

Picking Up the Baton

Back in business after a devastating flood, this store demonstrates Rouses' commitment to the community.

By Jim Dudlicek

Photography by Frank Aymami III

A

lackluster market at the time led Louisiana-based grocery chain Rouses Markets to retreat from Baton Rouge in 2000, but nothing — not even a natural disaster — could keep the retailer from coming back to stay.

The January 2015 grand opening of Rouses' supermarket in the Juban Crossing development in Denham Springs, on the outskirts of the Pelican

State's capital, was met with great fanfare, marking the grocer's return to the area after 15 years. The 54,000-square-foot store, one of 33 retailers and restaurants in the shopping center, was embraced by consumers for its signature fresh offerings and commitment to local products.

Then 25 inches of rain fell over two days in August 2016, bringing massive flooding and widespread damage to the area, including 4 feet of water that ruined the nearly new supermarket and its inventory, an event from which Juban Crossing and its surrounding area have still not quite fully recovered.



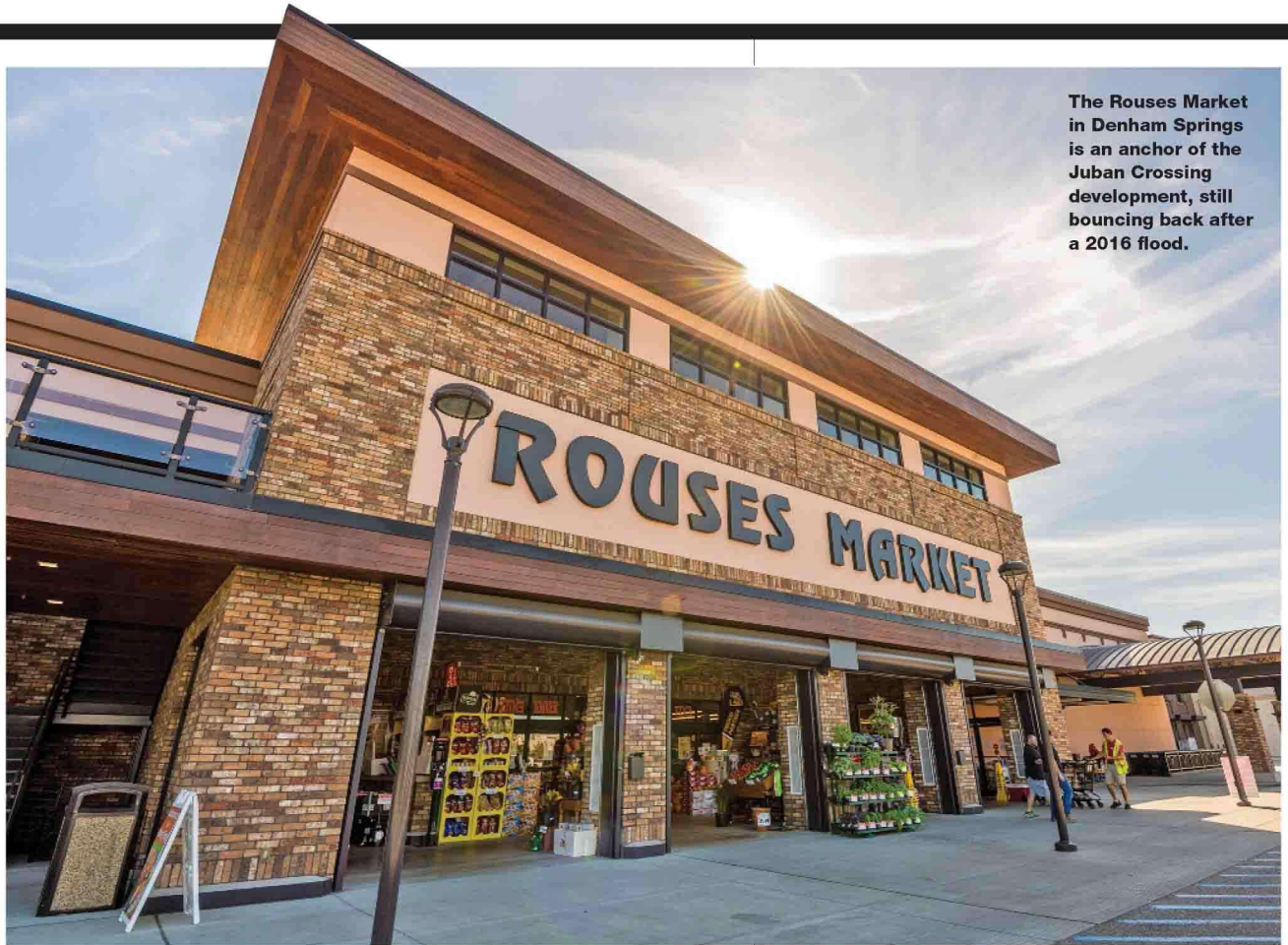
Rouses Market

Denham Springs, La.



"It's an important part of our growth strategy," CEO Donny Rouse says of the Denham Springs store, part of the retailer's expansion in the Baton Rouge area. "This is a very exciting time for our company."

STORE OF THE MONTH
Rouses Market



The Rouses Market in Denham Springs is an anchor of the Juban Crossing development, still bouncing back after a 2016 flood.

“ We knew what this store meant to this community, and what this community meant to us. Most rewarding is being able to serve a community we want to be a part of.”

—Donny Rouse, CEO

Yet Rouses is back and better than ever, reopening its doors in December 2016 to eager crowds and a commitment from the Rouse family to support the stricken area through donations of food and money, as well as its continued investment in the Baton Rouge market.

“There was never a question of whether or not we would rebuild. We started work as soon as the floodwaters receded,” CEO Donny Rouse said at the time of the grand reopening of the store, which is almost identical to its original layout. “We’d only been open a year and a half, so the store was practically brand-new. But we took this opportunity to make a few upgrades to make the shopping experience even better.”

Serving the Community

