



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/PAT GREENHOUSE

Store manager Bill Jordan (left), with customer Juan Cintron, built his knowledge of Latin American foods through such chats.

JAMAICA PLAIN

A rising community, a good appetite

By Carin Zissis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Two things haven't changed in the 40 years since the Jamaica Theatre became a supermarket. One is the '60s-style storefront, which overlooks a sloping parking lot. The other is Bill Jordan.

The Jamaica Plain resident has remained the supermarket's manager through changes in owners and names, from Sklars to Supersave to today's Hi-Lo Foods.

Jordan also watched the Hyde Square area around Hi-Lo transform. When the store opened in 1964, the makeup of the neighborhood was Irish and Eastern European. Five years later, when Hispanics began moving to the area, Jordan started carrying Bustelo's coffee and Canilla rice. "They sold like crazy," says Jordan.

From that time on, Jordan built his knowledge of Latin American and Caribbean foods through customers. Expanding the variety of products became Jordan's life project. "Every day you can walk into a place and see a can of peas," he says. "I wanted to do something creative."

Today customers walking down the aisles can find root



The Hi-Lo store in Jamaica Plain has survived eight other stores in its chain by catering to Hispanic customers.

vegetables such as apio and malanga from Puerto Rico, Dominican melons like zapotes and mameys, thick corn tortillas called arepas from Colombia, desiccated potatoes called chuños from Peru, and maté tea from Argentina.

Hi-Lo's range draws people from beyond Jamaica Plain's borders. Ricardo Villon, executive chef and owner of the Peruvian-Brazilian restaurant Botucatu in the South End drives to Hi-Lo regularly for products he can't find elsewhere. "They have the round discs for empanada crusts,

and dried purple corn to make chicha morada, a Peruvian violet-colored soda," he explains.

While expanding the products carried by the store, Jordan learned Spanish and hired a mostly Hispanic staff. "It's like an extended family here," he says.

On a busy Saturday afternoon, the produce department is tight with traffic as customers stop to chat between bins piled with yuca and plantains. "I know a lot of the customers. It's like they're my children," says Cesar Morales, the assistant produce manager, who's been at Hi-Lo for 12 years,

since moving here from Puerto Rico.

Carlota Martinez, originally from El Salvador, has been a customer for more than 20 years, even after moving from Jamaica Plain to Hyde Park. "I find things I need more here," she explains, "like frijoles from Guatemala and El Salvador."

Originally one of nine chain stores owned by the Knapp family, this Hi-Lo's character helped it survive the others. In spite of concern that the Stop & Shop down the street would affect business, Hi-Lo maintains its following. "The Hispanic community keeps growing, and eats a lot," says Morales.

Susie Walsh, 23, who lives a few blocks away, says she prefers coming here. "It has a much better feeling of the community." "What we want to convey to customers is that this is their store," says Jordan. "If we don't carry something, we ask them to write it down and tell us as much as they can about it."

And he's always looking for something new. "What do we hope to carry next?" He smiles and says, "Something yet to be discovered."