

Outstanding Retailers of 2005



Specialty Food Magazine and the NASFT are honored to present the six Outstanding Retailers of 2005, as nominated and selected by the 2,390 members of the NASFT.

From an upscale division of a leading Southwestern supermarket chain to an independent New Jersey operator who added specialty food to a perfume and cosmetic business, from a North Carolina grocer who moved uptown to a mail-order marketer that built cheese caves in the shadow of New York City's Jacob Javits Center, these outstanding retailers are serving an ever-increasing niche of consumers who have made quality food a part of their lifestyle.

Nicole Potenza Denis and Denise Purcell are, respectively, senior editor and managing editor of Specialty Food Magazine.

**Artisanal Premium Cheese Center:
The Ultimate Spa for Cheese**

Helping set the pace for cheese trends in the U.S., Chef Terrance Brennan's quest to educate Americans began in the early 1990s, when he introduced a traditional European cheese course at his restaurant Picholine in New York City. In 2001, he expanded on that service by opening Artisanal, a bistro/fromagerie/wine bar.

With the mission to provide Americans with the best cheeses in the world, matured to optimal ripeness and enjoyed at the peak of flavor, Brennan launched Artisanal Premium Cheese Center in 2003. This 10,000-square-foot Manhattan-based gourmet mail order and online retailer is devoted to the art of affinage, or the aging of cheese.

"The Artisanal Premium Cheese Center grew out of a vision of making artisanal cheese part of everyday life, as it is currently in Europe," remarks Brennan. He believes the appreciation for artisanal cheese is an educational process, similar to how wine appreciation has evolved over the years. "The more a customer learns about the product, the more he or she is likely to enjoy it," he adds.

With 270 cheeses from all over the world and five caves equipped with customized European refrigeration systems, the Artisanal Premium Cheese Center sets itself apart by being able to affine (age) its cheeses. The five cheese caves create distinct and precise climates for each type of cheese in order for them to reach full potential. It's like a spa for world-class cheese. Each cheese is carefully turned, brushed and washed by hand and closely monitored by a staff of 32 full- and part-timers, including a Maitre Fromager, Director of Affinage and a Cave Manager, until it has been determined to reach its optimal flavor.

Like a fashion designer updating a collection for each season, Artisanal selects cheeses with its customers' palates in mind. It looks for small-production, hand-crafted cheeses that will work together. Best-sellers include Epoisses, Comté, Ossau, Reblochon, Colston Bassett Stilton and Brie de Nangis. Cheeses change based on availability and seasonality.

Attracting customers that run the spectrum from seasoned cheese connoisseurs looking for new ideas to recently converted cheese lovers who aren't yet comfortable creating cheese courses on their own, Artisanal Premium Cheese Center receives more than 2,100 new visitors to its site each week. The majority of shipments are sent to New York, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Florida and California. Educational classes also are seeing growth. Artisanal's "Cheese and Wine 101" is the most popular, followed by "Old World Cheeses and New World Wines."

Along with building a national brand that represents the highest standards of quality, Artisanal Premium Cheese Center is committed to supporting American cheesemakers and becoming the leading affineur of American artisanal cheeses. The company is determined to continue growing and promoting artisanal cheeses, as well as educating the public on the pleasure of quality cheese. *Contact: Terrance Brennan, Artisanal Premium Cheese Center, 500 W. 37th St., New York, NY 10018; 212.239.1200; Fax: 212.239.1476; www.artisanalcheese.com.*—N.D.

Reid's Fine Foods: From Grits to Caviar

A "chain" of one with the heart and soul of a retail lion, Reid's Fine Foods has been serving its customers since 1928. Known as "the place to find it all" (customers joke if you can't find it anywhere else, call Reid's), the store is located in the heart of uptown Charlotte, N.C., where it offers an urban-style of retailing to its diverse mix of clientele.

