

Asian Food Markets opens in Marlboro

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MARLBORO — Here's something you don't see every day at every supermarket around: live fish, such as catfish or black fish, in a tank ready for you take home.

A fishmonger will clean it, chop off its head (or leave it on, if you prefer) and slice it into steaks.

Welcome to Asian Food Markets.

The Asian specialty food grocer, which started in 1992 with a store in Edison, officially opens its seventh store – and its second in Monmouth County – in Marlboro on Saturday. The small chain also has stores in Middletown, Piscataway, North Plainfield, Plainsboro, Cherry Hill and Staten Island.

The store features fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and poultry, and Asian specialty products from regions of China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and India. It also has a sections selling hot Chinese food for takeout and baked goods.

Marlboro resident Steven Trastman stopped by the new store earlier this week.

“The fact is that you're looking for something different,” he said. “We really don't have a good fruit and vegetable place around here.”

The new store, located in Brooks Edge Plaza on Route 79 at Ryan Road, comes as the Asian population in Monmouth County has grown, reaching 31,258, or 5 percent of the population, in 2010, up from 24,403, or nearly 4 percent, in 2000, according to the U.S. Census.

Anthony Chan, chief financial officer at Asian Food Markets, said the company has been looking for a location in the Marlboro area for about six or seven years. “There are so many customers that go to our other locations and say, ‘Can you open one?’ ” in the area.

About 14 months ago, the company signed a lease for 25,000 square feet at Brooks Edge Plaza, taking about half of the space once held by an Acme supermarket, which closed in 2006.

The store's emphasis on specialty products, such as live fish, Asian vegetables and products, helps to differentiate it from a traditional supermarket, Chan said.

“We want to make them feel like their home grown products are in our store,” he said. “It is a very specialty niche.”

Traditional grocers also carry Asian food and products in their aisles. But Chan said the difference is variety. While a supermarket may carry two brands of tofu, Asian Food Market may have 20, he said.

The growth of the state's Asian population is strong, said Matthew P. Casey, president of Matthew P. Casey & Associates, a Clark-based retail research firm specializing in supermarkets and pharmacies.

“The ShopRites and the Pathmarks of the world will carry some Asian product, but certainly not all that these customers are looking for,” Casey said. “They are looking for a whole lot more.”

Jessie Eleazar of Freehold Township buys fresh fish in the seafood department of Asian Food Markets in Marlboro.



TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER, APP.com

Other Asian grocers are growing too. H Mart Stores, a national chain based in Lyndhurst, has recently opened a store in Edison.

“Years ago there were a few Asian markets scattered here and there, but there’s a lot more,” Casey said. “I expect more to be coming just because there is so much more Asian population in this area now.”

Chan also attributed the popularity of cooking shows and channels to the growing sales at Asian Food Markets. Customers are interested in exploring and learning, he said.

When the Marlboro store opened on Dec. 31, a so-called “soft opening,” about 35 to 40 percent of the customers were non-Asian, he said.

“Everyone is excited about certain teas, or a certain type of noodle that we have,” Chan said.