

## Your Grocery Guide

The seemingly simple task of buying groceries is becoming increasingly complex in Oakland. A new generation of grocery stores recently came on the scene, and more alternatives to traditional supermarkets are on the way. Here's a guide to some of the big new players and smaller independents.

### The New Chains

#### WHOLE FOODS MARKET

230 Bay Place  
(corner of 27th and Harrison streets)

Opened: September 2007

[www.wholefoodsmarket.com](http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com)

Local, sustainable, organic, cruelty-free, artisan—these adjectives form the Whole Foods mantra, plastered on signs throughout the 55,000-square-foot store and parking lot. You're not grocery shopping when you're there—how boring is that?—you're doing something good for your body and for the planet! Never mind that you'll blow your budget on a \$94 organic cotton hoodie (yes, Whole Foods even sells clothing) and \$23-per-pound halibut, and then blow your diet on an aioli-drenched bistro sandwich the size of a football.

**PRO:** Nowhere else can you find such a bounty of all-natural products housed in such a visually stunning interior. Who'd've think it, right there across from the 7-Eleven and Wheel Works. Give Whole Foods credit and gratitude for a deep commitment to environmental and social responsibility, setting an example for corporate America to follow (one can only hope). Family-meal deals from the hot bar are a good bargain, relatively speaking, and you gotta love the gelato bar.

**CON:** The "Whole Paycheck" nickname is well deserved. Expect some under-trained and unsmiling servers behind the counters. A disorienting, hopelessly large layout and second-floor parking make a quick-and-easy stop virtually impossible. Check the expiration dates on "fresh" foods; eggs older than their sell-by date and moldy bread were spotted.

#### TRADER JOE'S

Two locations: 3250 Lakeshore Blvd. and 5727 College Ave.

Opened: October 2007

[www.traderjoes.com](http://www.traderjoes.com)

Employees wearing trademark Hawaiian shirts have imported an Aloha spirit to Oakland's two TJ's. You can get a college student's dream dinner of Two Buck Chuck wine, Truly Homemade Tortillas, killer cheese for quesadillas and Joe-Joe's Oreo knock-offs, all for about 10 bucks. The Lakeshore store, with slightly less than 10,000 square feet of selling space, feels shoehorned into the old Albertson's, whereas the College Avenue store, with higher ceilings and approximately 2,000 square feet of additional space, allows for a larger produce department and a more relaxed shopping experience.

**PRO:** TJ's offers an eclectic selection of all-natural items, fast and friendly checkout lines, and the best bargains around. And Trader Joe's has a knack for developing one-of-a-kind products that are virtually addictive—the pineapple salsa, for example, or those cat-shaped cookies. Each shopping trip can be a treasure hunt for your taste buds.

**CON:** Ever notice how a lot of TJ's frozen and prepared foods look better than they actually taste? And its enviro-friendly practices, such as incentives for BYOBag, are undercut by the mountains of plastic clamshell and styrofoam waste created by its pre-packaged produce, meat and deli items.

#### MI PUEBLO

1630 High St.

Opened: April 2007

[www.mipueblofoods.com](http://www.mipueblofoods.com)

The San Jose-based Mi Pueblo chain, founded in 1991, has grown to 10 stores in Northern California. The full-service market is a celebration of Latin American tastes and culture. Signs are in Spanish with English subtitles, and imported Mexican brands share shelf space with standard American grocery brands.

**PRO:** Mi Pueblo stocks a salsa bar to rival other stores' salad bars; sells ceviche and menudo at the extensive seafood and meat departments; offers sugary temptations made from scratch at the

panaderia; builds grande burritos at the in-store taqueria; and carries piñatas galore.

**CON:** Environmentally friendly?

Minimally processed? Neither is a priority here. You'll find an entire island in the produce department devoted to chilies but no organic offerings. Bring your own bag since only plastic are offered at the checkout.

#### COMING SOON:

##### FRESH & EASY

[www.freshandeasy.com](http://www.freshandeasy.com)

Jack London Gateway, 900 Market St. in West Oakland; other locations to be announced.

[www.freshandeasy.com](http://www.freshandeasy.com)

British-based Tesco introduced its Fresh & Easy line of markets to Southern California in 2007, and now the chain is rapidly expanding north and targeting urban neighborhoods neglected by other grocers. The Fresh & Easy format features a spartan design, low prices and fresh, healthy products (with meats, produce and deli items pre-packaged rather than prepared in store, similar to Trader Joe's). The company won't estimate an opening date but notes that its stores generally take less than two years to open. Look for Fresh & Easy additions in '09.

### The Locally Owned Independents

#### FARMER JOE'S

3426 Fruitvale Ave.; 3501 MacArthur Blvd. (original store)

Opened: June 2006; original store, 1994

The local Joe's (as opposed to the Trader) started in a Laurel District corner store, featuring an impressive selection of organic produce and quality meat, given its cramped size. Twelve years later, Oakland-raised Joe Tam and his wife, Diana, opened a much larger second store (approximately 11,000 square feet of selling space) in Upper Fruitvale. Cheerful murals, a gleaming interior and lofty ceilings make it look nothing like the Albertson's it once was. Picture Whole Foods on a much more manageable scale.