Starting as a bag boy during the 1960s, Owner Chuck Richards and his wife Pam purchased Reid's in 1984. After consolidating two locations and expanding on what was already working—including keeping its world-class meat market and home delivery—Reid's has come to fruition with 15,000 square feet housing 20,000 items. The departmental mix includes a Hot Lunch and Dinner Bar, wine bar, sushi bar, deli, floral, gift, bakery and

catering. "Reid's is the place to go for special-occasion foods—everything from grits to caviar," says Chuck Richards.

The consolidation, which took place in 2002, allowed Reid's to gain momentum. "Aside from being three times the size of our old store, we were able to be more competitive, offering prepared foods and enhancing our catering business," Richards says.

A mix of old Charlotte and the emerging young urban shopper make up Reid's clientele. They shop regular grocery along with the specialty foods that make up 25 percent of the mix. "We try to reach a wide cross-section with our products," adds Pam Richards.

Not only does Reid's do that in the store, but also through a successful mail-order catalog that accounts for approximately 15 percent of sales, with a marked increase in the fourth quarter. Since 1989, it has offered everything from specialty themed gift baskets to its own Southern spiral hams. A private-label program, which includes wine, preserves, sauces, cheese straws and chocolate pecans, does very well in gift baskets as well as stand-alone items.

Reid's boasts a wine bar in the center of the store that seats 25 and is used for tastings almost every night. Customers can also learn how to cook regional favorites or international cuisine at Reid's cooking classes taught by local chefs and renowned culinary instructors from Johnson and Wales University.

The annual holiday open house is a highlight every year. Reid's personally invites 2,000 customers to see and sample what is new for the upcoming holiday season; staff and vendors are on hand to introduce new products and catalog items. "It is a great way to kick off the holiday season, not to mention the biggest cocktail party in Charlotte," notes Pam Richards.

Treating customers as they would like to be treated themselves, coupled

with excellent quality and service, is behind Reid's success. "We are thrilled and humbled to receive this award. We're proud of our staff and customers. We are enjoying the fun of serving our clients and, as Charlotte continues to change, we will find more products to meet our customers' needs," the Richards' add. *Contact: Chuck or Pam Richards, Reid's Fine Foods, 225 E. Sixth St., Charlotte, NC 28203; 704.377.1312, 704.527.2669; Fax: 704.527.6161; www.reids.com. —N.D.*

A.J.'s Fine Foods: A Culinary Adventure

Combining mainstay food items with the adventure of specialty foods places upscale supermarket chain A.J.'s Fine Foods at the top of its game. With 35,000 products in store, superior customer service and a shopping atmosphere that soothes while appealing to all the senses, A.J.'s goes beyond shopper expectations.

Born 20 years ago, in Arizona's Paradise Valley, A.J.'s has expanded to 11 locations in the affluent neighborhoods of Phoenix, Scottsdale and Tucson. The flagship 16,000-foot store was immediately embraced by the community and proved to be a model for things to come. "Our original clients helped to drive the design of the store and product mix for future growth and other locations," says Pam Giroux, merchandising director. (A.J.'s Fine Foods is now owned by Basha's, which operates around 300 supermarkets in the Southwest.)

A.J.'s stores range from 16,000 to 28,000 square feet and feature wine, gelato and cappuccino bars, Butchers Corner and Seafood Grotto (in-store smokers allows A.J.'s to offer house-smoked meats), bistro, boulangerie, sit-down sushi bar and a Farmer's Market, featuring exotic and international fruits and vegetables. There are more than 35,000 SKUs on the grocery shelves and in the refrigerated and frozen food cases, including a vast selection of specialty foods and natural foods, along with mainstream

grocery.

To cater to diverse clientele in each trade area, each market has a varied product mix. Store and departmental managers have the autonomy to source whatever they feel will satisfy their specific customer base. Store designs also vary, although most locations are within an upscale shopping center that could include retailers such as Crate and Barrel, Williams-Sonoma and Barnes and Noble. No two stores are exactly alike. "We learn what works and what doesn't with each store," says Giroux.

