

At Whole Foods' Newark opening, organic smiles to go with the food



A breaking bread store opening ceremony with Mayor Ras Baraka as Whole Foods opened a new 29,000 square foot store in Newark, NJ. 3/1/17 (Ed Murray | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)



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NEWARK -- Cheerful looks were on the faces of the cashiers, clerks, butchers and shoppers as Newark's long-awaited [Whole Foods supermarket](#) opened for business Wednesday morning.

There were organic smiles to go with the food, as proud employees eager to make positive first impressions asked customers how they could help them and, if needed, escorted them to the proper aisle.

"Did you enjoy your visit?" Lanaja Creamer asked from behind her checkout counter, with a grin warm enough to melt the frozen foods section (all the way back in aisle B).

The shopper, Dale Colston, smiled back and said she had, placing her Thai shrimp salad (\$10.99), and mini key lime cheesecake (\$2.99), on the conveyor to be rung up.

"I came to buy lunch, and I'll be here," said Colston, the principal librarian at the Newark Public Library.

Colston, who had grabbed a press release about the new store for the library's records, had just attended a grand opening ceremony where Newark Mayor Ras Baraka and Whole Foods' northeast regional president, Christina Minardi, literally broke bread together in a company tradition at store openings, pulling apart loaves of challah.

"This is my 40th store opening, and I have never seen a crowd like this," Minardi, who lives in Wayne, told several hundred shoppers, employees and officials.

After years of planning and construction that dates back to the administration of former mayor and now U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, the crowd gathered in the atrium of the [Hahne & Company mixed-use complex](#) on Broad Street.

The Hahne project by L&M Development Partners includes Whole Foods and other businesses, as well as a Rutgers arts center and 160 market-rate and affordable apartments, all occupying what was once Newark's preeminent department store.

"This is an example of what we need in Newark and how the city is growing," said Baraka, who thanked Whole Foods for "getting us in the game" by offering a high-end grocery offering.

Charles Smith is one of the many Newark residents filling the 145 news jobs at Whole Foods. The \$12.50 an hour that Smith is paid isn't the most he's ever made, "but it's fine," he said, especially with the health benefits he receives, and his 20 percent discount on food.

"Growing up, I really didn't eat too healthy, well, I didn't really eat too healthy foods," said Smith, 30, who works in the produce department. "So, this is helping me with that."

Another Newark resident, Daryl Johnson, was in the atrium listening to the ceremony just before the store's 8:30 a.m. opening, gripping his red shopping cart.

"I'm ready to shop," said Johnson, 55, adding that the Newark store will save him regular trips to Montclair, where for years he had shopped at the Whole Foods there.

"Now I can walk to Whole Foods," said Johnson, who is on disability, and wore a brace on his right wrist.

Shoppers filing into the store found a receiving line of beaming Whole Foods employees who applauded as they walked by, past the checkout counters and a refrigerated bin containing last-minute staples by Whole Foods' 365 Everyday Value brand. They included cartons of a dozen large brown cage-free eggs for \$2.99; sticks of "grade AA" salted and unsalted butter for \$3.49 a pound; and whole and reduced fat milk.

At the meat and seafood counter, the double-cut, bone-in ribeye steaks were a carnivore's bargain at \$8.99 a pound, while around the corner at the bakery section, .40-pound cups of rice pudding (\$4.59) were labelled "vegan."

In aisle H, clerk John Werts was assisting shoppers and checking on the cereal, juice, cookies and soda.

There were cartons of Coco Libre organic coconut milk, at \$4.99 for 33.8 ounces on sale at 2 cartons for \$7; and Canadian Farm Organic brand's Honey Nut O's cereal, at \$4.49 for an 9.5-ounce box, also on sale at 2 boxes for \$7.

Werts had worked for three years at the West Orange Whole Foods store, and was among several veteran employees moved to Newark to set an example for workers new the company's customer-relations culture.

"You start to build relationships with the customers after a while: 'Anybody seen John?'" said Werts, who lives in Irvington. "That's one of the best things about working at Whole Foods. Makes you feel good about working here."