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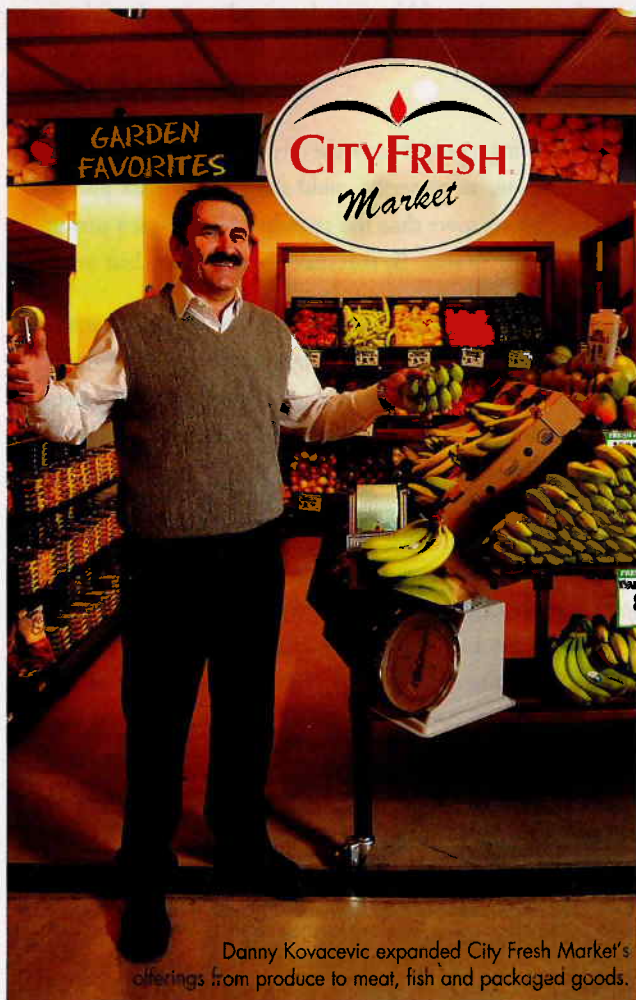


Pastoral
Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine
anchors rail station specialty food
destination **CHICAGO**
FRENCH MARKET

Chicago French Market can service 110,000 commuters who pass through the West Loop MetraStation each day.



PHOTOS BY JIM FROST



Danny Kovacevic expanded City Fresh Market's offerings from produce to meat, fish and packaged goods.

Chicago French Market

Just more than a year old, this rail station marketplace offers 15,000 square feet of meats, cheeses, pastas and other specialties, and anchors a retail space that serves commuters, area workers and residents alike.

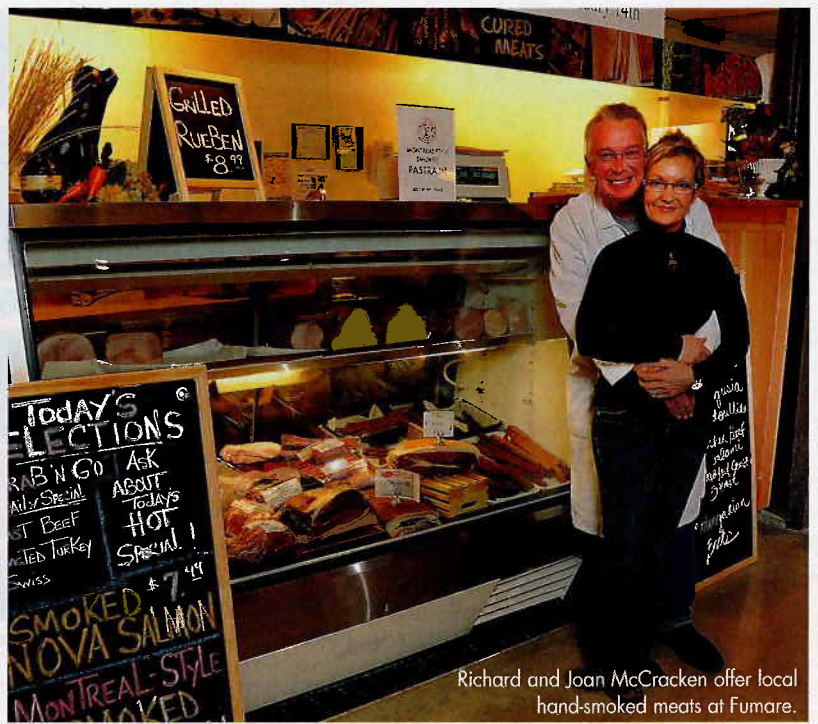
BY DENISE PURCELL

Though popular in Europe, a food market located in a commuter rail hub was a new retail concept to Chicago when the French Market opened in the West Loop's Metra Ogilvie Transportation Center in December 2009.

