

EXCLUSIVE RESEARCH: PG's Annual Retail Meat Review reveals changing habits

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PREPARED FOODS

Vintage Grocers, Westlake Village, Calif.

Our goal is for a guest to experience something new in the prepared foods department, whether it be a hot chili or a fig or something's that's uber-local, and then go seek that out in the produce department, meat department or the grocery department," says Melissa Darpino, brand ambassador for Vintage Grocers, with three stores in Southern California. "I come from the restaurant world, so having your source material there at your fingertips, whenever you need it or want to try something new or experiment, is the best of both worlds."

Upon opening its third location in 2018, Vintage Grocers took the opportunity to revamp its prepared foods program. The new menu, introduced at the Pacific Palisades location, will roll out to the Malibu and Westlake Village stores in the first or second quarter of this year. To create the menu, which uses ingredients that can be sourced from the stores' other departments — about 75 percent of the ingredients are directly from the store — the company hired a consulting chef and interviewed customers to find out what they wanted from the department.

"We have deli-standard favorites that are now prepared in a way that is elevated from your standard fare," Darpino explains. For example, the stores offer a pastrami sandwich that tastes like one from a traditional Jewish deli, and instead of tuna salad, the menu offers tuna conserva.

The revamped department includes a poké bar that has proved popular, and an ancient-grain bowl station that offers products from a variety of influences, including the Middle East and Asia. The station offers about 20 items to create a custom bowl, and includes vegetables from local farmers, as well as international items, like Korean short ribs.



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—Melissa Darpino,
brand ambassador

The stores also do a booming business for breakfast. The combination of the popular organic juice bar, coffee bar and deli-prepared grab-and-go breakfast items has "people lined up for breakfast in all three of our stores as we open," Darpino notes.

"Many folks are drawn to the grab-and-go department to try something new, and then search the rest of the store for that item," she adds. "Dinners now can be comprised of things from grab-and-go and things from the center of the store. That's just how people shop now. So [prepared foods are] a very important part of our store for that reason."



Woodlands Market, Kentfield, Calif.

Our philosophy is pretty simple," says Jennifer DeBonis, foodservices manager for Woodlands Market, which has three stores in the Bay Area. "We try and offer a really high-quality product made with great ingredients. We try to be really conscious of the environment as much as we possibly can. We have a really big commitment to the communities that we're in."

Some of those products include an Asian chicken salad, spaghetti with meat sauce, house beef or turkey chili, and house guacamole. When the stores roll out new products, a dedicated demo person helps introduce them to customers and does cross-promotions with the other departments within the store, where customers can find the ingredients to prepare an item at home. "We really believe in getting things in people's mouths," DeBonis adds.

Woodlands Market uses a central commissary to produce all of the packaged grab-and-go cold items for all three locations, with department managers having the authority to order the products that best fit their store's demographic. All hot foods are still prepared in store.

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—Don Santa, owner

"We have a great relationship with a lot of the sources of our products, and it also helps accentuate the quality that we're able to deliver year in and year out," observes Don Santa, owner of Woodlands Market. Prepared foods make up about a quarter of Woodland Market's sales and one-third to one-half of the profits, Santa adds. "It is a signature department," he says. "Many people do this pretty well, but when we first started doing it three decades ago, it was somewhat revolutionary, and we kind of set the standard in our area. I think to this day, we are still leading the charge. It has defined us on a level that has kept us in front of the pack."