



MEIJER

Michigan's Homegrown Grocery...

Where Innovation is Legendary

BY DIANNA STAMPFLER • PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEIJER

In Michigan, Meijer has become a household name. A homegrown company rich in tradition, value and a growing dedication to local.

Hendrik Meijer was an innovator in 1934 when he purchased \$328.76 worth of merchandise (on credit) to start his North Side Grocery in Greenville, with his 14-year-old son, Fred, by his side. It was a bold move in the midst of the Depression, but it would be the first of many as the nation's first "supercenter" began to take shape.

Over the decades, Meijer was a leader on many fronts—using local newspapers and later television to advertise specials; implementing the use of metal shopping carts, electric conveyor belts and check-out scanners to enhance the customer experience; developing a strong female workforce during the height of the World War II; and offering 24-hour shopping.

By the early 1960s, the company was embarking on a growth spurt and was looking to rebrand itself. Reaching out to its own customers for inspiration, a contest was held to name the iconic Dutch Boy mascot. Soon, "Thrifty" was born and in 1962, the first Thrifty Acres opened—

a one-stop-shopping venue offering food and general merchandise. This marketing concept took Meijer through its next 30 years, as the company expanded throughout Michigan and beyond.

Today, Meijer boasts more than 190 stores in five states, employing more than 60,000 team members. With the growing world of Internet shopping, Meijer was quick to develop online options to cater to new markets. Mobile and social media marketing followed—especially in the department of fresh foods. Through these channels, would-be chefs and foodies can find recipes, grilling videos, wine pairings and other resources to make quality meal preparation easier than ever before.

At the helm of these latest initiatives is the culinary team at the state-of-the-art Meijer Innovation Center (MIC) located in GRid70 in downtown Grand Rapids. The four-story, 6000-square-foot, modern-designed building—one of only a few design hubs of its kind in the world—is home to test marketing facilities not only for Meijer, but also Amway, Steelcase and Wolverine World Wide. Utilizing shared spaces, this urban co-work collaboration facility offers a creative environment for generating ideas for some of West Michigan's largest and most noted businesses.

For Meijer, the opening of GRid70 in May 2011, means things are really cooking in the kitchen. Under the direction of Corporate Research Chef Ray Sierengowski, Associate Research Chef Jen Gritters and Culinary Research Intern Daniela Pocklington, the culinary team is responsible for developing, testing and ultimately delivering hundreds of new products each year for shoppers.

"Not only do we have our main culinary team, but we have the great honor of sharing the space with 12 other product developers and quality assurance food scientists," Sierengowski says. "They help us do all the testing we need to bring the future of food to Meijer customers."

Prior to the opening of GRid70, much of Sierengowski's "work" was done either at home or in the kitchen at Meijer's commissary. Now, research is done in an expansive space, painted in vibrant colors and inspiring creative culinary ideas.

Sierengowski—a charismatic booming voice of a man—is a "food scientist" (think Food Network's Alton Brown). A graduate of the culinary arts and food science program at Oakland University, he has racked up years of experience at Morton's Restaurant, as well as serving as lead food scientist at Sara Lee and Kellogg.

He's also a food writer for culinary and food science trade magazines, is author of *Fire in the Kitchen: A Cookbook for Couples* and in 2013, Meijer is expected to release his *The Step by Step Chef* cookbook, which will provide busy families with easy to follow recipes, incorporating many fresh and local ingredients.

And where did the "Step by Step" name come from? It's the basic philosophy of developing recipes that are easy to follow—taking those dishes that the consumers enjoy in restaurants and then breaking it down into 1, 2, 3 simple steps to something that can be made at home, using products sourced at Meijer.

It's these products that Sierengowski and his team are responsible for developing. From the "Organic" and "Gold" brands to those items made fresh and packaged for sale out of the deli, these chefs are always thinking, creating and improving on the products they put their name on.

"The misconception is that local brands are inferior to national brands," says Pocklington. In reality, the Meijer team takes an aggressive approach to test countless other brands and then develops its own recipes which are tastier, healthier and more cost effective, thus delivering a better overall product to consumers. As many as 700 products are launched into the marketplace each year.

Before a product hits the shelves, it undergoes a series of tastings and rankings to tweak recipes until they're ready to be launched to the public. Luckily for Sierengowski, he's got plenty of "volunteers" inside GRid70 willing to lend a hand—or, mouth—as it were. To reciprocate, chef Ray willingly "volunteers" to try out shoes, chairs and other products made by his fellow innovators.

Once recipes hit the production line, the testing continues—in-store, by associates trained during an extensive three-tier ambassador program. And you thought they were just being nice offering samples to you during your Saturday shopping trips. The truth is, these ambassadors are looking for reaction from shoppers as to what they like, or

don't like; how sales of products increase after a day of testing; and how many repeat purchases are made.

