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Grocers harvesting a new market in Aurora

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THE AURORA SENTINEL

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AURORA | Freshness is in among Aurora grocery shoppers.

In just over a year, three new stores specializing in fresh, low cost produce have popped up in Aurora, and the growth among these "natural grocers" is coming at a time when a few traditional supermarkets have pulled out of the city.

The first store to open in Aurora was a Sunflower Market in the Cornerstar Shopping Center in October 2008. This summer, Blazer Street Market opened at East Sixth Avenue and Chambers Road. And last week, Sprouts Farmer's Market opened a location at the Gardens on Havana.

"Everybody is getting more cost conscience and the whole organic and natural movement continues to grow," said Mike Gilliland, the CEO and founder of Sunflower Markets. "I think all of us are at the nexus of those two developments."

This year, Sunflower, which started with one store Albuquerque, N.M. in 2002, added seven new stores, bringing their total to 27. The store opened that 27th store early this month in Tuscon, Ariz

"Percentage wise, that's fairly dramatic growth," said Gilliland, whose company now has stores in six southwestern states. "Business has been pretty good."

While business has been robust in Aurora for the natural grocers, it has come at a time when some supermarkets are struggling in the area.

In August, Albertson's announced it was closing five metro area stores, including one on Parker Road near the Denver and Aurora border. The company also said it was closing an Aurora distribution center.

In late 2008, a Safeway store on East Colfax Avenue and Ironton Street closed it's doors.

This summer, when Blazer Street Market came to town, it opened up shop in a building that Albertson's had left years ago.

Harry Blazer, the founder of Blazer Street Market, said the growth of natural grocers in Aurora mirrors the industry's growth around the nation.

"Aurora is just part of the expansion strategy," said Blazer, who has been in the industry for 30 years, previously running a chain of Harry's Farmer's Markets in metro Atlanta.

Blazer credits the success of Whole Foods with sparking the growth in the industry.

Whole Foods started with just one location in Austin, Texas in 1980 and now has more than 270 locations, according to the company's website.

"Whole Foods proved that catering to people that are concerned about what they eat and are health conscious, you can build a very substantial business on that," Blazer said. "But, they also had a reputation for being expensive."

Where stores like Sunflower and Sprouts have been successful is in catering to people who want fresh and natural produce, but don't want to or can't afford to pay Whole Foods prices, he said.

"Sprouts and Sunflower are basically a reduced cost version — they spend less money on their stores so they can sell things at a lower price," he said.

Blazer's Aurora location, which is the first Blazer's Street Market, sold only fresh produce when it opened.

The store doesn't use a warehouse for it's produce like most grocers, instead the produce is delivered straight to the store by farmers, Blazer said, something that he said cuts down on overhead and means lower prices.

"My whole goal is to make fresh accessible and affordable," he said.

This week Blazer's Street Market added an expanded deli and dairy section, among a few other changes.

Blazer said that while business has been booming for natural grocers, the big grocery chains are starting to move into the market with increased focus on natural and fresh produce.



Alissa Maslyn shops at Sprouts on Oct. 6 at The Gardens on Havana in Aurora. In the past year, three grocers in Aurora have opened with an emphasis on fresh produce. Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel



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"For a long time the supermarket industry stood by and let Whole Foods create an empire," he said. "Now everybody is saying, 'Hey, we want some of that!'"

Gilliland said Sunflower is seeing increased competition from similar stores like Sprouts and other natural grocers with a similar business model.

"Everything has gotten much more competitive, so that's been challenging," he said.

But he didn't seem too concerned with the larger supermarket chains focusing on natural and fresh foods and infringing on Sunflower's market share.

"That whole effort is kind of hit or miss with those guys," he said. "They make a splash for a while then they pull back. They are certainly carrying more and put more emphasis on it, but it doesn't effect us that much."

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