

> Prepared Foods a Hit at New Caputo's

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Jan 28, 2008 12:00 PM, By AMANDA BALTAZAR

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ADDISON, Ill. — Angelo Caputo's Fresh Markets here is trying something new with its sixth store: a huge array of prepared foods, both hot and cold, to cater to the hectic lives of its customers.

They were added, said spokesman Dale Ohman, based on customer feedback, and to differentiate the store from its nearby competition, which includes Meijer and Jewel stores.

The newest store, located in the South Elgin neighborhood of Chicago, features 60 feet of hot foods in an area devoted to prepared foods. Dishes range from homestyle chili and lasagna to fried chicken and minestrone soup. Seasonal dishes might include ham at Easter and hearty foods in the winter.

Most foods are available hot or cold, depending on a customer's preference, and according to Ohman, each sells equally well. The average prepared meal costs \$7 for lunch, and slightly more for dinner.

Since the founder of Caputo's was Italian, and all stores have an Italian focus, there's an emphasis on prepared foods from Italy. However, there are dishes from other countries as well, including Mexico, Russia and Poland, reflecting the diverse local demographics served by the store, explained Ohman. "It's also part of what we are, and we also want to educate our customers," he said.

An on-site chef oversees the prepared-food department. Each order is sized and packaged according to the number of people it will serve — usually two to four. "But we love special orders, and it's key to our success," said Ohman. Each meal comes with two sides, and customers can choose from a selection. All sides are priced identically.

A popular prepared-food station is the pizza station, where pies can be purchased premade or made to order and cooked while customers continue their shopping. Toppings are fairly standard, since that's what's popular in Chicago, said Ohman, and include pepperoni, sausage, green pepper and mushrooms.

This store also sells prepared crusts and dough balls for customers who wish to roll their own. Pizzas are particularly popular at the end of the week, when the store runs Pizza Fridays, offering an 18-inch take-and-bake pizza for \$7.99.

Along with the prepared foods, there's also a sushi bar operated by California-based Southern Tsunami. This company provides the chef, ingredients and employees, while Caputo's provides an 8-foot frontage of space and all necessary equipment, taking a percentage of sales in return.

Southern Tsunami sells 75 to 100 portions of sushi per day, and although it sells a variety of rolls and nigiri (rice with fish laid on top), California rolls are the most popular item.

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Manned food sampling stations are set up daily in the prepared-food area. Staffing the stations with employees drives sales, said Ohman, because they help draw shoppers' attention to the prepared-food area, and it allows customers to ask questions. "Our goal is to be not just a source of food, but also a resource," said Ohman.

"There's always a party at Caputo's," he added. "We encourage customers to sample and have a lot of vendor-supported tastings."

At 67,000 square feet, Caputo's newest store is also its largest. Other stores range from 45,000 to 50,000 square feet.

In case the sight and scent of these prepared foods are just too much for customers, there's also a sit-down restaurant with around 40 seats, where they can take their food and enjoy it right away. This option tends to be popular at lunchtime and all day on the weekends, said Ohman.

As well as this array of prepared foods, the South Elgin Caputo's also boasts over 500 varieties of fruit and vegetables; a fresh, from-scratch bakery; and meat prepared as it was in butchers' shops years ago, with meats ground, and sausages stuffed, on the premises.

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