

25

STORES TO VISIT BEFORE YOU DIE

GREAT SUPERMARKETS, FROM AUSTIN TO AMSTERDAM

By Pete Russell and Ron Margulis

Rotterdam's Markthal

GOING ON A TRIP SOON? IF SO, SURELY YOU'LL visit a few local food stores. Call it an addiction or just part of the job, everyone in grocery checks out stores when they travel. So, which are the must-see stores? We surveyed a dozen global grocery magazine editors, food-retail experts and retail analysts from firms such as IGD and Kantar. Here are 25 stores for your bucket list.

EUROPE

MAD COOPERATIVET (CENTRAL STATION)

Copenhagen, Denmark

Rail travellers won't have trouble finding this 8,600-sq.-ft. shop. It's inside Copenhagen's Central Station mall. Opened last March by Co-op Danmark, its design mixes neon lights, marble walls and industrial shelves. Selection includes healthy and organic meals, free

tap water and a vegetable butcher. Co-op Danmark uses the store to pilot products that later land in its other banners. Best time to visit: weekdays at 2 p.m., when Danish broadcaster TV2 does a cooking show from the store floor.

MARKTHAL

Rotterdam, the Netherlands

None of the world's public markets is as bold as the horseshoe-shaped Markthal. Opened two years ago, it's been dubbed the "Sistine Chapel of produce." Massive images of fruit tumble across a vaulted ceiling overlooking 96 food stalls. The 11-storey structure houses more than 200 apartments, whose residents simply go downstairs to shop.

WAITROSE (KING'S CROSS)

London, England

Britain's upscale grocer Waitrose is beloved by average blokes and royals alike

(Duchess Kate's a customer). The retailer's newest outlet, opened in September, may be its best. Situated in King's Cross, with its 67 acres of homes, offices and shops in central London, the store features a strong food-to-go offer, wine bar and a cooking school where the local office crowd can take part in lunchtime cooking sessions. All in all, a superb job "demonstrating Waitrose's quality credentials," notes Gavin Rothwell, retail insight manager at IGD.

ALBERT HEIJN XL

Eindhoven, the Netherlands

If this store were a movie, critics would give it two thumbs up. "Among the five best supermarkets currently trading in Europe," Kantar Retail analyst Bryan Roberts crowed after a tour. Opened last February by big Dutch grocer Albert Heijn, merchandising units are a combination of wood frames and barnboard,

while neon lights pull the eye to key departments such as cheese and a tapas bar. The effect is traditional and modern at the same time. Or, as Roberts notes, “nearly flawless.”

CRU

Overijse, Belgium

Belgian grocer Colruyt is a soft discounter, known for austere environments and low prices. So big surprise last year when it unveiled Cru, dedicated to fresh food, coffee, wine and craft-food vendors. Cru (“raw” in French) resembles a covered market with locally baked breads and produce that varies with the season. But it’s not all old school. Tablets on shopping carts let customers scan and pay.

INTERSPAR HOFLADEN (SILLPARK)

Innsbruck, Austria

Attempts to reinvent the staid European hypermarket have been mixed. Tesco’s eatery-laden Extra, in Watford, England, got mostly positive reviews. Carrefour’s Lite Brite-inspired Planet in France floundered. Watford is worth a look-see, but we also recommend Interspar Austria’s first crack at hypermarket reinvention in 17 years. Opened in Innsbruck in October, the 38,000-sq.-ft. store has a conventional supermarket feel, plus enticing extras such as a 1,000-item spice department, including some from Kloster Gut Aich, a famed Austrian monastery. The store’s farm shop carries products from Innsbruck-area vendors.

JUMBO FOODMARKT

Breda & Amsterdam, the Netherlands

To hear the experts talk, you’re best to book a flight *right now* to see Jumbo Foodmarkt, either in Breda or Amsterdam. It contains “the best foodservice counters in the history of modern retailing,” says Kantar’s Roberts, with superb merchandising, adjacencies and graphics throughout. Amid a fixture of tomatoes, for instance, Roberts found chilled mozzarella. In the centre store, yellow goalposts around sections of aisle fixtures drew customers closer. All this from a chain that only a few years ago was known as a mediocre, everyday low-price player with 3% Dutch food retail market share. Today, Jumbo is the country’s second largest with 14%.

