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Free Market customers like what they don't get

Appleton store features organic meats, produce, and dairy products

By Kristin Stankewicz

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When it comes to groceries and health products, customers of The Free Market, 1000 W. Wisconsin Ave., Appleton, like what they don't get — pesticides, preservatives, and other substances they'd rather avoid.

Founded in 2003 by Cindy Weinfurter and her husband, Kevin Hamm, the natural foods grocery store features certified organic meats, produce, and dairy products, as well as a large selection of foods for people with food intolerances and allergies. The store also carries natural health and beauty products.

"We really believe that what you eat determines your health," said Hamm.

Weinfurter has been in the natural foods industry for 26 years, but always dreamed of owning her own store. Prior to opening The Free Market, she ran the Copps health food departments in 24 stores statewide.

She came close to opening her own store on



Cindy Weinfurter, left, and her husband, Kevin Hamm, are owners of The Free Market in Appleton. Weinfurter was in the natural foods business for 26 years before opening the store in 2003. The Business News photo by J. A. Robb

several occasions. "I had filled our garage with store fixtures probably three different times, saying, 'this is it, I'm going to do it.' But then I'd get promoted, and I'd get rid of everything," she said.

"When they (Copps) were sold, and then sold again, their direction changed. Kevin looked at me and said, 'now or never,'" she said.

The couple, who live in Scandinavia, (near

Iola in Waupaca County), did market research when considering where to locate the store.

"We looked at a couple different areas, and decided Appleton would be the best market as far as potential for growth," Hamm said.

Although that meant traveling two hours a day, "We discussed it, and we agreed that if we lived in a large city, we'd be driving an hour to work every day, and we wouldn't have the beautiful countryside we get to see on the way here," Weinfurter said.

"We did our research on percentage of growth, market potential, population, and competition," she said. "We worked with SCORE and the Small Business Administration (SBA) to get their feedback and an objective outlook."

The couple financed the venture with an SBA loan and their own capital.

The store now has eight part-time employees and stocks more than 7,000 items, 90 percent of which are food. Some of the store's biggest sellers are organic milk, Rudi's breads, and organic produce.

The Free Market draws customers from two main categories: people already into organic and natural foods, and those who find out they have food allergies or intolerances (or have to

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restrict their diets for other health reasons).

Because Weinfurter was diagnosed with celiac sprue, which makes her unable to tolerate gluten in wheat, barley, rye, and oats, and has other sensitivities, "I've had to learn how to keep my body healthy using food," she said.

A trend toward buying organic food has been growing nationally since the mid-1990s, according to Hamm. He believes organic foods provide two kinds of benefits: "It's good for the people who eat it, and it's very good for the environment because of the way things are grown, without chemicals and fertilizers."

"An orange that you buy in a conventional store is picked six to ten weeks before it hits the store. They're actually picked green, and a lot of times they're sprayed with chemicals to ripen, or sometimes they're even sprayed

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— **Cindy Weinfurter**,
co-owner of The Free Market in Appleton

orange. With organic oranges, they can't use any preservatives, so they're picked three to five weeks ahead, and shipped refrigerated," Hamm said.

The special growing and shipping methods

increase costs. Some organic products are as much as twice as expensive as nonorganics. "It's more expensive to grow. You can't just spray your trees," said Hamm. "As more growers get into it, the prices will drop. Right now, demand outstrips supply."

He's found that customers differ in sensitivity to price. "On one end, you've got someone who would never think of drinking soda and would never put anything in their body or use anything that's not natural. For those people, money is not an object. They would think nothing of paying \$8 for organic chicken breasts, because they would never eat anything else," he said.

"On the other end, people who are just getting into it, or families with a budget, might cut back on some things," when money gets tight, he said. "Most people are going to be somewhere in between."

The couple is happy with the store's progress and customer base so far. "Our customers are

great. We want to make it as easy and convenient as possible," Weinfurter said. "We take care of them."

Customers take care of The Free Market, too.

"We had a customer the other day, and when they checked out we missed a couple things. They sent us money in the mail, and said, 'you forgot to charge us for these things,'" said Hamm.

"In the winter time, it is not unusual that some of the guys will grab our snow shovel and shovel our sidewalk," Weinfurter said.

Future plans include potentially expanding the store, but no timeframe is set yet. "We're family-owned. There's only so much money in the checkbook, and we have to look at, 'what's our top priority?'" said Weinfurter. "Our number one priority is that we meet our customers' needs. Number two is that the store needs to exist, so we can meet rule number one."

For now, "We're showing consistent growth, and that's what we wanted," she said.