At the "Apprentice" level, employees are taught basic knife skills and are given tips on produce and storage. As of October 2012, 1800 individuals in five states were certified at this level. At the "Culinary Assistant" level, the focus is on more advanced cooking methods. Finally, those who reach the "Culinarian" level are involved in the development of recipes, are among the most qualified of the on-premise product testing team members.

In addition to its product development facility in downtown Grand Rapids, Meijer operates the Purple Cow Creamery in Holland, a nut roasting facility in Grandville and a central kitchen and bakery in Middlebury, Indiana. Other products are outsourced, many to local producers in Michigan or the Great Lakes Region.

Meijer also has its own Grand Gourmet line of cooking accessories and products—from holiday baking items to grilling utensils and everything in between. "We've got it all—seasonal gadgets to gizmos to groceries," says Sierengowski.

It's not all just about selling products at Meijer—the culinary team is also out there doing demonstrations and educating the public at food festivals, community events, on YouTube videos and on local television stations. These opportunities give the team the unique opportunity to showcase the overall brand, while keeping the focus on fresh, local and affordable food options.

Among the annual events that the team makes appearances at are the Grand Rapids International



Wine Beer & Food Festival, held Nov. 8-10, 2012 at DeVos Place and Chefs Challenge, held each spring at Boyne Mountain Resort. The team is also out there in the digital world as well, developing relationships with customers on various social media channels.

It's outlets like this which allow these talented chefs the chance to engage and educate customers, answering questions and opening up the dialogue, in a fun and innovative way.

"We are honored that the company has the confidence in us to be the voice of Meijer's culinary brand," Sierengowski says. □

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- ON THE ROAD**
- Find the Meijer Culinary Team on the road...
- Nov. 1-2** Saginaw Women's Expo
 - Nov. 8-10** Grand Rapids International Wine, Beer & Food Festival
 - Feb. 1-2** Lansing Women's Expo
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Cranberry Walnut Couscous Salad

INGREDIENTS:

- 8 ounce box whole wheat couscous
- ½ cup dried cranberries
- ½ cup chopped walnuts

DRESSING:

- ½ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup orange juice
- 1 teaspoon orange zest
- ½ teaspoon salt

INSTRUCTIONS:

Prepare couscous as directed on box. Fluff with a fork and cool. In a serving bowl, combine the couscous, cranberries and walnuts.

In a small bowl whisk together the dressing ingredients. Pour over salad; toss to coat. Add walnuts just before you plan on eating (it keeps them nice and crunchy).

Bacon Wrapped Dates

INGREDIENTS:

- 24 dried dates, pitted
- 24 Marcona almonds, toasted
- 12 slices bacon
- one, 8-ounce package cream cheese
- tooth picks

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat oven to 400°F. Cut date in half and open, place almond into one half and fill the other half with cream cheese (approximately 1 teaspoon). Close date.

Cut bacon slices in half. Wrap each date in half of a bacon slice and secure with a tooth pick.

Place dates on parchment-lined baking sheet. Bake for 10 minutes, flip dates and bake 10 minutes more or until bacon has reached desired level of doneness. Baking time will vary based on thickness of bacon slices. Serve hot.

Roasted Butternut Squash Salad

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 bag diced butternut squash
- 2 tablespoons mild olive oil
- 2 tablespoons pure maple syrup
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon cracked pepper
- 3 tablespoons dried cranberries
- ¼ cup balsamic vinaigrette
- 8 ounces baby arugula, washed and spun dry
- 1/2 cup walnuts halves, toasted
- 3/4 cup grated Parmesan

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. In a large bowl, toss butternut squash with olive oil, maple syrup, salt and cracked pepper. Spread on a roasting pan and roast for 15 to 20 minutes, turning once, until tender. Add cranberries to the baking sheet for the last 5 minute

Place arugula in a large salad bowl and add roasted squash mixture, walnuts and Parmesan. Spoon vinaigrette over salad and toss well. Serve immediately.

Fully Loaded Smashed Potato Fritters

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 pounds of Meijer Fully Loaded Smashed potato salad
- 2 cups flour
- 4 eggs
- 2 tablespoons water
- 2 cups Italian bread crumbs

INSTRUCTIONS:

Put the flour into a bowl and set aside. In a second bowl, beat the eggs with water. Put bread crumbs in a third bowl. With a small scoop, scoop the potato salad then toss the ball in flour, dip into the egg wash and roll into the bread crumbs.

Deep fry fritters at 350F, until golden and brown. Drain fritters on a plate lined with a paper towel.

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