Flooding ruined the structure of the store, destroyed inventory, and forced the evacuation of Rouses team members, including a few who had to be rescued after working diligently to save their store. Work to rebuild the location began almost immediately.

“We were there checking the store from a helicopter multiple times before we were allowed to get in,” Rouse recalls. “As soon as the water came down and we could get in to assess the damage, we were on the horn with our general contractor, and insurance and restoration company. Ninety percent of area homes and all of the tenants in the Juban Crossing development were affected. Every grocery store in the area was damaged, so it was important to get the store up and running as quickly as possible.”

And once it was, folks came running back.

“Customers showed up in droves the day we reopened, and we’re doing more sales now than we did before,” Rouse says. “We worked day and night to get this store back up and running as quickly as possible. Customers are obviously rewarding us for the job we did to get reopened.”

Of course, Rouses is no stranger to natural

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disasters, having pitched in to get its stores and the community back on their feet following Hurricane Katrina a decade ago.

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A staunch supporter of local products, Rouses prominently features Louisiana seafood in its stores.

Local Destination

For its triumphant return to the Baton Rouge market, Rouses "wanted something different than what we'd done before," Rouse explains. Long a fixture in the New Orleans area, the retailer deliberately evoked the Crescent City with this design. "There's antique brick mixed with wrought iron," Rouse notes. "There's even a balcony outside of the store.

"There's never been anything like it in Livingston Parish," he continues. "It really is one of the finest grocery stores in the South. Of course, we're from Louisiana, so we know what locals like to eat. And we're in our stores every day."

And few retailers are stronger proponents of local than Rouses. From products to décor to community partnerships, Rouses stores are reflections of the neighborhoods they serve, and Juban Crossing is no exception.

Since it serves Louisiana State University's (LSU) hometown, the school's purple and gold are blatant in many displays, especially during *Progressive Grocer's* fall visit.

