

November, 7, 2004 . Perfect Bound . ÜBER MARKET . by Tyler Brulé

On a recent stopover in Miami, I had the misfortune of stepping into a branch of the Publix supermarket chain to purchase a carton of juice for my underequipped minibar. It could be that I was craving the wrong comestible in the wrong state or that I had been living on the opposite side of the Atlantic for far too long, but either way, I stood stunned in the juice section, unable to shake a single, disturbing thought: Erich Honecker's East Germany did have its upside – a luxurious lack of choice.

I was confronted with an aisle long enough for landing a small private aircraft. There were myriad brands touting an array of features I never considered in my daily intake of orange juice. Calcium boosted? Pulp free? Totally organic? Squeezed by hand? Reduced calories? Freedom of choice might be the fuel that powers democracies, but limitless choice can also delete years from an average consumer's life. At some point a worthy, right-minded think tank will mount a global survey about which nations spend the most time aimlessly meandering supermarket aisles. My guess is that the United States will top the list by a significant margin.

The current vogue for governments to tackle food-chain-sustainability issues like "fair farming" and genetic modification is certainly well intentioned but misses the point. While it's clear that tomatoes should never be bigger than pumpkins, what's less clear is how much legislation should govern the way stores buy, stock and market foodstuffs.

Clever supermarket C.E.O.'s might want to get a jump on the United States Department of Agriculture and add a new executive post to their organizational chart: C.E.E., for chief edibles editors. They would be brought in by chains like Safeway to select the best from the rest, cut out all the low-grade filler and refund lost time to the tens of millions of consumers who've been imprisoned by too much choice and too little quality. The smartest of the bunch would take the daring step to invest in a radical rethink of the whole supermarket experience and commission a study to come up with a food store that woos customers not with endless aisles of competing labels, but with a limited assortment of both essential and exclusive products.

My most pleasurable food-shopping experiences have always involved small-scale retailers that fully embrace the definition of focus. In St. Moritz, Bornatico does everything a full-scale grocery does in less than 1,000 square feet. Rather than 10 types of detergent, there are 2; for soy sauce, there's Kikkoman; for fruit and vegetables, there's everything you could hope for that's in season; and the wine selection stocks the best across a few key price points. In Toronto, the tightly edited aisles at Bruno's Fine Foods are a much more enjoyable place to spend time with a shopping cart than a superstore with towering shelving. And in Italy, where the strong national cuisine keeps the introduction of potentially troublesome foreign dishes at bay, well-stocked alimentari may be the wave of the future.

Somewhere between a Larry's Markets in Seattle and the friendly Korean deli, there's a happy middle ground that, if correctly nurtured, could be the foundation for a dynamic national chain. Aside from a more breezy, considered shopping experience, such a chain could do its bit for both the community and the environment. With more ministores serving smaller areas, the "village life" that's been eroded by the box-store business model might be restored.

For the decor, management would do well to jump a flight to Austria and borrow a few ideas from the MPreis chain. Founded by the Molk family, MPreis prides itself on hiring young architectural talent to design its stores. With no two of its branches alike, MPreis has done much to enhance the already strong Modernist architectural movement in Tyrol, as well as to demonstrate that a full-scale food-shopping experience doesn't have to cover several football fields to be a successful business. With about 120 stores, the Molks have worked with no less than 30 different architectural firms and are boldly unapologetic that their stores cost considerably more to build than those of their competitors. Using natural timber, solid glass walls, corrugated steel and natural stone, the tiny stores have become things of beauty, even tourist attractions. Couldn't neighborhoods in Chicago, valleys in the Catskills and suburban Atlanta use a bit of this?