



## EVOLUTION OF THE GROCERY INDUSTRY AND SUPERMARKET RD

By Barbara Ruhs, MS, RD

*Today's Dietitian* (TD) has reported on supermarket RDs and their programs, and has followed the growth of this emerging field of nutrition throughout the past decade. In this issue, to inform, educate, and inspire both retail dietitians and RDs in other areas of practice, TD launches a new column devoted to supermarket nutrition.

As supermarkets continue to grow in relevancy in the health care arena, and as health and wellness becomes a higher priority in consumer purchasing decisions, dietitians will benefit by being informed about the supermarket and the retail food industries. TD welcomes questions and feedback on this column from readers pertinent to the supermarket industry to be covered in future issues.

### Dietetics Careers in Retail

It's an exciting time for dietitians, as career choices in supermarkets continue to proliferate, offering greater opportunities to sharpen our skills and increase our knowledge. Dietitians working in supermarkets are representative of an evolving field within the dietetics profession. According to the Food Marketing Institute, 95% of stores employ dietitians at the corporate, regional, and store levels, and the majority of food retailers report that consumer health and wellness programs led by RDs offer a significant business growth opportunity and competitive strategy.<sup>1</sup>

As food and nutrition experts and trusted health care professionals, supermarket dietitians have the power to influence

consumer purchasing decisions, boost customer loyalty, and empower shoppers to make better food choices. Supermarket RDs function in many different roles within and across retail organizations, and their unique nutrition expertise is transforming the grocery industry in many ways. They're working strategically with category management to improve product selections available on store shelves, providing affordable nutrition education services to consumers, increasing access to clinical nutrition services, improving nutritional attributes of prepared foods, teaching culinary skills to shoppers to improve diet quality, and using traditional media and social media to

reach the masses with valuable food and nutrition information.

To be sure, the job description for supermarket dietitians varies widely, and retailers are employing them to gain an edge over their competition. Profit margins to sell groceries are diminishing, so retailers are being forced to find alternative ways, other than lowering prices, to entice customers to spend more money and visit their stores more frequently—and they're looking to supermarket RDs for help. Supermarket dietitians of the future will continue to gain more traction in this space as they hone their business and marketing skills and gain knowledge of how the food and the supermarket industries work.

While there are no guarantees, being a dietitian in the retail food business can be an added bonus. To survive and thrive, dietitians must prove their value and have a direct impact on sales and profits while functioning in many of the traditional roles found in supermarkets. Being a CEO, director of public relations or marketing, and category manager are all important duties that are within the reach of supermarket dietitians today and in the future.

### Brief History of Supermarkets

Since the Great American Tea Company, which evolved into the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, better known as A&P, introduced the first grocery store concept in the United States in 1859, retail grocers continuously have evolved to meet consumer demands. Convenience, price, and quality always have factored into the success of the retail food business. The initial grocery store concept sourced items in bulk, including dry goods, staples, and nonperishable ingredients used in everyday cooking, and a store merchant retrieved the items and measured and wrapped the precise amount the customer desired. During this time in the early 20th century, milk was delivered, and shoppers were required to visit multiple



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specialty stores to buy perishables, including produce, meat, cheese, seafood, and baked goods. Shopping for food was time consuming and labor intensive. When Piggly Wiggly opened in 1916 in Memphis, Tennessee, it helped save some time for consumers by offering them the first self-service grocery store, where shoppers could choose their nonperishable groceries and pay for them at the front of the store.

However, it wasn't until 1930 that Michael Cullen, a former Kroger employee, opened King Kullen in Queens, New York, which offered the first glimpse of the modern-day supermarket. Selling individually packaged nonperishable and perishable items under one roof, he saved consumers time and money because he could offer lower prices due to moving a large volume of grocery items. This is in line with what today's

Americans think of as a supermarket, which is, according to the Smithsonian Institute, "a self-service store, with separate product departments, discount pricing, marketing, and volume selling."

### The First Supermarket Dietitians

Before supermarkets hired dietitians, they began employing home economists in the 1920s. The duties they performed included product testing, recipe development, writing recipe booklets, advertising, and responding to consumer questions—all of which paved the way for the modern supermarket dietitian.<sup>2</sup> Gerri Seinberg, RD, a dietitian who started in 1967 as test kitchen director for Food Fair, a chain in Pennsylvania that eventually changed

## BARB'S HOT PRODUCT PICKS

Product innovations are what make the food industry go 'round. Here are some of my favorite products that were recently introduced on store shelves.