"We are a total-destination store on the weekends," asserts Donna Dickerson, store director. "We sell 300 pounds of chicken wings on LSU

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Fresh food and attentive service are hallmarks of Rouses Markets. From basic ingredients to fully prepared meals, the store and its team members strive to offer solutions for every need and occasion. Smoked barbecue, signature baked goods, freshly caught seafood, zesty deli sides and seasoned burgers are just a few of the items created to satisfy local palates and daypart demands.



“ People will come in, have lunch, try samples — they’ll spend two or three hours here.”

—Donna Dickerson, store director

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game days. This is Party Central.”

Typical of Rouses Markets, the Juban Crossing store is very focused on fresh, and that includes prepared food. “There’s a BBQ Chop Shop. We smoke our own beef, pork and poultry,” Rouse says. “It has an open kitchen so you can watch our pit masters at work. There’s a Mongolian grill, with noodle and rice bowls. Our hot line serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. You’ll always find something hot and delicious. There’s also a fresh soup and salad bar, a fresh sushi station, and a chef’s case with Rouses signature offerings.”

The store’s unique design places the produce department “right in middle of the store,” Rouse notes, “to show the freshness of the produce and to showcase the local produce we offer.”

To be sure, every department features local products, from Abita beer to Kleinpeter Farms Dairy milk to Zapp’s potato chips.

The Whole Meal

It’s evident to anyone entering this store that whether their mission is to procure components for an at-home meal or to enjoy one on the premises, they’re not going to be hungry for long.

One of the first things shoppers see is the chef’s case, packed with heat-and-eat delicacies. “People come here and buy their whole meal out of the case,” Dickerson says. “You can have a meal for under \$20 from this case.” The top seller is Rouses’ twice-baked potatoes, along with stuffed mushrooms, about which Dickerson notes, “We cannot keep these on the shelf.”

Other options abound within arm’s reach. There’s a traditional hot bar with favorites like fried chicken, red beans and rice, and gumbo, along with a salad and soup bar. A nearby island offers grab-and-go rotisserie chickens, some seasoned, others “naked,” the clamshells marked with “Eat Right with Rouses” stickers to promote wholesome meal solutions.

There’s a hot table featuring boiled seafood such as crabs and shrimp, along with veggies and sausage for jambalaya, plus boiled turkey necks, unique to the region. An iced-shrimp bar offers more local Gulf favorites. “We’ll go through 20 cases on a Saturday



— 400 pounds of shrimp,” Dickerson remarks.

