

The Road to Healthy

California's ENroute Market aims to redefine convenience by nourishing consumers' bodies while they're on the move

By Danielle Romano

ENroute Market founder and owner Heather McNeil is often posed with the same question from shoppers: Why didn't this exist before now?

Located at 7000 Sunne Lane in Walnut Creek, Calif., ENroute Market — which opened in late January — is McNeil's brainchild. While at a baseball tournament with her sons a few years ago, she was given 15 minutes before the next game to grab something to eat. Upon walking into a 7-Eleven store — the closest option — she asked out loud, "Where is the convenience store for people who care what they put in their body?"

"The moment the words left my lips, I had chills all over me. I thought, could this really not exist? I stayed up all night and Googled 'healthy, upscale convenience store' in every major city in the world. There wasn't a brand in existence!" McNeil told *Convenience Store News*. "I immediately began writing my business plan, raised 100 percent of the money, and ENroute was born."

ENroute Market's name stemmed from McNeil

stepping into the mindset of her shoppers who would think, "I can get the healthiest version of whatever I'm craving on the way." Hence, the name ENroute. The concept is designed to reach health and fitness conscious consumers, as well as always-on-the-go working parents and professionals.

At 1,600 square feet, ENroute Market seeks to redefine convenience by being a healthy convenience store providing nourishment for life's journey, according to its creator. Although ENroute Market carries most food items that a typical c-store would carry, it differentiates itself by offering products made without artificial ingredients and preservatives.

The company stays true to this core value by being "extraordinarily" diligent about the products it carries so its guests don't have to, McNeil explained. Before a product hits shelves, she tastes every item and investigates its ingredients to make sure it aligns with ENroute Market's promise of no preservatives, artificial ingredients, corn syrups or hydrogenated oils.

Going a step further, all of ENroute Market's employees are knowledgeable about the food the store sells, therefore delivering a level of service previously unseen in the convenience channel, according to McNeil. This is something she takes great pride in.

"We exist to improve the lives of busy people by nourishing them with delicious and healthy food conveniently," she said.

Another differentiator for ENroute Market is its grab-and-go menu, which was created by Chef Charles Ayers Jr., the former executive chef for Google Inc.

Some of the chef-created meals spanning the breakfast, lunch and dinner dayparts include: Kale-ifornia Nutrition, made with scrambled cage-free egg whites, roasted vegetables, sautéed kale and chimi-curry sauce; the Veggie-licious Sandwich that includes an array of roasted and grilled vegetables;



The store's artisanal baked goods and grab-and-go items are delivered fresh every morning.

STORESPOTLIGHT

ENroute Market



Founder Heather McNeil tastes every product and investigates its ingredients before stocking it.

and the Longevity Salad that is made up of arugula, red bell peppers, grilled marinated tri-tip and topped with a Vietnamese dressing.

The grab-and-go items and the store's artisanal baked goods are delivered fresh daily every morning. Whatever items aren't sold by the end of the day are donated locally, meaning the food at ENroute Market is always fresh, noted McNeil.

Other offerings shoppers can expect to find at ENroute Market are Italian coffee, cold-pressed juice, cheese and charcuterie, candy, snacks, cookies, ice cream, pizza, Kombucha on tap, and a plethora of local and specialty food products. Craft beer and restaurant wines are available for onsite consumption, and a small selection of sundries and gifts can be purchased.

NEXT STOP: THE FUTURE

One of the most unexpected parts of the ENroute Market journey for McNeil has been the joy she feels in the process of day-to-day operations. This includes interacting with people who devote their

lives to improving one product. To McNeil, this is “awe-inspiring.”

“I had a young man approach me with samples of a barbecue sauce. I asked him why he decided to devote his life to making a barbecue sauce without corn syrup. He said he always wanted to do it, but was only able to after he inherited some money from losing both his parents in a car accident. Every product has a story. Every person who consumes that product is part of that story whether they know it or not,” she said.

When asked what ENroute Market’s future holds, McNeil expressed to *CSNews* that her goal is to reinvent the “convenience store,” change the way people view this segment of food, and make healthy food available to people on the go. To achieve this goal, one location isn’t enough.

“I cannot do this with one location. I receive mul-

tiples calls a week from developers who want ENroute in their suburban neighborhoods; however, my preference is to open my second location in downtown San

Francisco to prove that the concept also has legs in densely populated urban environments,” she explained. “I’d like to see ENroutes in every major city in the country because healthier food options should be available in a convenience format.”

The phrase surrounding the logo of ENroute Market reads, “Nourishment for Life’s Journey.” McNeil hopes shoppers take this mission to heart as much as she does.

“My hope is that the people who visit us feel nourished by the food but, in addition, I hope they are nourished by the love that went into making it and the connection to the people from which it came,” she said. “It is a privilege to spend my days being a small part of the big picture in what I hope is the future of food.” **CSN**

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— Heather McNeil, ENroute Market

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