TESCO ERITH, London, England

A visit to any store on this list is as easy as a plane ticket and passport. Neither

will get you into Tesco Erith. It’s a “dark store” used by Britain’s largest grocer to fulfil online orders—up to 4,000 a day thanks to robots that pick items, then whiz them in totes down conveyor belts. Human pickers still help in the frozen section. It’s the Willy Wonka of supermarkets: fascinating, but a little terrifying to think of as the future of food.

AFRICA/MIDDLE EAST

WOOLWORTHS WATERSTONE

Somerset West, South Africa

Fifty kilometres from Cape Town, Waterstone is Woolworths’ flagship store and winner of the 2014 best worldwide supermarket design award by the Association of Retail Environments. Among the standout features: a 107-foot entryway, store-within-a-store setup and rustic display units of reclaimed wood. A

neat twist: a coffee stand where baristas expertly quiz customers about their java quaffing preferences, then mix coffee beans for a unique sample that can then be purchased, whole bean or ground.

SPINNEYS, Beirut, Lebanon

Many grocers provide shoppers with a place to sit and relax. Spinneys’ Achrafieh Street store goes one better, offering its top loyalty cardholders a private lounge to enjoy a coffee, read the paper or watch TV while their purchases are put together. Founded by a British army officer stationed in Egypt in the 1920s, Spinneys bills itself as the largest retailer in the Middle East and North Africa. The Achrafieh store covers 53,000 sq. ft. on three floors with groceries, household appliances, wine and cigars.

Clockwise from top: Mad Cooperativet; Waitrose; Albert Heijn XL





CAN



USA



ASIA

CANADA

LOBLAWS (MAPLE LEAF GARDENS) Toronto

Make no mistake, Loblaw's comeback after a decade of mediocrity starts with this store's delightfully messy mix of hot-food stations, deli, patisserie and more amid colourfully painted walls and memorabilia from the Gardens days as a hockey shrine. Many elements, from bold signs to the radiant orange floor, have since gone into other Loblaws, but this one, opened in 2011, is the masterpiece. A minor miracle: there's finally a winner in Maple Leaf Gardens.

IGA DES SOURCES

Cap Rouge, Que.

Is it a museum or a supermarket? Hard to tell. The 43,000-sq.-ft. store's imposing façade of grey stone and light-stained pine is meant to blend in with the surrounding forest. Inside, abstract art hangs on walls and from the ceiling while stylish light fixtures are customized for each department. No wonder Cirque du Soleil was on hand for the store's grand opening in 2009.

LONGO'S (LEASIDE), Toronto

Longo's has gotten pretty good over the

past few years at figuring out how to put stores into tight urban spaces. Its brilliant basement Maple Leaf Square store, which opened in 2010, had to contend with 60 pillars supporting the tower above. More recently, a Market store was neatly squeezed into Imperial Oil's former head office. Longo's best attempt at urban accommodation is its Leaside store, situated in an old locomotive repair shop. The retailer made the most of the red-brick building with 40-foot-high ceilings. Don't forget to go make the trip up to the mezzanine, where a licensed Longo's restaurant awaits.

ASIA

JASON'S (ORCHARD)

Singapore

Jason's is a one-off store by owner Dairy Farm aimed at selling gourmet products. "Knockout counters and a wide range of premium grocery products are available," notes Nick Miles, head of Asia-Pacific, international research at IGD. The store employs a store manager from the U.K. for his expertise and often runs weekend events for shoppers to try products. And did we mention underneath the store is an impressive liquor cellar with wine up to \$4,000 per bottle?

OLE Shanghai, China

It was just a few years ago that China surpassed the U.S.

as the world's biggest grocery market. As China's middle class grows, it'll be fascinating to watch the local supermarket scene develop. One store to check out is CR Vanguard's Ole, with its outstanding store design, colourful decor and eye-catching food photos. The selection focuses on brands from around the world. New flavours are strongly promoted within and there's an in-store bakery, a wine vault and demonstration kitchen used on weekends to display products to shoppers.

CENTRAL FOOD HALL (CHIDLOM)

Bangkok, Thailand

Central Food Hall is a delightful mix of international flavours and brands that's located in the centre of Bangkok. The food hall regularly runs international events to promote products and also sports a cheese room to highlight its expertise in this fast-growth category in Thailand. Among the standout service areas is the meat counter, led by an Australian butcher.

Left: Loblaw's MLG eatery; beer time at Whole Foods Austin; Ole food hall in China

UNITED STATES

STEW LEONARD'S, Norwalk, Conn.