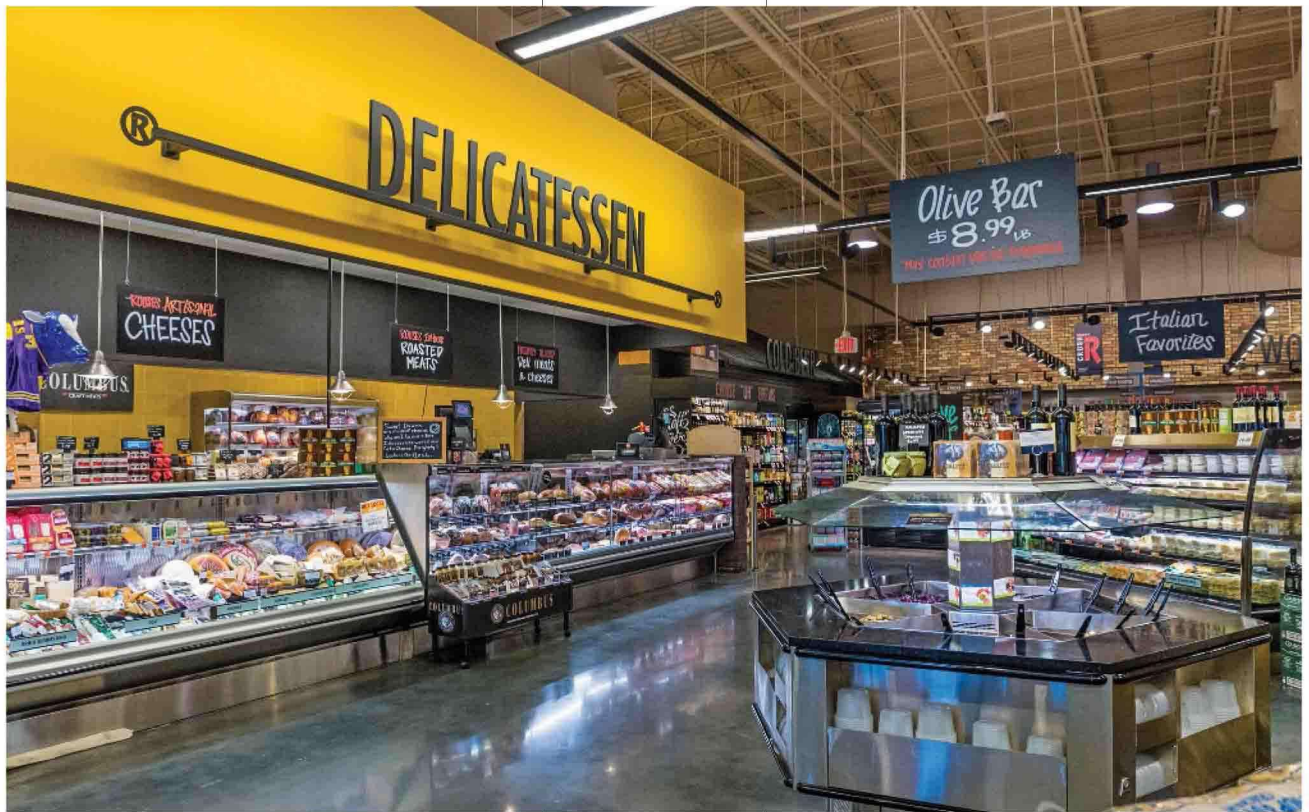
There’s also made-to-order sushi, along with the aforementioned Mongolian grill concept that turns out fresh rice and noodle bowls, presenting food theater on multiple sensory levels.

But the biggest draw among prepared foods is barbecue. “Our No. 1 seller is the Chop Shop,” Dickerson says of the carving counter that serves smoked brisket, ribs, sausage, chicken and boudin (a sausage made with pork and rice, popular in Louisiana), along with macaroni and cheese, greens, and other sides. “It’s a Deep South meal, for sure.”

Dickerson continues: “All our stores are based on local demographics. Here, barbecue sells better than, say, brick-oven pizza, which sells [better] in our Baronne store [in downtown New Orleans].”

Deli cases are replete with charcuterie and specialty cheeses; the store “sells a ton” of fresh-cut cheese, Dickerson notes. “Brie is huge for the holidays,” she adds, pointing out merchandising of complementary items like figs and fruit spreads to inspire special-occasion purchases and drive incremental sales.

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Meanwhile, the scratch bakery specializes in local favorites like gentilly and strawberry ambrosia cakes, along with gourmet cookies like the Royale, packed with macadamia nuts, chocolate chips, coconut and butter rum, and which routinely sells out.

Shellfish and other species from local waters abound in the seafood case, while the meat department features dry-aged beef and a wide variety of value-added items. The top seller: Rouses' Bayou Boy Burger stuffed with jalapeños, cheese and bacon. Also popular are green-onion burgers,

Luncheon meats just scratch the surface at Rouses' deli department, which also offers a wide variety of charcuterie and specialty cheeses.

made with beef or chicken; sausage-stuffed mushrooms; head cheese; smoked sausage; house-made jerky; kabobs with veggies; stuffed chicken breast with asparagus; and, according to Dickerson, just about anything wrapped in bacon.

Sampling is essential to driving traffic, Dickerson says. "You have to get it in people's mouths," she observes. "People will come in, have lunch, try samples — they'll spend two or three hours here."

