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On the Side: Targeting groceries

A big-box store brings its values to the marketplace.



By Rick Nichols

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By the end of rush hour Monday, the aisles at the big Target on City Avenue near the ramps to I-76 East were waking up - boxed pizzas getting restocked, gaps in the Great Wall of Soda being meticulously plugged.

That groceries are part of the big-box experience these days is hardly news. Wal-Mart has been up to it for years now, even boasting an organic section.

But over the weekend Target (now with more than 30 outlets locally) sent out mailers saying it was upping its own ante, offering a fresh "handpicked selection of meat, produce and baked goods."

The mailer was intriguing enough. Its cover could serve future archaeologists well. It's a shot of a juicy, grill-marked burger, top of the bun cocked to one side, orbited by a wedge of avocado, sliced onion, and a halved red pepper; a Granny Smith apple, the tip of a banana, and a pebbled green thing - is that broccoli? - huddled in the lower right-hand corner.

It's all there in a cornucopic nutshell, the king (the burger) and his court (the veggies) - the Western diet, lacking only the chips, rendered in bold relief.

It is an ambiguous photo, its message mixed, devils and angels dancing together, the food portrait disguising as well as revealing: It is silent about food miles, or feedlots, or carbon footprints, or sodium content.

A kind of proxy First World-vs.-developing world tension is quick to surface, though, when you scratch the surface. It goes like this: If you live in the right zip codes and have sufficient funds, then by all means have at the chic, pure, and pricey suburban farm stands, the Whole Foods (or Wegmans or Trader Joe's).

The Slow Food movement even has a name for this breed of consumer (*hey*, I'm one of them!). It calls them "co-producers," handmaidens of ethical, artisan farmers and cheese-makers, enabling them to do their thing.

If you're less well-heeled, though, and suddenly out of a job, and price is *the* object, well, Wal-Mart's and Target's prices (not to mention those at Produce Junction, or Genuardi's, which is discounting in reaction to Target's move) can look like godsend.

Now and then, you will hear libertarian think-tankers - the Cato Institute, for one - tsk-tsking opponents of bringing big-foot Wal-Marts into the inner city: It's the most efficient way, they argue, to pump affordable, fresh food into neighborhoods that are otherwise dependent on chips-and-soda bodegas.

At the Target on City Avenue, the fresh-grocery alcove had been open five days and was already reeling in fresh shoppers. They liked the one-stop shopping. And the cut-rate prices: two pounds of table grapes for \$2.98.

It is definitely not a locovore's haven. Target's house brands - Archer Farms (produce and prepared food) and Sutton & Dodge (beef) - are exemplars of industrial agriculture. The Driscoll strawberries are from the West Coast. The peppers are shrink-wrapped. The Oscar Mayer wieners hang above the Perdue boneless thighs.

And, yes, you could see it as a gateway to the patio furniture and the acres of bagged chips (perhaps blue corn with flaxseed if you're feeling guilty; smoked bacon with cheddar if you're feeling bulletproof).

Or to the canyons of Coke and Pepsi and Mountain Dew. (Or "Green Tea ginger ale," if you don't want to admit you're drinking soda.) To the Frosted Flakes and rip-off vitamin water and boxed mac and cheese and Chef Boyardee ravioli, the Doritos, salty Campbell's soups, Entenmann's chocolate fudge cake, and shelled walnuts.

But this much you can't argue with: Stacked on shelves near the bags of carrots and basket of lime-green limes are shiny Washington state apples, some of them in four-pound yellow boxes (\$5.89) cut in the shape of school buses, some - bright, kid-sized Honeycrisps! - in farmstand-like red cardboard crates sturdier than your average flimsy 12-pack of Coke.


For that alone, give Target props.

Apples can be gateways, too.

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