**PRO:** Organic and minimally processed products get prime space, but you can find Pepsi and Lucky Charms, too. Good selection of grass-fed beef and sushi prepared fresh on site.

**CON:** High prices and a ho-hum salad bar with only plastic containers, not paper. Checkout lines often lack baggers offering a carryout.

**PIEDMONT GROCERY**

**4038 Piedmont Ave.**

**Opened: 1902**

Since the days when it delivered groceries by a horse-drawn wagon, Piedmont Grocery has built a following by stocking European imports and other specialty items, and by providing the best selection of meat and cheese in town. The market—a small but adequate 12,000 square feet—shuffled things around recently to improve the salad bar and prepared-food sections.

**PRO:** Count on this grocer for detailed and reliable wine reviews; a large selection of artisan breads and baked goods; festive gourmet holiday displays; checkout clerks who know customers by name and always offer a carryout to the car; always-friendly and well-trained butchers.

**CON:** The produce department is good, not great; there's a limited selection of diapers and other non-food basics; some entrees at the hot-food bar were tired-looking.

**VILLAGE MARKET**

**5885 Broadway Terrace**

**Opened: 1953**

Originally owned by the Larsons of Piedmont Grocery, the much-loved Upper Rockridge gourmet grocery was bought in the mid-1970s by the Trimble family. "We're a mom-and-pop store when it comes to customer service but not when it comes to variety and quality," says co-owner Keith Trimble. By using the parking lot as an open-air produce market and by narrowing the aisles, he manages to fit a full-service grocery with epicurean delights into just 4,000 square feet of selling space.

**PRO:** Sure pleasers are the smokin' made-to-order grill items from the parking lot barbecue, top-quality deli items and salad bar, friendly checkout clerks and baggers.

**CON:** This store does have high prices and a confusing check stand layout. Claustrophobics should avoid it.

**MULBERRY'S MARKET**

**335 Highland Ave., Piedmont**

**Opened: December 2007**

**www.mulberrysmarket.com**

The excitement in Piedmont over its new hometown market rivals the fanfare of the city's centennial celebration last year. Husband-and-wife team Chad Olcott and Laura Pochop fought a protracted legal battle to replace the town's shabby Bonfare market with a gourmet grocery that packs a cafe, deli, wine shop and good selection of grocery basics into a mere 2,500 square feet. Finishes such as marble countertops and bead board reflect the aesthetic of the neighborhood's historic homes, while an ice cream bar featuring Fenton's and chrome-lidded glass jars packed with candy give the feel of an old-fashioned soda fountain.

**PRO:** Charming, convenient and community-oriented, the market succeeds in reviving the endangered tradition of a neighborhood grocery. It also strikes a smart balance between family friendliness and sophistication; for example, a basket with Play-Doh toys and an Icee machine stand near the specialty cheeses. Don't miss the salads and entrees prepared by a former Chez Panisse cook and the "hometown hero" sandwiches named after neighbors.

**CON:** Limited parking, limited selection and only in clubby Piedmont.

**GAZZALI'S**

**7000 Bancroft Ave.**

**Opened: 2004**

Behind this market is the story of a family from Yemen struggling to fulfill a dream; the family's patriarch died right before the store opened. Everyone hopes to see it succeed as an anchor tenant in East Oakland's troubled Eastmont Mall and to provide a wholesome alternative to the nearest major competitor, the Pak 'N Save. Unfortunately, Gazzali's looks as worn out and low budget as its surroundings, in spite of assistance from the city to stay open and make improvements. It'll take more upgrades and more customers for this story to reach a happy ending.

**PRO:** The Algazzali family has kept the store open in spite of many challenges, and the family is trying to fill a void in the community.

**CON:** Shoppers are treated to messy aisles and a mediocre selection. Fresh and healthy alternatives are in scarce supply. Cheap liquor, however, is abundant and prominently displayed. Only plastic bags are available.



**COMING SOON:**

**LUCAS HARVEST MARKET**

**Foothill Square, 106th Avenue and Interstate 580**

Arturo and Alberto Felix, who own two specialty grocery stores in San Leandro and San Francisco, plan to open a 30,000-square-foot full-service market in the remodeled Foothill Square later this year or early 2009. It's billed as a "lifestyle" store with features and decor one expects from a high-end grocery.

**MANDELA FOODS COOPERATIVE**

**1430 Seventh St.**

**www.mandelafoods.com**

West Oakland residents wanted a healthy, community-focused, full-service grocery to anchor the Mandela Gateway retail and housing redevelopment project on Seventh Street, across from the West Oakland BART. What they got instead was a 99¢ Only chain outlet. But the scrappy worker-owned Mandela Food Cooperative, which had hoped to land in the discount store's space, negotiated a deal that will allow it to open a small (2,000-square-foot selling area) market as early as April. "It became our strategy to get the business up and running, demonstrate the viability of a community-owned business, start getting fresh food into the neighborhood and set the stage for an expansion. Our goal is to open a larger store in the next five years," says Wells Lawson, the co-op's project manager. The co-op is taking multiple security measures to make the store as safe as possible (the Subway sandwich shop next door was held up repeatedly in 2007). But the real threat to their business may come from the Fresh & Easy Market landing nearby at Jack London Gateway. ■

—Sarah Lavender Smith