The MetraStation rail center is situated in what is primarily a business district where an estimated 500,000 people work in offices that include the Boeing and Starbucks regional headquarters. Additionally, nearly 40,000 people are residents of the neighborhood. Chicago French Market is designed to attract these locals, as well as serve the 110,000 commuters who pass through the station each day, with grab-and-go breakfast or lunch items or ingredients for dinner. The 26 vendors offer a diverse range of products from local smoked meats to air-dried pasta to European pastries to raw foods.



Customers shop Pastoral's selection of 100 cheeses.



Richard and Joan McCracken offer local hand-smoked meats at Fumare.

THE BEGINNING

The Chicago French Market anchors a larger \$30 million, 100,000-square-foot MetraMarket retail development project at the rail station run by U.S. Equities Realty, a Chicago-based commercial real estate firm. (The development currently includes retailers such as CVS and Lavazza.) U.S. Equities CEO and founder Bob Wislow envisioned the French Market after visiting marketplaces in cities around the world. "I'm a market aficionado. Any time I'd travel, I'd visit all types of markets—fish, produce, flower. I'd wanted to find a way to bring that concept to Chicago," Wislow says. "I wanted it to have a European market feel so people could leave their home or office, come to shop and feel they'd taken a vacation somewhere."

When the rail station space became available, Wislow felt it was an ideal fit. "Markets in train stations expand your customer base dramatically. We have unique, artisan producers, some of which don't exist in the suburbs. With our customers going out to many different suburbs, vendors can reach all of those areas plus local residents and nearby office workers," he says.

The French Market was more than a decade in the making. Nearly 10 years ago U.S. Equities won a proposal to use the two-block space that had been used for storage by the railroad. Wislow contacted the Bensedoun family, who manage 13 outdoor markets in Chicagoland as well as three more around the U.S. and 80 in Paris, to co-develop the project. While U.S. Equities is a 50 percent owner of the French Market, Bensedoun USA is in charge of operation and management.

"The concept came from our experience with the outdoor markets," says Sebastien Bensedoun, whose first retail entry near Chicago was an outdoor market in Wheaton, Ill., which opened in

CHICAGO FRENCH MARKET

131 N. Clinton St. • Chicago, IL • frenchmarketchicago.com

OPENED: December 2009

TOTAL SPACE: 15,000 square feet

NUMBER OF VENDORS: 26

HOURS OF OPERATION

Mon.–Fri.: 7 a.m.–7 p.m.; Sat.: 8:30 a.m.–6 p.m.

(Vendor hours vary but all are open by 10 a.m.)

1997 and grew to more around the region. "People kept asking us when we were going to do something year-round."

THE MARKET

The 15,000-square-foot space is open six days a week. Merchants are arranged in aisles of stalls and serve eat-in or takeout items such as crepes, coffee, sandwiches, sushi, cheese and pastries, plus products for cooking at home, gifts or party platters. A seating area in the back converts into community event space.

Vendors sign licensing agreements generally for a three-year term. Potential vendors are assessed for their fit with the market's high-quality concept, says Bensedoun. "We don't rent space just to rent it. You wind up with customers seeing things they don't want or selections that can bring down the rest of the market," he continues.

Chicago French Market also does not limit itself to single vendors selling particular product. "In some markets in France you might have three butcher stalls. As we get more demand we may add more similar vendors," Bensedoun adds. "We don't want to have just one option of each. We want customers to feel they have a choice."

"We offer some of the best 'fast food' in the Loop," says man-



From left: the Market's seating area converts into community event space; product offerings include salmon rolls, macarons from Vanille Patisserie and fresh produce.

Pastoral does a big lunchtime business as well as attracts many customers picking up cheese or wine for dinner. It offers nearly 100 cheeses with a focus on domestic artisan varieties and classic European styles.

ager Leslie Cahill. "We're not a chain. You have a person with passion and expertise here making the product."

Here is a look at some of the French Market's distinctive vendors. For a full list of merchants, visit frenchmarketchicago.com.

Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine: Latest Location for Chicago Cheesemonger

Though it has two other Chicago locations, this local cheese shop was one of the first vendors on board when the French Market opened and serves as one of its two anchors. (City Fresh Market is the other.) "It's helped us reach a whole new crowd," says Cristi Menard, store manager.

Pastoral does a big lunchtime business as well as attracts many customers picking up cheese or wine for dinner. The store has the same product selection as other Pastoral locations. The cheese counter is the same size, offering nearly 100 cheeses with a focus on domestic artisan varieties and classic European styles. Local is also emphasized, and includes cheese from Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan. Bestsellers, says Menard, include Pleasant Ridge Extra Reserve and Prairie Foods Farm.

Each Pastoral store's product mix is fine-tuned for the location. At the French Market, "we do a lot of grab and go for people in a hurry," says Menard. The retailer also offers individual cheese plates and canned beer and wine splits for eating and imbibing on the train.

The wine wall has 80 slots and is "Old World wine focused, to go with the French Market feel," says Menard. Pastoral offers a small selection of local wines such as some from Traverse City, Mich., as

well as local beers. "Beer and cheese pairings are at the forefront right now," she adds.

