

Public Market in Strip to open Sept. 10, feature specialty items

By Michael Machosky
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From homemade pierogies and duck pate with pistachios and fresh herbs to old-school Italian ice and locally-brewed beer -- the Pittsburgh Public Market is so close, you can almost taste it.

"It will be 45 years in November since Pittsburgh had a public market," said Becky Rodgers, executive director of Neighbors in the Strip, who vividly remembers the last one -- the long-demolished North Side Market House. "My great uncle Bob was a butcher there. My whole family used to go -- it was like a sight-sound-smell extravaganza."

Starting with a soft opening Friday, the long-delayed Pittsburgh Public Market finally will open to the public. On Sept. 10, there will be a clamorous Grand Opening marked by the ringing of bells -- the public is invited to bring their own to add the racket.

Unlike Pittsburgh's seasonal farmers markets, this indoor market will be open every weekend year-round. The \$1.3-million project will have more than 40 vendors in 10,000 square feet of space -- which is only a small slice of the blocks-long Produce Terminal Building along Smallman Street, where it is housed. The entrance is near 17th Street.

It's been a delicate balancing act from the start, which began in 2001. Spaces from 6,500 square feet to 30,000 square feet were considered. And finding a way to avoid diverting business from the Strip's established food purveyors was a major concern.

"You'll notice we don't have a fish place in our market -- that's a very usual kind of thing to have in a market," said Cindy Cassell, the market manager for Neighbors in the Strip. "We don't have a cheese place. We're really working hard not to replicate existing niche markets."

Vendors quite literally are all over the map -- from Gosia's Pierogies to Sito's Mediterranean dressings, to Ekh's authentic Indian vegetarian dishes, to Mushrooms for Life, foraged from around Western Pennsylvania.

Kevin Costa was slicing up duck pate and "Gin & Juice Salami" Tuesday morning at the Crested Duck Charcuterie, a specialty meat market with a booth near the entrance.

"We wanted to start our own business, but it would have been impossible to duplicate the foot traffic of the Strip, so this is perfect," Costa said.

Starting a business is a lot less daunting for vendors when they're paying \$25 a day for a 10-foot-by-6-foot booth or \$50 a day for a 10-foot-square booth.

"One of our challenges has been to get the concept across that, while this is not necessarily full-time, it's also not a farmer's market where you just show up and put your tablecloth down," Cassell said. "It's a little more permanent than that. So there is some planning involved for your booth. The booths are small, but

from a financial perspective, I think it's very accessible for a new business.

"We do have a lot of startups that are coming in," she said. "That's one of our goals, to incubate new businesses. And you know everything will be realized when they grow up and need a storefront, and can, hopefully, take an empty storefront in the neighborhood."

Other vendors just want a little more visibility.

The Spice by Tamarind booth stocks Indian spices, snacks, chutneys, ready-to-eat meals and specialties like eggless cakes. Owner Prasad Potluri runs several Indian restaurants and small grocers in the region.

"It's to make people aware of the restaurants and food," Potluri said of the reason behind his participation.

For some, it's simply a way to make it easier for customers to find their product.

Scott Smith, of East End Brewery, always assumed most of the sales for his Big Hop IPA and Black Strap Stout would be wholesale to bars and restaurants. But craft-beer fans just kept searching out the tiny, out-of-the-way brewery.

"We're in an unmarked building in Homewood, and half our business is walk-in traffic," Smith said.

Now, customers can sample Fat Gary Nut Brown Ale and Pedal Pale Ale at the Pittsburgh Public Market, and fill up their growlers to take home.

Not everything in the market is edible.

Babouche sells Moroccan crafts, jewelry, scarves and leather goods. Iron Eden is renowned for beautiful ironwork -- flowers, trellises, sculpture -- often made from recycled scrap metal. Jenn's Jems features knit and crocheted items, and handmade jewelry.

Markets in other cities -- like Cleveland's West Side Market and Seattle's Pike Place Market -- have become first-day tourist attractions.

The Pittsburgh Public Market is starting on a much smaller scale, of course, but drawing new shoppers to the Strip is part of the plan.

"When we had Campos do a consumer market survey for us in 2006, at that time, we were planning for about 30,000 square feet," Cassell said. "According to the consumer survey, it would add about 12,000 additional shoppers to the Strip every week. Now we're scaled back in 10,000 square feet. But one of our goals is to increase the customer base for the entire Strip."

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