

Berkeley's Superbowl: Venerable market, and its shoppers, adjusting to larger home

**By Victoria Colliver
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BERKELEY - A longtime Berkeley Bowl customer, who calls himself "Dave wedding dress" was wearing a tie-dyed skirt as he cruised the aisles of the store's new location. He described the experience as overwhelming.

Sure, the new store is nearly twice as big as the old Berkeley Bowl and the aisles are wide enough to avoid locking carts or brushing body parts with strangers.

And instead of the huge produce array, mixed with a limited offering of bulk and packaged foods, the new Bowl offers produce-a-plenty, plus paper towels, name-brand cereal, fabric softener - everything found at a full-service, conventional grocery store.

The Berkeley Bowl, the beloved market housed in a former bowling alley since 1977, moved on March 26 to its spacious new store directly across the street at 2020 Oregon St., the site of a former Safeway store. The store, rebuilt from the ground up, continues to draw a devoted following of shoppers, who travel from other cities and counties to peruse the store's legendary produce section.

But wedding dress, like a few of his fellow Bowl faithfuls, doesn't want conventional.

"Personally, I'm not interested in major brand products," he said, explaining he was able to find everything he needed at the old Bowl. "I live kind of an alternative lifestyle, so there's not much else I really need."

While that view may reflect one portion of this city's historically opinionated populace, the Berkeley Bowl's move to bigger, better digs is a long-fought victory for a neighborhood that has been without a full-service market for five years. Nonetheless, the Bowl and its shoppers are going through a period of adjustment that is oh-so

"Berkeley."

"With such institutions in a city, particularly in Berkeley, people have very strong feelings about them of love and hate," explained David Trachtenberg, architect of the new store. "There are things they hate about these old places - they hated the parking situation, they hated the narrow aisles and the fact there was no sort of order. But on the other hand, they wanted it to remain the same."

Crowds, however, have been streaming into the new Bowl since its opening, in such numbers people have reported waiting as long as 40 minutes at the check-out.

Most shoppers marvel at the selection of produce and other goods, the convenience of not having to go to another store for staples, the increased supply of cash registers and longer store hours.

Those shoppers are celebrating the new Bowl for bringing something to the south Berkeley neighborhood, clustered around Shattuck Avenue and Adeline Street, that has been lacking for more than five years: a full-service grocery store.

"This is the only grocery store in my neighborhood. I'm pretty happy I don't have to make many trips (to other stores) anymore," said Jennifer Sherman, who has shopped at the Bowl for about a year.

So why would anyone yearn for the former claustrophobic site, with its narrow aisles, its old concrete slab floor, and a lack of charm so distinctive it was sort of charming? Does anyone really miss the fact the Bowl closed by 7 p.m. weekdays and was not open Sundays, turning a Saturday trip into a collective shopping experience for the produce-conscious masses? (The new store is open from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and on Sundays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.).

"There was a funkiness about the old place that was sort of attractive," said shopper Fred Johnson, wistfully. His concern continues: "There's a general trend toward bigger and bigger. This brings about the question of whether this trend will eventually pave over areas where the fruits and vegetables sold in this store are grown."

The south Berkeley neighborhood has been without a grocery store since Safeway closed the doors of its undersized, circa 1960 store in November 1994. At that time, Berkeley Bowl founders Glenn and Diane Yasuda considered taking over the old Safeway site at 2020 Oregon St., located on an oddly shaped plot bounded by Adeline Street and Shattuck Avenue. But Safeway was unwilling to sell the property and the Yasudas were not interested in a leasing arrangement.

When Safeway announced its intention to lease the site to MacFrugal's, a discount variety store, the neighborhood objected with vehemence.

"The implication of leasing it to MacFrugal's was that it was a second-rate neighborhood appropriate for a distressed goods store," explained Dave Fogarty, community development project coordinator for the city of Berkeley.

The neighborhood then formed a group - the Community Committee for a Full Service Supermarket - to fight for a store. From 1994 to 1997, several grocery stores considered occupying the site.

At one point, Lucky Stores was interested, but it didn't want to lease from arch rival Safeway, Fogarty said. Wild Oats got as far as the permitting process before the natural food store's management unexpectedly pulled out of the deal. So the store sat empty for years as a blight on the frustrated neighborhood until Safeway finally agreed to sell to Yasudas.

"They couldn't get anyone else interested in it so they (Safeway) made some special concessions," said Glenn Yasuda, who would not say how much he paid for the site other than that the price was knocked down "fairly substantially" from the initial offer. The city of Berkeley also helped ease the way by waiving many permitting and other bureaucratic requirements.