Creating a pleasant shopping experience through selection and superior service keeps customers loyal. Giroux says she still sees many of the same customers in the Paradise Valley store that shopped there 20 years ago.

"We spend a lot of energy on the presentation of products. We like to create ambiance to keep the intrigue level up," she notes. A.J.'s presents a visual carnival of specialty foods to make consumers feel good from the minute they enter the store until they put the groceries away at home. "We take great effort to make a customer feel satisfied," says Giroux. "Whether it is sourcing hard-to-find items, learning customers' names or creating a sense of excitement visually or through the knowledge of our staff members, we want customers to feel like A.J.'s is their store."

With five chefs on premise, and a staff of mainly "foodies" whose passion and excitement are passed down to the customer, A.J.'s considers itself a vehicle to what is going on in the culinary world. "We listen to our customers and pamper them," says Giroux. "It is not always just about that great balsamic vinegar; it has to be the whole picture, the experience you give to make customers feel special." *Contact: Pam Giroux, A.J.'s Fine Foods, 2626 S. Seventh St., Phoenix, AZ 85034; 602.594.1372; Fax: 602.594.1185; www.ajsfinefoods.com.* —N.D.

Oliver's Market:

Sonoma's Single Source

It's a rare feat to individualize yourself by being everything to everyone. But that's what 17-year-old retailer Oliver's Market has accomplished at its two independently owned stores in Sonoma County, Calif.

Oliver's has morphed a standard grocery store, gourmet retailer and health and natural food emporium into one, all while maintaining a neighborhood feel at its locations in Cotati and Santa Rosa. The stores offer a mix of specialty items, organic foods, natural products, homeopathic remedies, upscale deli, extensive prepared foods, award-winning baked goods, specialized cheese and wine departments, high-end service counters and conventional grocery.

Differentiation is key to standing out in its foodie-territory location. Northern California's wine country is home to superior specialty retailers as well as an ever-growing influx of chain supermarkets and mass merchants. Oliver's, explains General Manager Tom Scott, strives to distinguish itself from chains such as Safeway or Costco by offering a full line of specialty and natural items. Meanwhile, it sets itself apart from nearby specialty stores with a selection of gourmet products at supermarket prices. Volume purchasing allows Oliver's to remain competitive price-wise while offering the broadest selection possible. The retailer has upwards of 400 active vendors of specialty items alone.

"If a customer is looking for something obscure, they can get it at Oliver's," says Scott. "Our mission is to carry everything we can fit into our stores." In fact, the retailer has one employee who devotes up to 30 hours per week handling shoppers' product requests. "We strive for a seven-day turnaround between when we are asked to having the product shipped and on the shelf," Scott continues.

Natural products, including food, bulk, supplements and personal care, are the store's backbone, comprising nearly one-third of total SKUs. These

items are integrated into shelf sets.

Produce, with nearly 175 organic fruits and vegetables, is known as the “heart and soul of the store,” notes Scott, due to Owner Steve Maass’ retail beginning as an operator of roadside fruit stands in San Francisco. After a stint at a local grocery chain, Food 4 Less, Maass and wife Ruth opened the original Oliver’s in Cotati in 1988. The chain has since grown from 12 workers to nearly 400 full- and part-timers at Cotati and the flagship Santa Rosa location, opened in 2000. Santa Rosa currently offers nearly 30,000 items and does about 17,000 weekly transactions.

Kitchens at both locations are staffed by chefs trained at the Culinary Institute of America or California Culinary Academy who churn out daily entrées, side dishes, soups, salads, meal components and desserts. In 2003, Oliver's implemented a home meal replacement program, which offers a daily selection of 30–35 prepackaged entrées made in-house. The retailer also features fresh sushi and a taqueria. Professional cakes and desserts are prepared fresh daily. Oliver’s bakery is a perennial winner at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair, where it competes against restaurant-quality pies, cakes and other baked goods.

