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Oct 27, 2008 12:00 PM, By AMANDA BALTAZAR



BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, Wash. — As the economy takes a downswing, consumers are eating at home more frequently to save money, but there's a problem: We are a nation of non-cookers.

Fortunately, there are programs like the one running at Town & Country Markets' grocery stores in Washington state.

In 2000, this chain of six grocery stores (three each under the Town & Country and Central Market banners) launched its first Culinary Resource Center, a small area in its Shoreline store offering recipes, demonstrations and cooking advice.

Now Central Market stores in Poulsbo and Mill Creek, as well the Town & Country Market on Bainbridge Island, have their own centers.

“The Culinary Resource Center at Shoreline became the jumping-off point when we knew we really wanted to go all-out with fresh as no one had seen before, and support that,” said Ron Nakata, Town & Country's director of retail operations.

“It was an easy commitment to have a demo staff, as we called it then. We wanted to open ourselves to answering questions and offering solutions.”

Now, the Culinary Resource Centers are living up to their mission statement: “Inspiring the cook in you.” The goal is to help people learn how to cook, with tips, advice and products, said Becky Fox Marshall, the company's spokeswoman.

Each Culinary Resource Center creates recipes, either from scratch or an adaptation from a cookbook, sometimes for specialized diets such as gluten-free or low-fat. Each center can submit a maximum number of recipes (seven per week, per center), since they all go through one editor.

Once they've been checked by the editor and formatted by the in-house graphics department to include the

Culinary Resource Center logo, the editor uploads the recipes to the company's website, where consumers can access them.

The Culinary Resource Centers access them from a file-sharing site and individually select which ones to print out and display in their department.

At first, the centers were reluctant to share their recipes, said Fox Marshall. “But it just took them getting to know and trust each other. I think that, more and more, they're growing to appreciate each others' different styles.”

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On days when they're demonstrating a recipe that's been adapted from a cookbook, the Culinary Resource Centers also display the book to garner bonus sales.

Sometimes they also demonstrate how to prepare some of their store's prepared foods, which range from blue cheese burgers to parmesan chicken, so customers can sample them, which may encourage them to make an additional purchase.

There are now over 1,000 recipes in the database, and the Poulsbo store distributes around 150 per day to shoppers.

The recipes are across the board, from the simple to the complex. "But I think people are mostly looking for solutions to what they can make for dinner," said Fox Marshall, "and that's usually something that's simple and healthy."

The stores also sell binders for \$7.99 (to cover costs, said Fox Marshall) with index tabs for different food categories. Many people buy these and fill them with recipes to give as gifts, she pointed out. The chain sells around 3,000 binders per year.

A coordinator runs each Culinary Resource Center, and since this person really understands the store's customer base, he or she can offer some value for everyone, whatever their cooking needs.

"The recipes and demos they select have to do with responding to their customers, sharing their own unique take on cooking," she said.

Every six weeks or so the four coordinators meet to share experiences and brainstorm. They also devise special pamphlets, such as the Special Occasion Meat Guide or the Turkey Guide.

Until last year, the Culinary Resource Centers worked independently, but they were encouraged to work together so that customers at each store could benefit from all of them.

"By aligning themselves, our Culinary Resource Centers could leverage the talent and benefit of these individual programs into a collective program with more impact and benefit for customers, and for themselves," said Fox Marshall.

"Our culinary folks are able to really connect with customers by offering solutions to the age-old questions: 'What do I make for dinner?' and 'What do I do with this?'"

The Culinary Resource Centers are always near fresh food departments, usually produce and seafood. Each has a display monitor so customers can watch the cooking demonstrations. These are held most days, usually

in the afternoons, with one recipe featured per day.

Two of the centers even have computers, so if a customer is looking for a specific recipe and it's not available, it can be printed out immediately, allowing him or her to shop for ingredients.

It's not just about recipes. Oct. 15 to 21 was Technique Week at all four Culinary Resource Centers, for consumers who need to brush up on their kitchen skills.

Classes included techniques such as blanching, roasting root vegetables and searing meat. Sixteen informational cards were specially created, also designed to fit in the recipe binder, and Fox Marshall said she hopes to make the week an annual event.

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