus extends into the meat department and the deli. Many of the prepared foods are sourced from local vendors or prepared at Willy Street’s production kitchen. While the North store offers an olive bar, salad bar and hot food bar, customers have requested a juice/coffee bar and made-to-order sandwiches, both of which are offered at Willy Street’s other two locations. The new store is planning to add both in its next fiscal year.

“We’re planning a minor remodel,” GM Firszt says. The truncated opening, about nine months between being presented with the

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opportunity to the actual opening, meant not everything could be built before the store opened.

The produce department in the new store also offers more conventional products than the other two locations, but the staff uses color-coded signs to help distinguish between conventional and organic.

LOCAL IN HOUSEWARES

The larger location also allowed for a larger housewares department and allows the products to be merchandised throughout the store. “With this store, we were afforded some wonderful space for housewares,” says Lily Hoyer, general merchandise department head. “The baking housewares are able to be by the baking mixes; coffee, gadgets, coffee makers and to-go containers are all by the coffee. This location really afforded us an opportunity to spread out. We’re just constantly adjusting to what the customers need and paying attention to price point.”

Hoyer has noticed an uptick in the Preserve brand of food storage, which “hits an emerging co-op customer who is still using plastic to-go containers, but it’s a recycled one.”

She also brought in the Core line for its accessible price point for bamboo and silicone.

The top products fluctuate seasonally, with colanders and gadgets especially popular in the early produce season, but some year-round products, like water bottles, continue to sell well.

Local also is a big selling point in the department, just as it is in the rest of the store. Finding a Made in the USA option is one of the top priorities for the department. Jewell Hollow cutting boards, which are made in Richland Center, Wis., are especially popular for gifts. “If we tell this story right, then our customers really respond,” Hoyer adds.

Ohio Stoneware, made in Zanesville, Ohio, also sells well, with the store offering the preserving crocks and bowls. “Again, if we tell that story, the customers are like, ‘That’s USA made, it’s in the Midwest. That’s something that I would be willing to pay a little bit more for.’ A lot like our food, we’re elevating too and telling that story,” Hoyer says. The company uses shelf tags, social media and its newsletter to tell the stories of its manufacturers.

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Whetstone Woodenware serving utensils are also popular in the store. The company is based in Missouri and uses wood from Arkansas; Hoyer says, “It’s a local, sustainable wood.”

SUSTAINABILITY EQUATION

Cuppow lids that turn mason jars into sippy cups are made in New York and hits on two key demographics: Made in the USA and environmentally friendly. The lids are made from recycled materials and are made for glass jars, which is a growing sustainability trend.

To go along with the importance of sustainability, Willy Street’s housewares department also focuses on fair trade products when it sources from outside the United States. It stocks products from a women’s cooperative in India and items from West Bank Ceramics. “These are small producers that work with Serve International, which has some Wisconsin roots,” Hoyer says. “We bring them here because we already knew our customer base really loves fair trade food, and housewares is kind of the next realm of that education.”



▲ The cheese department in the North store is almost 90 percent sourced from Wisconsin dairy producers.

As a co-op where customer owners have more control in how the store operates than they do with conventional supermarkets, Willy Street actively solicits customer comments and attempts to answer any questions or requests within two weeks. It also makes those comments visible by posting them in the community room and in the newsletter so anyone can see what others have to say about the store. “We’re very transparent about what they are,” Smith says. “We exist to serve the needs of our owners.” TGR