

# Tropical Foods to open store in Dudley Square

By Taryn Luna Globe Correspondent February 04, 2015

Say goodbye to the stained checkered floor at Tropical Foods. There's no sign of the thick plastic strips that dangled in the entrance of the old supermarket in Dudley Square, either.

After selling hard-to-find ethnic foods from a bulging bodega for decades, the independent supermarket plans to open a much larger store next door to its original location on Wednesday.

The supermarket, which will triple the store's retail space, is a strikingly modern presence that stands out from neighboring buildings.

Years in the making, the store serves as a 44,000-square-foot symbol of revitalization efforts in a neighborhood long plagued by blight and neglect.

"It's a long time coming," said John Barros, chief of economic development for the city and the former executive director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

"There's been a lot of hard work in Roxbury by the city and residents planning for the opening of a business like Tropical. The development of that site is a milestone," Barros said.

A sign outside the original Tropical Foods location reads: "Roxbury's Neighborhood Supermarket since 1974."

Pastor Medina, a Cuban immigrant, founded the market as a small plantain shop called El Platanero, or The Banana Man, on the corner of Washington Street.

Medina's son-in-law, Ronn Garry Sr., bought the store in 1988 and renamed it Tropical Foods.

Garry expanded the business to a full-service grocery store and eventually sold it to his sons, Ronn Jr. and Randy Garry, in 2006.

Over time, the market outgrew its tight space.

Ronn Garry Jr. said the family began asking the Boston Redevelopment Authority to allow them to construct a bigger building in 1998, only to sit and watch as projects in other neighborhoods moved forward.

“Maybe 20 years ago it was a big store and met shoppers needs,” Garry said. “Today it doesn’t. It wasn’t luxurious. It wasn’t something you felt was modern.”

In 2011, the city requested proposals to develop the land adjacent to the old store. Tropical Foods and Madison Park Development Corp. won the bid.

Garry said the market has a leg up on competitors because it serves local residents unique products from their homelands.

Shoppers on a recent visit agreed as they picked up items like cassava, a root vegetable popular in Africa, Asia, and South America.

Roxbury resident Paul Williams shopped for African corned beef and perused the store’s flavored sodas on a recent visit.

“I’ve been coming here since the 1970s,” Williams said. “It’s got stuff you can’t find anywhere else.”

But other factors have also contributed to the store’s success.

Chain stores are notoriously reluctant to move into low-income neighborhoods, said David J. Livingston, a grocery business consultant based in Milwaukee.

In many cases, cities offer big grocery chains financial incentives to open stores in urban areas.

It’s hard to find a chain grocery near Tropical Foods.

But rather than wooing big grocers to do business in Roxbury, Boston’s late mayor Thomas M. Menino protected the store’s turf from the industry’s largest player.

Following his lead, city officials refused to endorse a developer’s plan to build an urban concept Walmart near Dudley Square in 2011.

They said it would undercut local businesses, including Tropical Foods.

“That’s very unusual. It just doesn’t happen,” Livingston said. “A lot of times small independents just don’t get favored for city projects. They don’t have the political clout and they don’t have the money to have any influence.”

But Tropical Foods’ future as the neighborhood leader is uncertain as retailers follow the migration of residents from the suburbs back to the city.

BJ’s Wholesale Club intends to open its first Boston grocery store about a half-mile from away.

Garry, the president of Tropical Foods, had expressed some concern about BJ's ability to buy in greater bulk and to draw customers with lower prices.

Now he hopes the new supermarket will help him fend off larger players.

The new store features 21,000 square feet of retail space and 14 check-out lanes.

It also offers a full-service seafood counter, a bakery, and a deli, amenities unavailable in the smaller footprint. Garry said the store is offering organic products for the first time.

He also hired 30 more employees and now has a staff of about 100 workers.

Christopher Jones, executive director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, said the store is an example of development he hopes will continue in the neighborhood.

"People are excited because it's a neighborhood store, a real neighborhood store, that has been used by long-term residents and could be a sign of more of these kind of economic development projects to come," Jones said. "You're talking about permanent jobs and facilities for local residents."

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