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Print Date: Friday, January 11, 2008

Last modified: Wednesday, January 9, 2008 4:10 PM PST

Searching for a Nugget

By: Art Garcia

When Nugget Market opens in El Dorado Hills on Jan. 30, it will present the usual offerings of most major supermarkets, plus a lot more.

Among the extras: a "chef-led" kitchen and its prepared deli items, a bakery with scratch artisan breads and upstairs seating that overlooks the Town Center pond and the Sierra foothills.

The local store will be the 10th in the family run chain that started 81 years ago in Woodland, the location of its present corporate headquarters and the home of two Nugget markets. A store opened last year in Roseville and No. 11 premieres this year in Elk Grove.

Nugget moved into a 56,000-square-foot building vacated by Ralph's supermarket, the Southern California chain that made an unsuccessful run at cracking the Northern California grocery market.

The space previously housed a supermarket so why has it taken Nugget so long to move in?

"This store has been totally redone," said Eric Stille, 49, company president whose great grandfather and grandfather started Nugget in 1926. His father, Gene Stille, is board chairman.

"People will hardly recognize it, which was part of the intention," Stille said. "We had to make it into a Nugget."

Besides adding the upstairs loft, Nugget expanded the store's kitchen to five times the size it was. Each Nugget store's decor and resulting cachet are different, but all have a similar general interior theme, same as their exteriors.

"Everything is very creative," said Susan FaGalde, an El Dorado Hills resident who is familiar with the Nugget store in Sacramento. "It's a very appealing feeling when you walk in. It's way different than other supermarkets. It's like walking into a painting."

Nugget Market, Inc., owns and operates three Food 4 Less stores in Northern California, it purchased two Alpha Beta stores in Sacramento, three Ralph's locations in the greater Sacramento area and the Stilles bought the vacant Sam's Town Center in Cameron Park, where it opened a Food 4 Less store.

Last year, Nugget was ranked No. 13 among America's "100 Best Companies to Work For" as surveyed by Fortune magazine. It's known for "taking care" of its employees - free food, parties, field trips, pay for unused sick days, flexibility, a fun place to work - a culture whose reputation has spread.

Stille said there were 2,000 applicants, primarily from Folsom to Cameron Park, for the approximately 150 positions at the El Dorado Hills store soon after word of the local opening got out. Hiring is nearly completed.

Employees are called "teammates and associates."

"We've got an amazing team put together," Eric said. "Just a few more courtesy clerks to hire. Pretty much everyone else is on staff and training at other Nugget stores. It helps being a top-100 company. It's a great foundation and creates a desire for people to come work for us."

He calls Nugget stores "the ultimate one-stop shop, offering conventional groceries, as well as hard to find groceries, plus organics and natural foods.



A complete overhaul of an existing building in Town Center was needed to capture Nugget supermarket's unique style and design. Andrew Nixon/The Telegraph

"We try to offer the best of all worlds but still offer our groceries at a value that beats the competition."

The El Dorado Hills store's produce department will be the largest of any of the Nugget stores. The freshness of Nugget's perishables is "something we hang our hat on," Stille said.

"What impressed me most was the fruit and vegetables," FaGalde said. "The display was a work of art. Everything is very creative."

The wine selection will be impressive too, he promises, with wines from El Dorado and Amador counties, as well as Napa and Europe.

Stille claims his stores sell for less than conventional chain stores and to prove it each Nugget features a huge scoreboard high on the front wall, above the check-out stands and used for what he calls the "price challenge."

"Any guest (what Nugget folks call customers) can go shop at a full-service supermarket and bring their groceries into our store. We'll rescan them, compare the receipts and beat their price or pay the guest double the difference, plus \$10."

Nugget associates also do blind price surveys of 25 random items sold by the competition then report back with the prices.

"We win eight out of 10 times," he said.

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