



Fresh Thyme Farmers Market Takes Root in the Midwest

By Marianne Wilson



A new specialty grocer — Fresh Thyme Farmers Market — has big plans for the Midwest. With industry veteran Chris Sherrell at the helm (and an investment interest from Meijer Inc.), the start-up emphasizes natural and organic foods and produce, much of it locally sourced, at value prices in a convenient neighborhood-store format.

“We’ve taken the experience of an outdoor farmers market and combined it with the convenience of a full-service grocery store,” stated Chris Sherrell, president and CEO Fresh Thyme Farmers Market, in announcing the start-up. “Shoppers will enjoy value-priced natural and organic items throughout our store, making healthy food more attainable to the masses.”

The territory is not new to Sherrell, who has amassed more than 20 years in the natural food and farmers market segments of supermarket retail. From 2003 to 2012, he was with Sunflower Farmers Market, first as COO and then as president and CEO, during which time it grew from one store to 44 locations throughout eight southwestern states (the company merged with Sprouts Farmers Market in 2012). Prior to Sunflower, he was in operations at Wild Oats Market.

Fresh Thyme opened its first store in April 2014, in Mount Prospect, Illinois. Currently, it operates 10 locations (two in Illinois, five in Indiana and three in Ohio). A total of 60 locations throughout the Midwest are planned by 2019.

Fresh Thyme boasts a smaller footprint — stores range from about 24,000 sq. ft. to 28,000 sq. ft. — and a nontraditional floor plan. In a twist on the standard grocery model, the center of the store is devoted to fresh offerings. Other prominent features include a 400-bin selection of natural and organic bulk items and small batches

of locally roasted premium coffee beans, a Hops & Grapes department with wine and local craft beers, a butcher shop and an expansive healthcare selection.

DESIGN: As seen in its debut Mount Prospect location, Fresh Thyme is designed to provide Midwestern shoppers with a year-round farmers market experience — regardless of the weather.

“Fresh Thyme Farmers Market emulates the look and feel of traditional farmers markets, with an easy-to-navigate layout, low-profile fixtures and a fresh produce department positioned prominently in the center of the store,” said Ryan Martin, LEED AP, design services, api(+), Tampa, Florida, which served as branding designer, concept designer and architect of record for the store. “While the farmers market concept is not new, Fresh Thyme employs a diverse palette of materials and finishes to create a unique environment that invites guests to “embrace their inner barn,” Martin explained.

“The finishes, including corrugated metal paneling, rough-sawn cedar planking, reclaimed barn siding and recycled snow fence, work to create an authentic farmers market feel,” he said.

In a distinctive focal point along the back wall, generously scaled produce crates house several large illustrated murals. The colorful murals epitomize the spirit of Fresh Thyme and visually call attention to the star of the show, the produce department.

“We chose illustration over photography to avoid competing with the exceptional first pick produce selection,” Martin added.

In the dairy area, department and category signs are inspired by vintage glass-bottle milk caps for a nostalgic, old market feel. The remaining departments feature unique and cohesive finishes and treatments that enhance the store’s friendly vibe. ■