



Ethnic Cool *Grocery stores feed ethnic trends*

My uncle often tells us the story of how he was embarrassed to eat his lunch in school because it was so different from what the other kids were eating. He'd prop up his textbooks and hide behind them in the cafeteria. It reminds me of the play on the Greek dish mousaka in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* – you'll know which scene I mean if you've seen the movie.

But times have changed. It's now trendy to eat – and shop – ethnic. And there are more ethnic products on mainstream supermarket shelves to make it easier to do so. Proforma Consulting Limited in Mississauga, Ont., tracks the grocery retail industry. Jonathan Mitrovich, vice-president of key accounts, says in 1994 the mainstream big-chain supermarkets devoted about four feet of shelf space, length-wise, to ethnic food products. In 2004, that figure jumped to 12 feet, length-wise, including all the shelves from top to bottom. So in 10 years, he says, “we've seen the size of the category grow by almost 10 times.”

While that may be true, mainstream big-chain supermarkets won't eclipse ethnic supermarkets and the role they serve anytime soon. For one thing, they could never carry the same variety of food products. For example, you might be able to find 10 brands of soy sauce in a mainstream supermarket. “Ten is quite a lot already,” says Melina Hung, marketing manager of T&T Supermarket Inc. in Vancouver. “But we have 150.” T&T has 12 Asian stores across Western and Central Canada.

But it isn't just about offering ethnic foods, it's about offering the culture, the language, the nuances, says Hung. Ashwin Joshi puts it this way: for people who strongly identify with an ethnicity or for recent immigrants these



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stores provide comfort. Joshi is director of the MBA program and associate professor of marketing at the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto. He adds that South Asian stores, for example, are laid out as they would be back home. Not that those ways are very attractive if you were born and raised here, he says, “but there's a familiarity that is reassuring.”

Robert Krider, professor of marketing at the Faculty of Business Administration at Simon Fraser University in B.C., says ethnic supermarkets also offer a positioning on freshness that may differ from what mainstream supermarkets offer. Krider, who has studied grocery retail in Asia, explains that Asian supermarkets in Canada copy, as best as they can within the limitations of our regulations, the Asian idea of freshness. This may

explain why, when it comes to perishables, the traditional street markets in Asia are still more successful than Western-style supermarkets.

Besides offering ethnic consumers freshness, familiarity and variety, ethnic supermarkets serve another group: Canadians who want to recreate an ethnic dish they had in a restaurant. While these consumers are not the target audience, when they want the ethnic experience at home, they may venture into ethnic supermarkets for the ingredients. We're becoming more “cosmopolitan,” says Hung, and more willing to try different things.

We're also fairly trendy and maybe just a little curious. As for my uncle, I suspect whatever he was having for lunch then would be cool now.

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Photos courtesy, T&T Supermarket Inc.