

Whole Foods almost ready in Wall



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(Photo: BOB BIELK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

WALL - The stretch of Route 35 that passes through Belmar, Wall, and Sea Girt already boasts two Foodtown supermarkets, ShopRite and an Acme. In one month, a new competitor will be thrown into the mix.

Whole Foods (<http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/>) will be open its Wall store on April 13.

"We have a bread-breaking ceremony. People usually do ribbon cuttings, but we (bake) four or five-foot loaves of bread, and typically we'll literally break bread and the doors will open," said Michael Sinatra, public relations director for Whole Foods Market's Northeast region.

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Along with the bread breaking will be sales for the opening, Sinatra said.

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Whole Foods opened its first New Jersey store in Edgewater in 2000, and since then, the company has expanded in New Jersey, averaging about one store a year. Wall's location is the company's 15th in this state, including stores in Marlboro and Middletown.

"What's nice about this store in Wall is it serves a large town and a lot of neighboring towns, and a seasonal crowd," Sinatra said. The location is also an easier commute for residents in Ocean County who might make the trek up to the Marlboro location for weekend shopping trips.

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Whole Foods on Route 35 in Wall will open with a bread-breaking ceremony. (Photo: BOB BIELK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Filling a niche

Despite the plethora of choice in Monmouth County, Whole Foods has its own niche in the supermarket industry which resonates with consumers, said Matthew Casey, a supermarket analyst based in Clark.

"I think everywhere they trade in New Jersey, if not nationwide, they're up against strong competition, and it's no different in Wall Township," Casey said. "They have a probably the largest selection of organic foods and so forth, so if you're health conscious or a healthy eater, you may choose Whole Foods."

It has been a tumultuous time for supermarkets. In November, Acme took over a former A&P location in Wall, after The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy last July, along with several other former A&Ps.

Last June, three supermarkets — Super Foodtown in Toms River, Stop & Shop in Manalapan, and Foodtown in Freehold — announced they were shuttering their doors.

Competition in the supermarket industry is tough, Casey said, and stores must evolve to survive.

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Their prices might range higher than other supermarket's, and the company has a reputation for pricey goods, Casey said, "but I don't think they're as bad as their reputation suggests. If you want a certain organic item, I guess you may be willing to spend the money to get that item."

The supermarket industry is a reactive one, Casey said, so in response to Whole Food's healthy offerings, other retailers put the pressure on by increasing their own healthful products.

"I think Whole Foods over the years has recognized that reputation and has tried to address it and lower their prices, in response to the competition increasing their offerings," Casey said.

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The Whole Foods on Route 35 in Wall is the chain's second supermarket in Monmouth County. (Photo: BOB BIELK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Not just a specialty store

Whole Foods isn't only about one niche, said Sinatra.

"Once in a while people think of us as a natural food store, or as a specialty food store," Sinatra said. "We really have it all. I think people, what they'll come to really love in our store, is the quality of product and the thoughtfulness of the product we select for our shelves."

Many products are locally sourced from New Jersey, like produce, flowers, seafood, beef, and baked goods among other items.

"No two Whole Food Markets are the same. They all have an assortment of different offerings," he said.

What will be different about the Wall location is an Italian food venue, called Italian Counter. The venue will feature family style meals to go or dine in, and various chef-prepared Italian meals.

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The menu will be shared in the next few weeks on social media.

There are currently no plans for additional locations in Monmouth or Ocean counties, but the company is expanding in New Jersey.

"We have a fair amount of development going on," Sinatra said. "Were excited to continue to grow in the state."

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