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Whole Paycheck

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It's been weeks since Whole Foods opened in the new Brentwood Square shopping center, but I am only now writing about it. Why? It's taken me this long to find a parking space. This new development — which also features Pier 1, REI, Organized Living and Borders — is located at the intersection of Brentwood and Eager, an area that needs more traffic about as much as I need another ten pounds. And since opening, the ridiculously small parking lot has been full at virtually any time of the day or night.

But today, I can park.

I've been to a Whole Foods Market before, so I'm somewhat of an expert in these matters. My husband and I discovered one in Austin last year, where the locals call it Whole Paycheck. When I heard the chain of health and specialty foods was making its debut in St. Louis — in Brentwood, no less — my first question was...*why?*

Now, I'm not anti-healthy eating, despite appearances. I just don't like grocery shopping that makes me feel guilty. I already have a mother for that. But there's already Wild Oats, just a stone's throw away in Clayton and I'm not sure I see the need for another organic mega-shop in the vicinity.

And so it was with a healthy dose of skepticism that I infiltrated Whole Foods market on a weekday morning, disguised as a consumer. Right away, the bounty of bright colors in produce makes me feel instantly healthier. I couldn't tell you what makes a fruit organic, but it apparently makes them far more attractive and well-behaved than regular grocery store produce.

Even the prices are not as steep as I expected, and the selection is overwhelming — which I experience often during this visit. But what shall I do with my cruelty-free, organic sun-chokes? No problem! There's a colorful guide to all produce imaginable and a free recipe cards with suggestions on what to do with your kumquats. I'm still on the fence about whether one should need a manual to navigate the produce section, but I'm learning stuff! Woo hoo!

Approaching the bakery, I'm prepared for carob and whole-wheat offerings as unattractive as

they are unappealing. Wrong again! Here, I discover the trick Whole Foods employs to get people like me to shop there: they hide real foods in with the healthy stuff. Right next to the flourless cakes and whole grain, uh, things are real croissants, cookies and desserts! Sure, the butter's unsalted and the flour in the chocolate mousse cake is unbleached, but what the hell difference does it make when there's sugar, eggs and real, live chocolate?

And meat lovers needn't hide here. No, no, my friends! There's meat a-plenty here. I get dizzy just looking at the meat counter selections. Dizzy and a little grossed out, actually, since I don't eat a whole lot of meat.

At the fish counter, Pamela the fish lady tells me that their fish is brought in six days a week, all fresh, most of it filleted on the boat and shipped right in. Prefer your fish frozen? No problem! There's actually a pick-your-own-piece frozen seafood items bar. No more choosing between cod and crab cakes. You can pick one of each and go nuts.

But don't fill up before you've visited the seafood soup and salad bar, which included a fresh octopus salad, teeming with the poor tentacled little buggers. Bars are a trend throughout the store (not the cocktail kind, of course) as, I discover to my delight, are samples. Let's just say I didn't need lunch after I'd made my way full circle.

The olive bar is my favorite by far. All different kinds of olives; I stopped counting at twenty and started scooping them madly into little plastic containers. Informative little signs educate me on my olives. Did you know that olives are harvested between October and December? That green olives are those harvested earlier and black ones later? Will you ever use this information? Probably not.

Suddenly, I'd gone from cynical reporter to consumer. Who cares? I had to find feta in the sea of cheeses! And find it I did...I just had to chose *which* feta cheese I wanted.

Next is the, uh, vitamin-y healthy mineral-type stuff area. If I was confused by generic multivitamins before, I have achieved a whole new level of confusion. There are minerals, extracts, essences, powders, gels, infusions. There are shampoos, soaps, bath soaks, toothpaste, shaving creams and...yikes...cotton menstrual pads.

Sometimes you just know when it's time to move onto the next section.

What's next? Bulk foods. The clincher. If you sell anything in bulk, I will buy it. Even if I don't know what it is, like millet. I like saying it. Millet. I just don't know if I'm supposed to eat it — or apply it — or how many pounds I'll need. I summon the help of a young employee named Dan, who confesses that bulk foods are not his forte. His expertise is nutrition, the section from which I have just escaped. We chat.

I ask, "So...how many of your customers are, like, complete and total all-natural-no-gluten-crap health food FREAKS?" Dan, a little uncomfortable with my wording, guesses 50%. So who are the others? I wonder. "Everyone else," he says. Hmm. Yeah, 'spose so. Dan seems to want to get away from me. Quickly. "What's the weirdest thing you sell over there?" I ask. "I've worked with this stuff for more than a year," he says. "So nothing's weird to me." Well, that may just be the key. Dan escapes.

There's more to the store...and to the story. There are a wealth of pre-made gourmet items — seasoned fish, sides and pasta dishes — that would rival your favorite restaurant. There are deli sandwiches and salads. There's a pizza bar where you can buy pizza to take home and cook or if you're too busy (read: lazy), or you can pick it up by the slice! There's a salad bar that puts your grocery store to shame, accompanied by a soup bar featuring Apple Butternut Squash soup and Root Vegetable Stew. Okay, so you're not going to like everything here.

Somehow, I'm at checkout, unloading items from my basket. I came to criticize, I left consuming. It's not the first time that's happened. Maybe Whole Foods isn't the most necessary addition to the area's shopping centers, but the real key is the variety it offers. In fact, I'm having trouble remembering why I thought it was a bad idea in the first place...until I emerge to a full parking lot as the lunchtime traffic vies for precious space.

Julia Smillie-Carey is none other than the genius behind STLtoday's "Ask **Julia**" column. You can email her your questions any time of night or day at askjulia@STLtoday.com, and read her answers every Tuesday right [here](#).

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