

A mini-empire at Bi-Rite

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Sam Mogannam stays in constant motion as he zips through Bi-Rite Market, the San Francisco grocery that has been in his family since the 1960s - answering questions, exchanging hugs with customers, and showing off the store's densely packed inventory and locavore credentials.

He sweeps his arm to encompass the wine wall and the array of cheeses; clammers up a ladder to the rooftop herb garden and beehives; peers into the meat locker where huge lamb haunches await butchering; darts down the block to the Creamery, Bi-Rite's ice cream shop; and around the corner to 18 Reasons, its new "community space for art and food."

"We put the kitchen in the heart of the store because we want people to see and smell what we do," he said, motioning at the narrow space where a corps of workers busily chopped vegetables, assembled sandwiches and stuffed sausages. "We're trying to stimulate all the senses, not just the palate."

Bi-Rite is a mini-empire built on sustainable food, much of it local and organic, packed into several small storefronts in the heart of the Mission, a stone's throw from Dolores Park. As the owner, Mogannam marshals 75 store workers into a constant ballet to handle some 40,000 grocery purchases a month.

Mogannam, 41, a former chef who looks like an earnest grad student, speaks fluidly in the language of new-millennium gastronomy.

"Food is critical in our lives; we need to be more conscious of what we eat, how we eat, who we share it with, really understand the sourcing and provenance of what provides us with our energy," he said. "We're very fortunate to live in an amazing place in the world where a lot of people are fanatic about their food and what they put in their bodies."

A foodie haven

The store attracts a cadre of loyal foodies. Joann Kochevar and her husband, David, who live in Oakdale (Stanislaus County), come by whenever they're in San Francisco.

"The variety, the freshness - I could stay here for days," she said as she selected Fujis for a Thanksgiving pie.

Bi-Rite brings in annual revenues of about \$4,000 per square foot. By contrast, traditional supermarket revenues are \$200 to \$300 per square foot and Whole Foods brings in \$900 to \$1,000 per square foot, he

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said.

"I see Bi-Rite as one of those shining lights that shows how we could redevelop a regional food system in the Bay Area," said Anya Fernald, director of Live Culture Co., an Oakland company that consults on sustainable food and agriculture. "Sam has pulled together a clear, tight vision. He's building a really strong supply chain and developing lateral businesses."

Mogannam is also unique for his community commitment, she said.

"He's made the bold choice of making his store and his neighborhood better and better, rather than trying to replicate it and do it in Danville," Fernald said.

Mogannam's father and uncle bought Bi-Rite in 1964 and he basically grew up there, taking the streetcar from West Portal after school starting at age 6 to sweep, stock shelves and eventually work the cash register.

"I vowed never to be in the grocery business," he said.

Instead, he became a chef, training in Switzerland for a year, cooking at Oakland's Pasta Shop, and opening his own Financial District restaurant, Rendezvous du Monde.

But after the restaurant's landlord raised his rent, Mogannam's father persuaded him to take over Bi-Rite, which had been in other hands for several years. Mogannam decided to put a kitchen in the store - a relatively new concept for 1998. The location wasn't yet chi-chi; most shop windows still had iron gates, there was gang activity and persistent drunks on the street, he said.

"We took over the space, gutted it, put in a kitchen," he said. "People in the neighborhood remembered me as a kid and thought I was crazy."

Over time, the grocery expanded. Mogannam's wife, Anne Walker, a pastry chef, originally worked out of a rented kitchen making baked goods for the store. When space down the block opened up, Walker and her staff took it over. They wanted a retail presence, but the area already had a surfeit of bakeries.

"We felt like ice cream would do well with the community," Walker said.

Creamery expanding

With flavors like honey lavender, Earl Grey and ricanelas (cinnamon ice cream with snickerdoodles), the Bi-Rite Creamery now produces some 450 gallons a week. It soon will expand next door, almost doubling its size.

About 18 months ago, Bi-Rite rented a minuscule storefront around the corner to launch 18 Reasons, a nonprofit community center focused on increasing connections between consumers and producers of food. About 500 residents pay \$40 a year to be members, and other businesses have chipped in as sponsors.

The nonprofit hosts food education classes, winemaker dinners and conversations with farmers. Upcoming events include Butterfest '09, "a two-hour extravaganza of all things butter."

A couple of years ago Bi-Rite bought a small plot in Sonoma where it grows tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, squash, beans and greens.

"Simon Richard, our produce buyer, is an ex-farmer and was itching to get his hands dirty and grow food again," Mogannam said. "We decided to take our chances and start growing crops." A neighbor read about the farm and offered up her Noe Valley backyard, where Bi-Rite now grows "inner-city greens."

Local produce

The 5,000 pounds of produce the Sonoma farm produces are a minuscule percentage of what the store carries, but is another step in getting closer to food sources, he said.

So are the beehives on the roof, which produce a honey that tastes of jasmine and fennel, both found in abundance in the area. "The beekeepers were sweet enough to name the two queens after my daughters, Olive and Zoe," Mogannam said.

Zoe, who is 6, is already asking her parents when she'll start working in the store the way her dad did as a kid.

"She thinks she wants to be an ice cream scooper," Mogannam said. "I'd put money into seeing her in the store this coming summer a few hours a week. The staff digs her; she knows she'll have a ball."

-- Bi-Rite Market, 3639 18th St. (between Guerrero and Dolores streets), San Francisco, (415) 241-9760; www.biritemarket.com

-- Bi-Rite Creamery, 3692 18th St., (415) 626-5600, biritecreamery.com

-- 18 Reasons, 593 Guerrero St., (415) 241-9760, www.18reasons.org

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