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With Tesco, second British invasion begins

By Tom Burfield



Consumers check out the produce Nov. 8 at the opening of a Los Angeles Fresh & Easy store owned by British retailer Tesco.

(Nov. 16) After being bombarded by a bigger-is-better business model by supermarket retailers over the past several years, Southern California consumers got a dose of something completely different when Tesco, the British retail behemoth, launched the first of its compact Fresh & Easy Neighborhood Market locations Nov. 8.

Probably the most obvious difference between Fresh & Easy locations and today's traditional supermarkets is the size.

While some chains describe their massive stores in terms of how many football fields they could hold, Fresh & Easy might talk in terms of basketball courts — just over two would fit in a typical 10,000-square-foot store.

The 1,500-square-foot produce department is the first thing you see, but you won't find any fancy fixtures or expensive wood display tables.

Instead, there's an aisle that's maybe 100 feet long, with three shelves laden with dozens of black reusable plastic containers on one side and four- and five-shelf refrigerated cases on the other.

Nearly all of the produce is packed under the store's own Fresh & Easy label.

The number of organic items seems to vary. On opening day at a Los Angeles store, organics were evident throughout the department, but in an Anaheim store about a week later, there were only a handful.

Typically, about 9% of the stores' 200 or so produce items are organic, said Chris Harris, Fresh & Easy's produce category manager.

On Nov. 14, the Anaheim store carried five varieties of apples: four-count packs of fuji's and galas, 10-pound mesh bags of granny smiths and red delicious merchandised together on the produce aisle, and some rose gold apples in the "Ideas" section at the end of the row, where new or unusual items are featured.

Other items included mangoes, papayas, avocados from Mexico, two- and three-count packs of green and colored bell peppers and 12-ounce bags of red, yellow and orange baby sweet peppers. Pineapples were one of the few items not wrapped or bagged, but they had scannable tags attached.

Bonita-brand bananas were displayed in their original cardboard containers.

Just about everything is packaged in clamshell containers, overwrapped trays or shrink wrap with scannable Universal Product Codes. The label on all items indicates where the



product was grown and provides a "best if used by" date.

On the refrigerated side were red and green grapes in clamshell containers, four-count kiwifruit, 12-ounce bags of fresh cranberries, a variety of clamshell containers of cut fruit, and fruit salad made with "hand-selected" items.

There were punnets of organic baby spinach and organic baby leaf spring mix, seven varieties of bagged salads and overwrapped head lettuce. The store carried nine kinds of It's All Good-brand refrigerated items like veggie chicken fillets and veggie beef strips.

Comparing prices is difficult because of Fresh & Easy's unit pricing versus per-pound prices at other stores, but a couple of comparisons with a nearby Vons store showed Fresh & Easy offering 16-ounce clamshells of strawberries at \$2.99 compared with \$4.99 at Vons; a head of lettuce was 98 cents, compared with \$1.99 at Vons, and a gold pineapple at Fresh & Easy was \$2.98, compared with \$4.99 regular price at Vons, but on sale for a loyalty card price of \$2.99.

Six stores were involved in the first wave of grand openings. Store officials were in Las Vegas to kick off more stores the week of Nov. 11, and openings were scheduled in San Diego and Arizona before the end of the year.

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