

The Road to Wellville

Natural Food Lovers Rejoice! Whether You Are Looking for Organic Coffee, Sustainably-Grown Produce or Hormone-Free Steak, We've Found the Best Healthy Retailers Sarasota Has to Offer

By Fred W. Wright Jr.



Above and Right: Richard's Whole Foods has managed to hold its own against giant competitors in Sarasota since 1979. Far Right: Whole Foods, now a dominant downtown presence on Lemon Street, is just a small part of the Austin, TX-based retail giant (\$5.6 billion annual sales).

As most people will admit, the first step to eating healthfully is to shop healthfully. Fortunately, Sarasota offers healthy eaters a wide range of choices, from the commercial chains to the weekend farmer's market. Naturally, shoppers develop favorites—a certain brand available only at one particular health food store or green section of the supermarket.

But exploration is also recommended. Get out of the "comfort shopping zone." More and more supermarkets, not traditionally seen as meccas for health food selections, are changing their wares, making major marketing efforts to reach out to the shopper who is looking to eat well naturally.

For example, the Tampa-based **Sweetbuy Supermarket** chain launched in March a new three-star rating system to highlight the nutritional values of its products. The chain now labels hundreds of its products that meet the chain's "nutritious" formula that was created by a panel of academic health professionals.

The Guiding Stars program uses one, two or three stars that stand for good, better or the best combination of nutritional values. Foods can get bonus points for having dietary fiber, vitamins, minerals and whole grains while they can lose points for having saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol and added sodium or sugars.

Typically, the best-rated foods are fresh and minimally processed. The rating goes down as products lessen in nutritional value due to additives and processing. For example, frozen foods are often processed more than

other packaged foods. So of the estimated 300 items in Sweetbay's On The Go Bistro frozen entrées, only a few got a star rating.

The stores offer cafés for eating on-site or take-away, and there is an extensive choice each day. Some of the food selections may surprise—if you forget that Sweetbay isn't strictly a health food supermarket. There's lasagna and beef and, sometimes, guilty pleasures for the palate.

But the consumer does get more support for buying healthy here than ever before.

In the more traditional world of the health food store arena, Sarasota is clearly dominated by **Whole Foods**, located downtown on Lemon Street. It's the "uber" supermarket for health foods, sprawling and well-stocked, often with selections not found anywhere else. It's a feast for the eyes.

The standard Whole Foods chain amenities are also present, including adjacent garage parking—and valet parking, if desired—and an indoor/outdoor café where shoppers can gnosh healthy as well as shop or take-away.

Whole Foods is lovingly referred to as "whole paycheck" by some locals. In other words, it's not bargain-basement shopping. "You're not going to go there if you're shopping for a family of five," noted one local.

It's true, in some cases organics can cost up to 50 or 100



percent more than their conventional counterparts. Yet, there's no denying that Whole Foods is environmentally friendly with a huge inventory of organic products.

And if the high price is a concern, consider Consumer Reports' recent report on organic purchasing. To get the most bang for your organic buck, the report suggests buying organic products that the U.S. Department of Agriculture says retain high levels of pesticides when grown using chemicals, even after thorough washing. This includes apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, spinach and strawberries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, and red raspberries.

The store goes the extra mile by supporting local organic farmers. It also has a large specialty section with varieties you can't find anywhere else. Publix may carry one type of organic tomatoes. Whole Foods carries six.

They hold a variety of seminars, cooking classes and wine tastings (there's a huge wine selection) and carry green cleaning supplies that you can't find anywhere else as well.

There's an entire counter of prepared meats—roast beef, steak and all of those red meat selections not always associated with healthy eating. Some can be sliced to-go.

For those with a "healthy" sweet tooth, Whole Foods has a huge selection of exotic chocolates, more than any other health food store. There's actually a floor-to-ceiling chocolate nook near the prepared food sections.

Richard's Whole Foods has been a mainstay for vitamins

and supplements in Sarasota for years. There are no less than four different locations. The location on Bay Vista Street sells a great deal of products in bulk, ideal for people who do their own baking or are seeking seeds, beans, nuts or dried fruit in volume.

And while the Richard's stores tend to be small (by comparison to their mega big brothers), the attention to customers' special orders more than compensates. The staff is helpful and friendly. Also, the stores do sometimes carry locally made products—samples or small selections.

The Granery was the first big health food store to come to Sarasota, prior to Whole Foods' arrival. One popular amenity is the ready-made food bar, making it easy for shoppers looking for a healthy lunch or a healthy dinner to make a quick stop. Traditionally there are big salads, some soups and veggie chili.

Shoppers can eat in as well at The Granery. They have tables inside and out.

And the target audience here isn't solely vegans and vegetarians by any means. There are ample natural meat and seafood sections for health-conscious people who like their meats.

There's a large vitamin and supplement section too, and the staff can often be found wandering the aisles, offering help and answering questions. The front of the store

provides flyers and bulletins about local classes, seminars and alternative health organizations.

Not to be overlooked, though, is the very casual and very sprawling **Saturday Farmer's Market** that stretches from Lemon Avenue (about a block from the front of Whole Foods) to the downtown Five Points intersection—about three blocks long altogether (see our full coverage in this issue's iSpot, page 12).

Since it's a farmer's market, there's no health food exclusivity here, but there are always numerous vendors offering health-oriented products, including several organic product stands. There are also vendors with such items as Bavarian breads along with herbs and lettuce.

And there's live entertainment—so you can dance while you rejoice in your newly found health food zone. **U**

Saturday Farmer's Market



Our Fab Five Health Food Stores

Sweetbay Supermarkets

A chain of markets located entirely in Florida, composed of 85 Sweetbay stores and 16 Kash n' Karry stores. Company is headquartered in Plant City, Florida and is a part of the Belgium-based Delhaize Group. For the location nearest you, visit www.sweetbaysupermarket.com.

Whole Foods Market

This Austin, Texas-based natural foods grocer now owns 191 locations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. 1451 First Street, 941.955.8500
www.wholefoodsmarket.com

Richard's Whole Foods

Proudly based in Sarasota since 1979, with various locations throughout the city. For the location nearest you, visit www.richardswwholefoods.com.

The Granery

The Granery stores have been in business for over twenty years. The original Granery located at 1930 Stickney Point Rd., was sold to Al Gore in January, 1998 (the former Vice President also owns a Mother Earth store in the city). 1930 Stickney Point Road, 941.924.4754 and 1279 Beneva Road, 941.365.3700

Saturday Farmer's Market

Lemon Street to Five Points, 941.951.2727