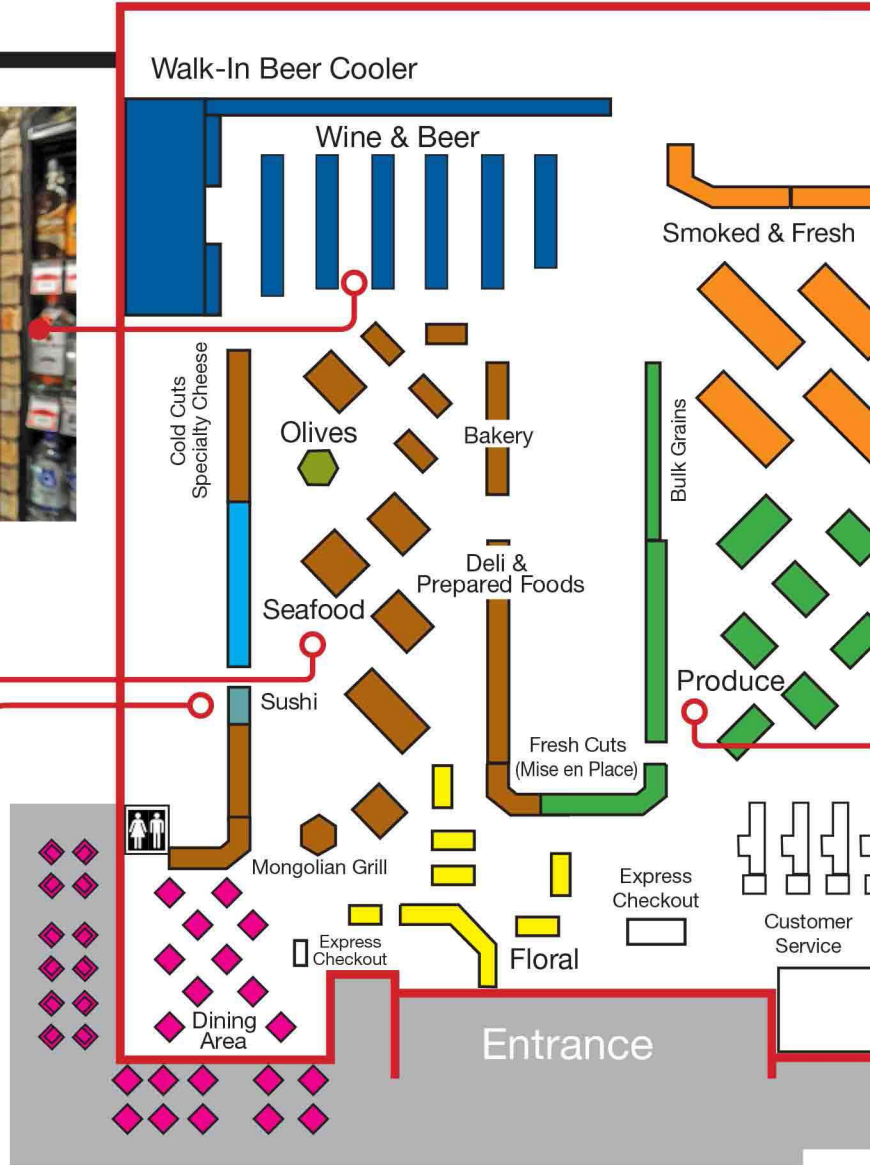
Dedicated Team

Dickerson makes it her mission to create a store team that goes above and beyond to serve shoppers. Every morning, she huddles with her associates to go over the day's game plan and review any issues or concerns.

"I'm training people to know everything that I know, because I want them to be promoted," says Dickerson, a Louisiana native and *Progressive Grocer* Top Women in Grocery laureate who spent two decades rising through the ranks at Winn-Dixie before coming to Rouses in September 2016.