### GROCERY AISLE

#### Probiotic-Enhanced Products

Probiotics are no longer sold only in the dairy and supplement aisles. Shoppers can find them throughout the grocery store. Following is a list of probiotic products found in various departments throughout the supermarket:

- **Suja Pressed Probiotic Waters** have 10 kcal and 1 g sugar and contain 2 billion CFUs. They're made with organic fruit and vegetable juice. For more information, visit [www.sujajuice.com](http://www.sujajuice.com).
- **Naturally More** Roasted Almond Butter with Probiotics and Flax, Valencia Peanut Butter with Probiotics and Flax, and Chocolate Hazelnut Spread with Probiotics and Flax contain 500 million CFUs, have 384 mg omega-3 alpha-linolenic acid, and provide 4 g dietary fiber per serving. The almond, peanut, and hazelnut varieties are available in 12- and 16-oz plastic jars and a new convenient 5.6-oz squeezable pouch. The products contain organic nuts, flaxseed, coconut sugar, sea salt, and inulin. For more information, visit [www.naturallymore.com](http://www.naturallymore.com).

### DAIRY AISLE

#### Plant-Based Milks

Clients seeking alternatives to cow's milk have more of a variety from which to choose than ever, including soy, rice, almond, hemp, and flax milks. And now there are the following two more:

- **Royal Hawaiian Macadamia Nut Milk** is dairy-free and made with Hawaiian-grown macadamia nuts. The unsweetened varieties contain 35 to 45 kcal per serving; the

sweetened variety contains 60 kcal per serving. Both offer 50% more calcium than dairy milk. For more information, visit [royalhawaiianorchards.com](http://royalhawaiianorchards.com).

- **Silk Nutchello** nut milks are lactose-, gluten-, casein-, soy-, and carrageenan-free. They contain 30% DV of calcium, 70 to 90 kcal per serving, and 9 to 14 g sugar. The milks are available in three different flavors: Caramel Almonds + Cashews, Rich Dark Chocolate + Walnuts, and Toasted Coconut + Cashews. For more information, visit [silk.com/nutchello](http://silk.com/nutchello).

### PASTA AISLE

#### Bean Pastas

As the low-carb craze persists and Americans continue their love affair with high-quality protein, the following pasta brands are likely to increase in popularity:

- **Banza** pastas made from chickpeas contain double the protein, four times the fiber, and nearly one-half the net carbs of traditional wheat pasta. A 2-oz serving has 190 kcal, 14 g protein, 8 g dietary fiber, and 32 g carbohydrates. The pastas are available in the following four varieties: shells, elbows, penne, and rotini. For more information, visit [www.eatbanza.com](http://www.eatbanza.com).
- **Explore Asian** makes a line of organic bean pastas that are certified gluten-free, USDA organic, and vegan. The pastas are available in Black Bean Spaghetti, Edamame Spaghetti, Edamame & Mung Bean Fettuccine, Soybean Spaghetti, and Adzuki Bean Spaghetti. Depending on the variety, the pastas can include up to 25 g protein, 207 kcal, 15 g fiber, and 26 g carbohydrates per 2-oz serving. For more information, visit [www.explore-asian.com](http://www.explore-asian.com).

If you know of other healthful product innovations recently introduced on store shelves that you'd like to tell us about, contact Barbara Ruhs, MS, RD, at [barbruhs@yahoo.com](mailto:barbruhs@yahoo.com).

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its name to Pantry Pride, is one of the earliest pioneers in the field of retail dietetics. Janet Tenney, RD, a notable supermarket dietitian for Giant Food in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., started her 30-year retail career in 1975. She implemented shelf tags to help customers identify more healthful products, participated in store-based nutrition research projects, and, after the first release of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans in 1980, was featured in a 1981 article, "Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food?" in *Food & Nutrition* magazine, published by the USDA Food and Nutrition service.<sup>3</sup> Jane Andrews, RD, a supermarket dietitian of 28 years for Wegmans, based in Rochester, New York, started her career in 1988. Other trailblazers include Layne Lieberman, RD, who worked for King Kullen, and Judy Dodd, RD, who worked for Giant Eagle in Pittsburgh. They both started their careers in the early 1990s and had careers spanning nearly two decades. The common thread of all of these retail dietitians is that their job descriptions varied widely, yet they all had the same goal in helping shoppers find nutritious choices within a budget.

### Evolving Consumer Demands

While convenience, price, and taste still remain drivers of consumer food purchases, more than 50% of consumers place a similar value on health and wellness when making purchasing decisions.<sup>4</sup> Today, many supermarket chains are increasing their focus on health as part of their competitive

advantage to meet these changing consumer demands. As shoppers continue to be more invested in personal health, supermarkets will continue to evolve and rely heavily on dietitians to improve America's shopping habits and impact the future of the supermarket business.

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