Supporting local suppliers is a mainstay in every department. The cheese and wine selections both specialize in Sonoma County entries in addition to international products. The wine department offers 1,500 labels while cheese features in excess of 200 varieties, with an emphasis on American artisan cheese. *Contact: Steve Maass or Tom Scott, Oliver’s Market, 560 Montecito Center, Santa Rosa, CA 95409; 707.537.7123; Fax: 707.537.7269; www.oliversmarket.com.*—D.P.

PCC Natural Markets: Commitment to Community

In 1953, Puget Consumers Co-op (PCC) began as a food-buying club for 15

families. Today, those families have multiplied into nearly 40,000 members—along with thousands of non-members—who shop in one of the seven store locations in the greater Seattle area.

From humble beginnings, PCC has grown to a retailer selling more than 26,000 food and non-food products. It defines itself not solely as a consumer cooperative, but also as a specialty retailer, natural foods store and a company with amenities that have made possible its continuous growth. “We still adhere to the principals of being a co-op, but we are also a competitive food retailer. We balance what it takes to be a co-op and what it takes to be economically viable,” says Diana Crane, community & public relations manager.

PCC's mission is to create a cooperative, sustainable environment for members and shoppers in which natural and organic foods thrive. Its four-pronged approach includes:

1. High-quality products with a range of natural food and personal care products that reflect positive choices for shoppers and the environment
2. A knowledgeable and empowered staff of 645 employees trained to understand PCC's products and expected to provide stellar customer service
3. Demonstrated commitment to sustain-able business practices
4. Ongoing community outreach and education.

“Our success also comes from our dedication to the three elements of our triple bottom line of sustainability—encompassing economics, social mission and environmental stewardship,” remarks CEO Tracy Wolpert.

Through donations, sponsorships and involvement in neighborhood projects, PCC has contributed more than \$500,000 to local community groups.

“When our customers purchase something at PCC, they know it is more than

just putting food on their table," says Crane. "Their dollars will be put back into the community—every dollar they spend supports the greater good." PCC celebrated record sales of \$89 million in 2004. Shopper donations purchased almost 32 tons of food for local food banks for one of its community support programs, Cash for the Hungry.

Socially conscious consumers that enjoy the wholesomeness of organic foods shop at PCC. In produce, shoppers can find anything from organic heirloom tomatoes to on-the-vine raisins. A full line of natural, preservative-free grocery products and a wide variety of deli items are also available.

One of the most important jobs of a PCC staff member is to make customers feel comfortable. Escorting people around aisles to locate items is not uncommon; allowing customers to try an unfamiliar product is encouraged. "Once a customer wanted a specific pie for a dinner party but wasn't sure how it tasted. We opened the box and cut her a slice," recalls Crane.

Staff knowledge and training is on-going. New hires attend PCC Natural Foods Kitchen program, a three-hour natural foods class and tour to introduce them to PCC's products, policies and expectations. "If they didn't know what tofu was before, they sure will after their training," says Crane.

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Jerry's Gourmet & More: All Things Italian

Italian super-deli Jerry's Gourmet & More began as a perfume and cosmetics merchant in an industrial neighborhood of northern New Jersey. That was until a 1993 trip to the food halls of Harrods of London and other renown European department stores showed Owner Gennaro (Jerry) Turci that cosmetics and gourmet food could successfully be merchandised

together.

Turci returned home to build his product mix from select confections to myriad imported pantry items, plus wine, a 300-variety cheese case, salumeria, bakery, gift baskets and deli counter turning out nearly 50 prepared entrées, sides, salads and sandwiches daily. Much is made in-house, from prepared meals and baked goods based on family recipes to homemade mozzarella to a line of store-brand pasta sauces and soups. A family-run enterprise insisting upon authenticity, Jerry even flies in relative/trained chef from Italy to personally instruct kitchen staff in preparing its offerings.

To read more about this retailer's passion for all things Italian, go to this month's Profile. jerryshomemade.com—D.P.