



health off the shelf





AREA GROCERS HAVE MADE IT THEIR BUSINESS TO STEER SHOPPERS TOWARD GOOD-FOR-YOU FOODS.

story by anna dubrovsky
photography by heather mull

IF YOU SEE JOHN FIGLAR behind the meat counter at Pittsburgh's Whole Foods Market, you're in luck. He can answer almost any question about the wide selection of beef, pork, chicken and lamb. Just don't ask him to tell you his favorites. The meat department team leader hasn't eaten meat for more than a year.

"Isn't it ironic?" he quips.

Giving up meat – as well as eggs, cheese and other dairy products – has served Figlar well. He's 100 pounds lighter and no longer needs a slew of medications for diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. He's also a poster boy for "Health Starts Here," the grocery chain's new program to help employees and shoppers make healthier choices. "Customers ask me all the time, 'Wow, you've lost a lot of weight. What are you doing?'" says the 47-year-old Pittsburgh native, who learned what his body needed during a 10-day residential program in California – all on the company dime.

Whole Foods isn't the only grocer that has made it a mission to promote healthy eating. Giant Eagle, Pittsburgh's homegrown supermarket chain, has plunked dieticians in more than a dozen stores. Its massive Market District store in Robinson Township boasts a hydroponic garden that yields lettuce and herbs year-round. More and more grocers are taking pains to steer people toward good-for-you foods, which may in the end be good for business. "I'm pretty confident that it will make an impact on sales because I see more and more people who are definitely interested in making healthier choices with their food," says Mark Staley, healthy eating specialist at the Whole Foods on Centre Avenue. His observation is backed by research. A recent survey by The Futures Company, a trends consultancy, found that 71 percent of consumers agree with the statement: "I wish grocery stores would make it easier to determine what foods are healthier than others."





Nutritionist Desk at Giant Eagle Market District Robinson.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of consumers' growing appetite for healthy options is the fact that Pittsburgh's East End Food Co-op, which has emphasized natural products for decades, plans to expand within two years.

Each grocer has a unique personality and approach to educating consumers. Here's what you can expect at three of Pittsburgh's favorites.

EAST END FOOD CO-OP

IN THE '70S, PITTSBURGH had several co-ops dedicated to providing members with natural foods. East End Food Co-op is the lone survivor. But it's not just surviving. With nearly 9,000 active members, money in the bank, and plans to open a second store in an undetermined location, the natural foods grocer is seriously thriving.

The North Point Breeze co-op, which is due for a renovation this summer, is the smallest of the three grocers. Its cafe is quaint by comparison to those at Whole Foods and Giant Eagle Market District stores. But it's the place to go for hard-to-find foods, including locally produced cheeses, raw milk, small-batch salad dressings, and vegan cinnamon buns. Can't find a favorite product? The co-op's buyers will be happy to get it – provided it contains no artificial sweeteners or flavors, hormones, antibiotics, hydrogenated oils or other unmentionables. "We find out about a lot of great new products through members," says Berry Breene, outreach coordinator. "They'll say, 'Hey, I was just in California, and I found this great vegan cheese.' So we'll try to accommodate." Likewise, the store has pulled products off its shelves because members found them

in conflict with its mission.

The co-op is zealous about promoting local suppliers. In fact, local growers are exempt from its organic-only produce policy. Labels identify local products throughout the store, and if you buy one, you'll find a note of acknowledgment at the bottom of your receipt.

It's also committed to educating shoppers. It publishes everything from recipes to articles about genetically engineered foods in its monthly newsletters, *The Co-operator*, which is mailed to members and available in the store. Look on the back page for a schedule of workshops on topics including healing foods, feng shui and backyard composting.

GIANT EAGLE

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, Giant Eagle hired dietician Judy Dodd for a novel initiative: the installation of touch-screen kiosks designed to help shoppers plan healthier meals. Well ahead of its time, the project fizzled after a year. "I lasted a lot longer," Dodd says.

She stayed with the family-owned supermarket chain because it cared about nutrition before caring about nutrition was popular. Now, she says, "wellness is in." And Giant Eagle is once again taking a novel approach to educating shoppers. Over the last two and half years, the regional grocer has transformed the pharmacy sections of more than a dozen stores into wellness centers where shoppers can find a wide variety of nutritional supplements, natural skincare and beauty products, and even organic eats. In addition to a pharmacist, they can now consult with a licensed aesthetician or registered dietician.

"You can go to other supermarkets and get all the free samples of food you want, but where else can you find qualified professionals who are giving you an unbiased opinion?" says Dodd, Giant Eagle's corporate nutritionist and a past president of the American Dietetic Association. "These are ethically practicing professionals. They are not salespeople. They're not saying, 'Here, drink this because this is the best coffee made.' There's a big difference."

In addition to answering questions in the wellness centers, Giant Eagle's dieticians offer personal counseling sessions, group classes and store tours.

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They rove the aisles with a mobile cooking station, conducting demonstrations and explaining the health benefits of certain foods. You might find them discussing omega-3 fatty acids in the seafood section or whole grains near the quinoa. “As a registered dietician, it’s exactly what I always dreamed of being able to do – of being able to be available to the public,” Dodd says.

WHOLE FOODS MARKET

EARLY IN ITS 31-YEAR HISTORY, Whole Foods adopted several “core values.” Chief among them: “Selling the highest quality natural and organic products available.” Guided by these values, the company prospered, growing from one store in Austin, Texas, to about 300 in North America and the United Kingdom. But in 2009, as the health care debate raged in Congress and around the country, the grocer decided it wasn’t enough to stock the healthiest foods. It also needed to inspire interest in those foods. The company took the rare step of adding a core value: “Promoting the health of our stakeholders through healthy eating education.”

Last year, its education efforts were largely directed at employees. It offered to increase their 20 percent discount on purchases by as much as 10 percent if they satisfied certain criteria for blood pressure, cholesterol levels and body mass index.

Now the education program known as Health Starts Here is increasingly geared at shoppers. Take a stroll through Pittsburgh’s Whole Foods and you’ll find the purple Health Starts Here logo scattered among the prepared foods, where it identifies dishes that are low in fat and salt and high in nutritional value. In the bakery, you’ll find it on some grainy loaves and even on a couple of quick breads sweetened with dates or bananas. In the produce section, where everything meets the grocer’s criteria for healthy food, you’ll find Aggregate Nutrient Density Index (ANDI) scores linked to the concentration of micronutrients in a particular food. Kale scores a perfect 1,000.

Where you won’t find high-scoring foods is the meat department. Health Starts Here is based on the work of nutrition experts including Dr. Joel Fuhrman,

Dr. John A. McDougall, *The China Study* author T. Colin Campbell, and firefighter and *The Engine 2 Diet* author Rip Esselstyn, all of whom advocate a plant-based diet. “They’re not saying you have to go on any particular diet,” explains Mark Staley, one of two healthy eating specialists at the Pittsburgh store. “They’re saying look at food differently. You have to look at food for its nutritional value.”

His favorite part of the job is interacting with the next generation of shoppers. As part of Health Starts Here, Staley has shared the principles of healthy eating with students at the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School, the Mon Valley School, Propel McKeesport, and other area schools. “They’re starting to tell their parents, ‘Don’t eat that.’ And they come and tell me, ‘You know, I told my mom she shouldn’t drink diet soda anymore.’ I just love that they know that and can make some choices.”

John Filgar, Whole Foods Market.