Rounding out the selection is an assortment of breads from local bakery Bennison's, crackers such as 34 Degrees, condiments such as The Gracious Gourmet Spiced Sour Cherry Spread and charcuterie such as Les Trois Petit Cochons foie gras and pâtés.

Fumare Meats & Deli: Local Cured and Smoked Meats and Sausages

Richard McCracken, owner of Fumare Meats & Deli, had worked as an investment banker, but dreamt of starting his own food business. His work put him in touch with Eastern European financial brokers who took him to their favorite local food spots and in time, he discovered several ethnic meat smokers around Chicago. Once Fumare (which means smoke in Italian) was conceived, McCracken decided all products would be hand smoked from Chicago purveyors. "The beauty of what we're doing is that we're using local vendors. We go to some suburbs but use no big names," says Joan McCracken, Richard's wife, who runs Fumare's front end. Two other full-timers complete the staff.

The McCrackens work with five to six smokers around Chicagoland, including Ream's Market, a specialty butcher in Elburn, Ill. The selection includes hams, sausages, bacons and a Montreal-style meat similar to pastrami that is cured, smoked, peppered and slow-cooked on site daily.

"This [market] atmosphere is great. It's personal, not like a supermarket. The vendor is the owner and there's nothing better than that connection," says Joan. "Some other vendors haven't been as successful because they don't get out there and talk to their customers," she adds. "You need to make it fun and inviting." For instance, to create reasons for an exchange with shoppers, Joan offers samples and also keeps mayonnaise and mustard on the side so she has a chance to ask customers if they'd like some.



Fumare opens at 7 a.m. to serve commuters. Bread and butter baguettes are a big breakfast seller. At lunch time, “the place turns into a food court,” says Joan, who offers sack lunches such as ham and cheese on ciabatta with European butter and lettuce.

Fumare will soon expand by 18 feet to make room for a kosher line, dry goods and more packaged meats. “We didn’t know there was a big kosher community here but now we’re addressing that,” notes Joan. “We’re happy to look for whatever [the customer] wants. There’s no ‘we don’t have it’ from our staff. For example, we don’t serve coffee but we’ll tell customers they can get some at Lavazza or at Flip Crepes.”

City Fresh Market: Grass-Fed Meats in an Old World Setting

The second anchor store of Chicago French Market and its largest vendor at 120 linear feet, City Fresh Market offers produce, meat, poultry and fish as well as to-go sandwiches, salads and cheese for lunch and dinner and ingredients such as condiments and sauces for a quick meal. “We offer convenience,” says Danny Kovacevic, who co-owns City Fresh with his brother Ray. “Everyone is in a hurry trying to catch their train. We started with fruit and vegetables and then added meat and fish, which are both big for dinner.”

Tallgrass Beef Co.’s 100 percent grass-fed beef is one of the merchant’s top sellers. “We have a decent demand for natural meats,” notes Kovacevic, who offers meats raised without antibiotics and hormones plus other meats including shish kebabs.

The French Market location is City Fresh’s second in Chicago. Since 2004 it has run an 8,000-square-foot full grocery store located on Devon Avenue. Kovacevic says he was drawn by the market’s Old World concept as well as its location and traffic. “I’m from Serbia and liked the European market feel,” he says.

In addition to Kovacevic, City Fresh has a staff of eight full- and part-time employees. The owners are currently considering expanding the space to grow their current selection.

More Merchants: Award-Winning Pastry Chef and Raw Foods

Other distinctive vendors include: Vanille Patisserie, a pastry shop that features chocolates, candies and other baked goods from Dimitri Fayard, the 2008 World Pastry Champion, and his wife, cake designer Keli Fayard; Raw (Raising Awareness Worldwide), which offers packaged condiments as well as about 20 prepared foods such as a salmon pâté sandwich on Bavarian sunflower bread and snacks such as GoRaw flax bars; and Provos, which specializes in old-fashioned European baked goods and recently expanded its space to bake on site.

FUTURE FOCUS

Most of the sales so far have come from commuters and office workers but that may be changing. There is a push to reach out to those who live in the area. “Residents may be our biggest base in the future,” says Wislow.

“Our lunch business has been tremendous and our goal is to make the dinner rush as big,” he continues. “You have people who are used to supermarket shopping where they load up for the week. Part of our role is to help them learn about fresh shopping.”

“It’s not an overnight thing to change people’s attitudes,” says Bensidoun. “When they need to catch their train they are in a hurry and don’t always take time to shop and relax. Instead they seem to stop at a supermarket in the suburbs when they get home. We want to get them familiar with a more European style of shopping,” he says.

Cahill has seen similar learning curves while working in outdoor markets and notes it’s usually a three-year period to shift shopping habits. “A lot of people come in because they’re curious,” she says. “But each day we get one more person who says ‘I’m going to start to go every day.’” **|SFM|**

Denise Purcell is editor of Specialty Food Magazine.