

## **Vegetarian Journal Mar/Apr 1998**

### **Surveying Supermarkets**

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The Vegetarian Resource Group recently surveyed a number of major supermarket chains by phone and fax to see if they carry certain vegan foods and organic produce. Twelve chains responded. A similar survey was conducted by mail two years ago when 11 chains responded. The total number of individual stores accounted for each time was around 1,800.

Only a few years ago, the average supermarket probably would have sent a customer searching for a veggie burger to a natural foods store a couple of miles down the road. But now the veggie burger business, as well as the market for vegetarian, vegan, and natural food items like tofu, soy milk and organic produce, is booming.

Supermarkets are responding to an increased demand for healthy, vegetarian products. Every major supermarket we surveyed reported carrying veggie burgers and tofu. Just two years ago a similar survey conducted by The Vegetarian Resource Group showed that supermarkets were just beginning to carry veggie burgers in large quantities. A number of supermarkets at that time said that the general public was more interested in buying tofu.

However, some stores did seem to sense a growing demand for vegetarian foods. For instance, the Hanover Consumer Co-Op in New Hampshire carried five types of veggie hot dogs, five types of veggie burgers, eight types of tofu and even five types of tempeh in 1995. They also carried EdenSoy soy milk and rice milk.

Although supermarkets continue to offer more products for vegetarians and vegans, few supermarkets have caught up to chains like Hanover. For vegans, the availability of soy milk and rice milk has remained constant over the past couple of years. The nondairy milk products are still not available at every major supermarket chain, but one or both are offered at 67% of surveyed markets.

The market for veggie hot dogs doesn't quite compare to the one for veggie burgers, but the hot dogs are available at 42% of the chains we surveyed, compared to only 9% of chains surveyed two years ago. Tempeh is available at only 25% of the supermarkets, and only a few people from the chains had any idea what the product was. However, many were eager to hear a description of tempeh.

Perhaps the most growing demand for natural foods has been in the area of organic produce. Although supermarkets were not asked if they carried organic produce two years ago, many supermarkets commented on the growing consumer interest in this area, and every supermarket reported carrying it in at least some of its stores. For example, Tops Markets carries it in 25% of its stores, while Grand Union boasts 70 different varieties of organic produce.

As a result of the growing number of vegetarians and health conscious consumers, more stores are creating natural foods sections in their stores. Only 9% of supermarket chains reported having their own natural foods section in 1995, but 42% of the stores surveyed in 1997 said they had separate sections in at least some of their stores. Some, like Giant Food Stores, Inc. in Pennsylvania, said they were in the process of creating a separate natural foods section.

Smith's Management and Hannaford Brothers both said they offer almost all of the vegan, vegetarian and natural food items we asked them if they carried. Hannaford also made it a point to mention that they carry wheat-free and gluten-free products. D'agostino Supermarkets in New York answered yes to carrying every natural foods product in the survey.

Supermarkets respond to demand. Each chain has individual stores that offer a greater variety of natural foods than its other stores because of the individual requests from different communities. The demand for vegetarian, vegan and organic products is clearly on the rise. There will always be obscure items that succeed through the little health food store because of their amazing properties, and there will always be products that major supermarket chains cannot carry. In another five years, though, the customer searching for tempeh in a major supermarket will probably just have to go down to aisle 4 rather than go down the road a couple of miles to the natural foods store.

