

○ SuperMarket

Sure, Central Market offers a dazzling array of choices in everything from apples to zucchini. But what you really get when you shop at this Austin, Texas grocery store is an experience.

BY RON LIEBER

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The first thing that hits you is the Texas-size abundance of the place: 17 varieties of apple; 30 kinds of sausage, all handmade behind a 75-foot-long butcher's counter; 18 blends of citrus juice; more than 200 varieties of olive oil; 500 cheeses. You could shop here every day for the rest of your life and still not taste everything in the store.

○ But what sets Central Market apart isn't its selection. Any store can stock its aisles with, say, couscous from Israel. What makes Central Market one of the most radically different stores in the United States, and one of the most popular tourist attractions in Austin, is that shopping here is a trip. "It's about the shopping experience, not about selection," says John Campbell, 48, vice president of Central Market, who helped open the 63,000-square-foot store in 1994 and who has run it ever since. "We want people to feel uplifted when they walk out of here."

An ordinary trip to an ordinary supermarket won't make your spirits soar. But Central Market lives in the experience economy — a place where stores offer the customer experiences that are so vivid that retailers could probably charge admission for them. At Central Market, five elements define what it means to be a truly super supermarket.

The Family Experience

Children and supermarkets can be a bad combination — unless children are made part of the supermarket experience from the beginning. That's what Central Market does: Each year, it spends thousands of dollars on helium, so that it can give a balloon to each child who visits the store. When kids come through the front door, they immediately discover a children's fruit counter, where 25 cents buys them any piece of fruit they want. And hardly a weekend goes by without a children's birthday party, complete with pizza baking by kids and printmaking using cut-up vegetables.

○ For those who don't yet have kids, Central Market is happy to help the process along: In 1995, it hosted the wedding of a couple who had met in its cheese section. For the event, Central Market staffers built a cheddar wedding arch, beneath which the happy couple exchanged vows. Afterward, guests threw rice — a fancy arborio.

The Educational Experience

With so many items to choose from, Central Market can intimidate even the most accomplished cook. The recipe for eliminating fear? Take a class at the store's cooking school, staffed by Roger Mollett, 43, Central Market's resident chef. For \$35, students in one class "Shop the Market" — in other words, wander the aisles in search of ingredients. After they've gathered several hundred dollars' worth of goodies, they repair to a kitchen upstairs, where they might prepare, for example, an eight-course meal for 20. "The school is not designed to make money," explains Campbell. "We're trying to make coming to the store an experience that's both educational and entertaining."

The Foodie Experience

A store that focuses on creating experiences needs employees who know how to facilitate them. That's where Jane King comes in. She's a foodie — that's her actual job title. King, 46, walks around the store all day, talking with customers about their cooking and eating habits. King has her regulars, people who consult her about every meal they're planning. But she also meets lots of strangers, people who are new to the store. "I have carte blanche to rip open any package in the store and give people a taste," she says, tearing into a box of biscuits that are made with wine. "Here, try some."

The Orienteering Experience

The boldest bet made by Campbell and his bosses at H-E-B Food Stores —

Central Market's 94-year-old, \$7.5 billion parent company — was to turn a piece of grocery wisdom inside out. For decades, grocers assumed that good design meant helping shoppers get in and out of a market as quickly as possible. Long aisles placed side by side, grocers reasoned, made it easy for customers to find what they came for and then head to the cash registers.

Central Market has no aisles. Instead, merchandise runs along a single path that winds through the building. Despite a few escape routes along the way, shoppers have little choice but to

walk past every section of the store. One benefit of this layout for Central Market: It allows for 20% more shelf space than a standard layout. One benefit to customers: They get an eyeful of the market's lavish presentation style.

The Laboratory Experience

Central Market is so different. Why, then, do customers put up with its oddities? For many of them, the experience is an experiment: They are happy to be part of the food laboratory that Campbell and his cowboy grocers are conducting on the frontiers of retailing. "We had no idea how customers would react to this," says Campbell. "They knew we would need their feedback, and they've given us an earful."

The store has also become a laboratory for testing new food concepts. Technicians at an independent grower, for instance, figured that if Central Market customers could adjust to a radical redesign of the grocery store, they might be good test subjects for a new vegetable. So the technicians sent shoppers home with samples of a new invention — "broccolini," a combination of broccoli and kale. Central Market customers tried it out and gave it a thumbs-up. Now the hybrid stalk can be found in H-E-B stores all over Texas.

The Central Market business experiment is also working. Last year, it began bringing in \$1 million a week on a regular basis. The store, which cost \$10 million to \$15 million to launch, needed two years to reach profitability. But it now enjoys a healthy net income, Campbell reports. "For a while, I was looking around town for a bridge that was high enough for me to jump off," he says. Not anymore: This spring, he's opening another Central Market outlet in Austin, just a few miles down the road from the current one.

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