It's this locally recruited team that helps drive home the company's commitment to the community. In the wake of the 2016 flood, Rouses raised more than \$200,000 for area families in need, and donated a truckload of hams to the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank. In fact, the retailer's collection

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Rouses Market #55

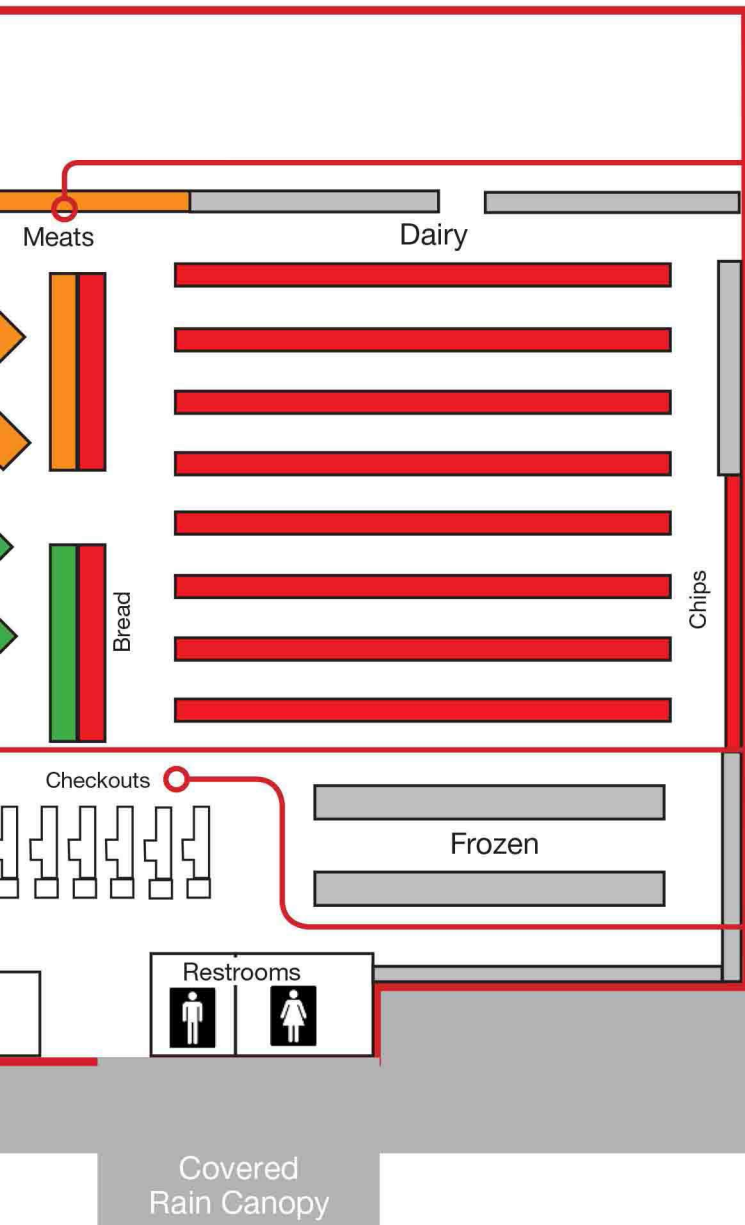
January 26, 2015
Grand opening (original)

Dec. 13, 2016
Reopening (post-flood)