Bowing to the requests of the neighborhood, Yasuda agreed to turn the store into a full-service market. This was a big change for Yasuda, who honed his produce-selecting skills working seven summers at Oakland's Wholesale Produce Market and counts the late Tom Fujimoto of Berkeley's famed Monterey Market among his mentors.

"The transition is not an easy one for us," admitted Yasuda, a remarkably youthful 65-year-old who typically starts his day at 3 a.m. and works until mid-morning before returning to the store at 6 p.m. for the second shift of his day. Since the new store opened, Yasuda's hours have been even longer, sometimes reaching 18 hours a day.

While he knew produce inside and out, learning how to manage a full-service grocery store, complete with a deli, a sit-down cafe and non-food products like paper goods, has been challenging.

Yasuda estimates at least half the old store was devoted to produce and now that percentage is about 25 to 30 percent, although the new produce section is actually larger. The Bowl reportedly has the largest produce section in California.

Increasing the store's square footage from about 20,000 square feet to 44,000, making it Berkeley's largest grocery store, has meant the Bowl has had to double its staff from about 50 to 100 employees.

Some customers have complained about the slow checkers and inexperienced counter employees, but Yasuda explained there is a learning curve, especially in the labor-intensive process of checking out produce and learning the nuances of fresh meat and fish.

"We've been getting a lot of knocks from customers saying we're too much like a Safeway or a Lucky. They don't understand that's why we're here," said the store's general manager, Dan Kataoka, who has worked with the Yasudas from almost the beginning. "We brought everything we had over there (the old store), and we've enlarged everything."

In the age of megachain supermarkets like Safeway and Lucky, independent grocery stores like the Berkeley Bowl manage to survive and stay competitive by joining cooperatives or buying through wholesalers. The Bowl is part of Certified Grocers of California, one of state's largest coops with 2,700 stores in California, Nevada and Arizona.

The California Grocers Association, a trade group for the state's food industry, does not track

the number of independents, but reports they are alive and kicking.

"It's still tough to be an independent. But independents tend to thrive when they find their own niche," said David Heylen, spokesman for the group. "They tend to be a little more responsive to the local community."

Sensitive to the reaction of its loyal customers and eager to keep costs down, the Bowl's founders took special precautions to ease the transition from old Bowl to new Bowl.

Trachtenberg, the store's architect, said he tried to retain much of the bare-bones style of the old Bowl, with its concrete floors and exposed beams.

"We consciously tried to maintain the informal, ad hoc quality of old place," he said. "There's a kind of honesty about the building - exposed concrete, factory fluorescent lighting. It's a modest, hard-working and handsome building."

The new Bowl is part of a larger neighborhood transformation. Any Mountain sporting goods will lease the old Bowl site from the Yasudas. The process of gutting and renovating the store is expected to be completed by the middle of this summer.

Expected to take a little longer will be the conversion of the Rite Aid, formerly Thrifty / Payless, into a Walgreens Pharmacy. The Rite Aid, which is located on the other side of Oregon Street from the new Bowl, closed in January after the company lost the bid on the site to Walgreens. Berkeley architect Marcy Wong, who is handling the complete renovation of the Walgreens, hopes to have the new store up and running within a year.

Parking in the area remains a problem, and it may get tighter once the pharmacy opens since some shoppers are using Rite Aid's parking lot while it is closed.

Parking spaces in the new Bowl's lot have increased to 109 spaces from the 66-space lot the Bowl leased from Safeway's property subsidiary. The city of Berkeley also agreed to make the block of Oregon Street adjacent to the store one way to increase parking and ease some traffic woes.

Residents see the changes as a victory for a neighborhood they consider redlined, despite its nice, modest homes and the relatively high household income of \$43,000 a year. The neighbors are relieved they finally have a grocery store, and that feeling will be complete once the pharmacy returns.

"We may one of the very few examples of a community working in partnership with city agencies to bring back a supermarket to a location that has been deserted," said Max Anderson, a founding member of the Community Committee for a Full-Service Supermarket. "When you look around the Bay Area, you'll look around and see a lot of hulking shells of supermarkets. And they're not supermarkets anymore."

While Anderson has heard nothing but raves about the new store, he surmised there may be a difference between what some Bowl customers want and what the residents need.

"A lot of people shopped at the Berkeley Bowl out of preference and many people shopped at the old Safeway out of necessity," he said. "But they'll all get along fine." <

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