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BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

The American Bazaar

The first supermarket, King Kullen, opened in Queens, N.Y., in 1930, with the slogan ‘Pile it high. Sell it low.’ Rien Fertel reviews “Grocery” by Michael Ruhlman.



PHOTO: THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

By Rien Fertel

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Is there any place more American than the supermarket? Forget the airport and the voting booth; for nearly a century, the one-stop shop has remained a temple of consumerism, not to mention our particular form of consumerist anxiety. “What peaches and what penumbras!” Allen Ginsberg wrote in “A Supermarket in California” (1956). “Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!” Three decades later, a pre-presidential Boris Yeltsin marveled at pudding pops in a Houston-area grocery store and later wrote in his memoirs that “when I saw those shelves crammed with hundreds, thousands of cans, cartons and goods . . . I felt quite frankly sick with despair for the Soviet people.” In “White Noise,” Don DeLillo’s postmodern novel about, in part, the alienation caused by the modern American supermarket, the author writes that “here we don’t die, we shop. But the difference is less

marked than you think.”

GROCERY

By Michael Ruhlman

Abrams Press, 307 pages, \$28

In “Grocery: The Buying and Selling of Food in America,” Michael Ruhlman is only slightly less cynical. “Supermarkets illuminate what we care about, what we fear, what we desire,” often simultaneously. Products that might make us live longer share a space with

name brands that will most certainly shorten our life spans. Wobbly-wheeled shopping carts now come SUV-size—some are even equipped with drink holders!—but also cause more than 24,000 injuries involving children each year. We demand out-of-season bananas, tomatoes and apples—in his 1985 novel, Mr. DeLillo is awed by the half-dozen varieties for sale, a pittance in today’s produce aisle—while insisting that grocers act responsibly and sustainably. Supermarkets are America’s “invisible behemoth,” Mr. Ruhlman warns, despite the fact that we shop at them, on average, twice a week—ignore the elephant in the aisles at your own peril.

In this book, Mr. Ruhlman returns to a conceit that worked wonderfully in “The Soul of a Chef” (2000), which investigated the American restaurant revolution by tracing the fortunes of a pair of cooks turned celebrity chefs, Thomas Keller and Michael Symon. Here the focus is on his beloved hometown supermarket, Heinen’s Grocery Store, a Cleveland-based chain with 23 locations in Ohio and Illinois. Joe Heinen opened the first one in 1933, three years after Michael Cullen launched “the first true supermarket,” in Mr. Ruhlman’s designation: King Kullen in Queens, N.Y. Heinen, like Cullen, stockpiled meat, seafood, dairy, produce and groceries, often at a discount, under a single roof. (King Kullen’s slogan was “Pile it high. Sell it low.”)

There are now 38,000 grocery stores in America, some as large as 90,000 square feet. Heinen’s has annual sales of some \$600 million—on a margin of only 1.25% to 1.5%, typical of the industry. “You do sales of half a *billion* dollars,” a Heinen’s executive notes to Mr. Ruhlman, “and you only have profit of \$5 million—what kind of a business is that?” With the blessing of its current owners, twin brothers

Tom and Jeff Heinen, Mr. Ruhlman shadows a range of Heinen's employees, a unionized workforce earning full benefits and vacation pay. He learns firsthand the art of bagging groceries: Inspect what's coming down the conveyor belt; lettuce, not eggs, is the most fragile item; cold cuts always go on top. He scouts new products—probiotics and beef jerky are hot—at fancy food shows with Heinen's buyers. In the prepared-foods department, or “high-end leftovers,” in Mr. Ruhlman's words, he gushes about the chain's popular Chicken Romano. And he forages for wild edibles and medicinals in Cleveland parks with the corporation's Thoreau-quoting “wellness” promoter and chief medical officer, Dr. Todd Pesek.

Though Heinen's might be the world's only supermarket chain that employs a chief medical officer and takes pride in thinking responsibly and sustainably when stocking the perimeter of each store with produce, dairy, meat and fish, each location still must pack its center aisles with Wonder Bread, Bud Light and a host of “the most worked-over, processed, and heavily marketed products on earth.” The author rightly regards this “heart of abundance,” the grocery's central cavity, as a “food desert,” a term most often used to describe neighborhoods with little to no access to affordable healthy foods.

Today the average supermarket carries 40,000 to 50,000 different products—that's up from just 200 items when the modern grocery store was born. Twenty thousand new items are introduced each year; including, according to Mr. Ruhlman, inordinate varieties of Oreos. On a recent visit to my local supermarket, I counted 28 different flavors, shapes and sizes of the cookie lining a single aisle. There are just too many items to buy.

It's not rare for even the most mildly ambitious of home cooks to supplement their supermarket shopping with visits to the local farmers market, a wholesaler like Costco and any number of niche stores: the artisan bakery, whole-animal butcher shop, cheese monger, Asian and Latin food marts, and trusted bottle shop. Now the best grocery stores compete in a crowded marketplace by combining all of the above while becoming obligatory shopping, and even tourist, destinations. Wegmans, an East Coast chain frequently named America's top grocery, and Central Market, an upscale offshoot of Texas' H-E-B (“Here Everything's Better”),

have generated the kind of fervent fan bases once limited to sports franchises. No trip to San Francisco is complete without a stop at one of two Bi-Rite locations. While New York City sightseers now skip the once-mandatory visits to Macy's and FAO Schwarz to gaze and graze upon the more than 50,000 square feet of Eataly—an Italian megastore imported to these shores by food personalities Mario Batali and Lidia and Joe Bastianich.

Mr. Ruhlman's skillful portrait of Heinen's might make you want to catch a flight to Cleveland—and as soon as possible. As groceries grow in size (Jungle Jim's International Market outside Cincinnati recommends first-time visitors allot two to four hours to peruse the 150,000-plus products on display), Jeff Heinen fears that the supermarket will eventually go the way of the suburban shopping mall. "We'll be prepared food and specialty products," he tells Mr. Ruhlman. Everything else, all those center-aisle products, in his estimation, will be delivered via Amazon. But before that great rearranging of the shelves takes place, we will steer our shopping carts up and down increasingly unfamiliar aisles, filling the basket with kale chips, yogurts and flavored waters, trying to remember where we'd last seen the Cream of Wheat.

—Mr. Fertel is a former grocery store owner and the author, most recently, of "The One True Barbecue."

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