There are many reasons Stew Leonard's has the highest sales per foot (around \$1,300) of any American food store, even though it has only 2,200 items. A destination shop that has a farmer's market decor and features animatronic singing cows, fresh produce and milk boxes above the shelves, Stew's captures the customer's attention with great bakery aromas at the start of an Ikea-like shopping path and doesn't let go until after the great smells of the prepared food section just before the checkout.

DOROTHY LANE MARKET (OAKWOOD) Dayton, Ohio

As the oldest of Dorothy Lane's stores, the Oakwood location is where the company started its customer-first culture. Sure, just like the other two DLM stores, Oakwood has thousands of amazing specialty foods not found anywhere else. But it's the people offering samples, providing cooking advice, pairing wines with meals and carrying bags out to the car that make the store special.

WEGMANS (PITTSFORD) Rochester, N.Y.

A few years ago, actor Alec Baldwin couldn't get his mother to leave upstate New York for California because she said there are no Wegmans in the Golden State. Any Wegmans shopper will heartily agree. From the DIY peanut butter to the prepared food stations serving everything from pizza to three-course meals, Wegmans combines product assortment with fanatical customer service. And, while visiting the Pittsford store, make time for the Next Door Bar and Grill, the restaurant that Wegmans operates right across the street. It's just as amazing as the supermarket.

WHOLE FOODS (LAMAR), Austin, Texas

The flagship Whole Foods, in downtown Austin, is like a regular Whole Foods, but on steroids. At 80,000 sq. ft., it's more than twice the size of the average Whole Foods and has the added departments and product assortment to prove it. An extensive collection of craft beers and wines is housed in a large tasting area, there's a barbecue counter with more than two dozen seats, concierge service and even a spa area complete with a personal care technician.

HEB CENTRAL MARKET

(PRESTON ROYAL), Dallas

Central Market has the same commitment to quality product and outstanding service as its cousin, HEB Grocery Stores, but the similarities end there. Central Market has almost as many cheeses as packaged products, concentrating as well on fresh produce, meat and seafood and chef-prepared meals and sides. The floral and wine sections are outstanding and are often cross-merchandised with other categories. The Café on the Run has dozens of fresh, convenient meals, including items from its Central Market Organics line.



JUNGLE JIM'S INTERNATIONAL MARKET Fairfield, Ohio

Twice as big as a Walmart Supercenter, Jungle Jim's is a foodie's paradise. Many of the 60,000-plus international items can't be found anywhere else in Ohio. The European section has miniature storefronts that mimic the architecture of the countries represented, and huge sombreros highlight the Mexican area. Add more than 500 types of hot sauce and it's no wonder more than 80,000 shoppers visit weekly.

LATIN AMERICA

FRESKO (JESUS DEL MONTE)

Mexico City

Vibrant colours, lighting and the way floors and ceilings merge into shelving are highlights of Fresko, a format owned by Comercial Mexicana. The service departments in particular, such as meat, deli and seafood, stand out, says Kantar Retail analyst David Marcotte. Another

area of the store worth checking out is the gift counter, something that Marcotte notes is a common feature in many supermarkets around the world outside Canada and the U.S. "If you're going to somebody's house to visit, you go to the gift counter and they'll put together a gift set to take with you."

MINUTO PAO DE ACUCAR

Sao Paulo, Brazil

Well-heeled Brazilians looking for quality and convenience are behind the rise of Minuto Pao de Acucar, a small format from GPA, the Brazilian arm of French grocer Casino. The first store opened

two years ago; as of last summer there were more than 30.

Inside is a specialty store feel: dark decor and wood fixtures punctuated by spotlights and fine merchandising, with fruit and veggies at the front. The unit in Sao Paulo's Garden district is 120 feet deep but just 30 feet wide. Yet the way shelves are broken up makes navigation a cinch.

Dark wood and bright fruit at Minuto Pao de Acucar in Brazil

VIVANDA, (MIRAFLORES)

Lima, Peru

What does a supermarket owned by a bank look like? Nicer than you think. Held by Peru's Interbank through its Supermercados Peruanos chain, Vivanda is around 20,000 sq. ft. with eight locations in and around Lima. The Miraflores store, in an area known for surfing, is exceptional: with big baskets of produce, easy flow-through from produce to the meat department and "great attention to detail," says Kantar's Marcotte. Don't forget your surfboard. **CG**