Size
53,740
Total square footage

Selling Area
47,000
Square Feet

Hours: 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily



10130 Crossing Way #300
Denham Springs, LA 70726

**55,000
SKUs**

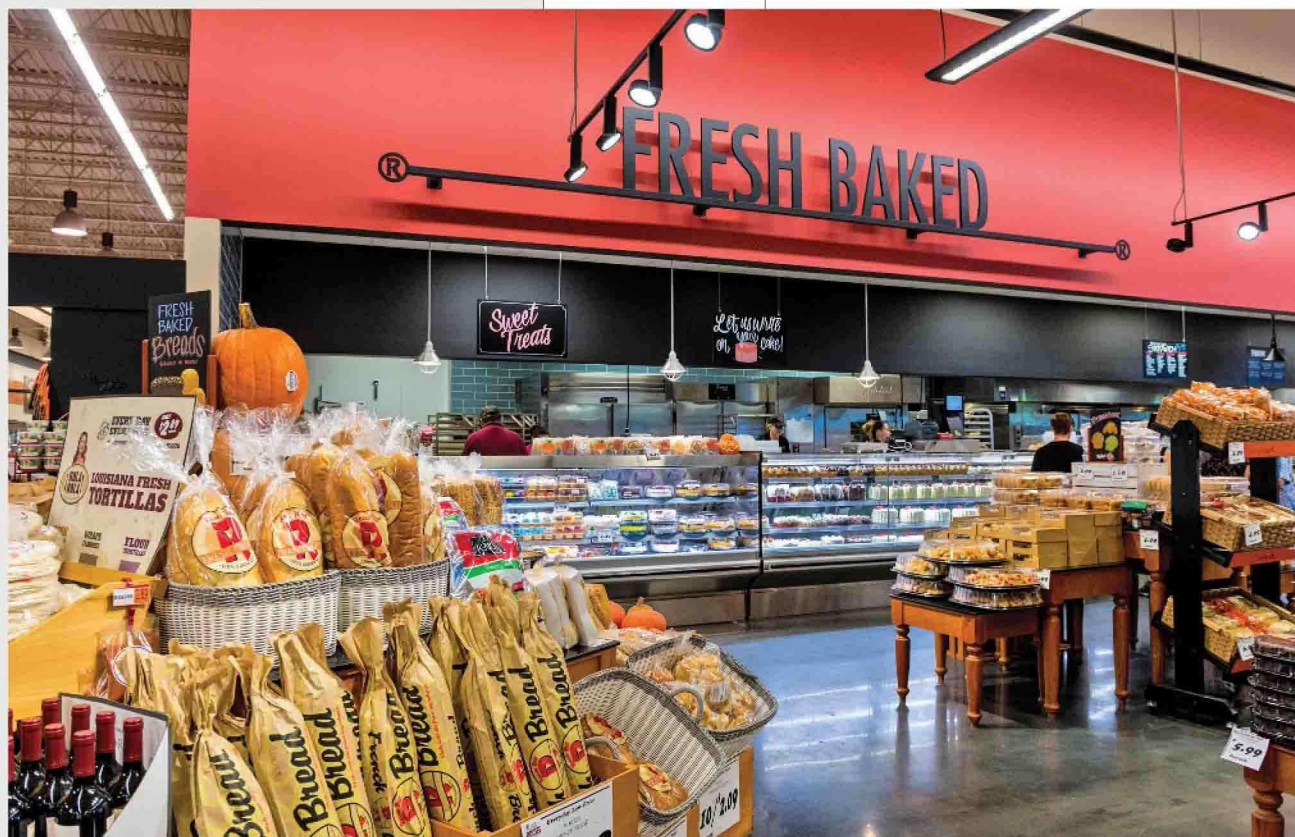
12
Checkouts

156
Employees



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About Rouses

The late Anthony J. Rouse Sr. founded Thibodaux, La.-based Rouses Markets in 1960. CEO Donny Rouse is the third generation of the family to lead the family-owned chain, which is one of the largest independent grocers in the United States.

Rouses Markets operates 55 stores in Louisiana, along the Mississippi Gulf Coast and Lower Alabama, and employs nearly 7,000 team members. In 2016, Rouses acquired the nine LeBlanc's and Frais Marchés stores in the Baton Rouge area. At the time of this writing, new stores were under construction in Baton Rouge, Sulphur, Moss Bluff and Covington, La., and Mobile, Ala.

Rouses' suppliers include Kansas City, Kan.-based Associated Wholesale Grocers, which services Rouses stores from its Gulf Coast division warehouse in Pearl River, La., and foodservice company Perronne & Sons, based in Metairie, La., a suburb of New Orleans. www.rouses.com



The aroma of fresh-baked bread tickles the nostrils, while gently cakes and other fancy pastries dazzle the eye at Rouses' scratch bakery.

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of donations continues year-round, with contributions of food and cash to area food banks exceeding \$2 million. "My family considers feeding our community job one," Rouse affirms.

The Juban Crossing store is a jewel of the community and sets a high standard for the Rouses Markets locations to follow.

"It's an important part of our growth strategy, which includes remodeling existing stores and building new ones," Rouse says. "This is a very exciting time for our company." **PG**