

MARKET PLACE

BY ANDREA VANSKOY

A ROYAL WELCOME



You hear the Royal Blue Grocery, at the corner of 3rd and Lavaca, before you see it. Merengue beats and breathy jazz vocals emanate from beneath its blue steel canopy. Next come the voices of passersby. Whether or not they enter the store, its many patrons make a point of greeting their grocer, George Scariano. Scariano, who knows most of them by name, never fails to return their greetings.

“Hi, Ann!” he shouts to a woman passing on the street. “Have a nice trip!”

“I’m an Italian man from New Orleans,” he continues. “I’m used to thriving downtown markets, older stores that have a little bit of everything, where everybody talks to each other.”

The store’s been here less than a year, but already looks like a neighborhood fixture, its dark-wood-framed windows displaying stargazer lilies and bottles of champagne; its interior, concrete and steel, more utilitarian chic. It’s a bustling urban store, and none too spacious. If you stood in the center, you could probably touch everything with a 10-foot pole.

Delights for every palate abound with indulgences ranging from Tofurky to pork rinds, from Pillsbury cookie dough to soy ice creams. Local treats include grab-and-go sandwiches from Food Heads, pastries from the Upper Crust Bakery, and Taco Deli’s Tortas and Salsas. There are lightbulbs, charcoal, paper and cleaning products to fulfill everyday needs as well.

The Royal Blue is nothing like a chain grocery, but it shouldn’t be mistaken for an upscale food boutique, either.

“We sell Cheez-Its, too,” says Scariano, from his post behind the counter. “People have old favorites. We don’t want to wean them off them. There’s so much diversity downtown.” He interrupts himself to sign an invoice and say goodbye to the man who delivered the goods. “*Gracias otra vez. Hasta mañana!*”

“We have really had the opportunity to cater to everybody,” he says. “When I get here in the morning, the first thing I do is check the tickets from the night before, and look at what people are buying, and sometimes we get really crazy combinations of stuff. My favorite was a bottle of Roederer Champagne and a 79-cent bag of Zapp’s Spicy Cajun Crawtators.”

With his glasses, beard and curly brown hair, George has



a comfortable air about him that transfers easily to the atmosphere at the Royal Blue. A longtime resident of the neighborhoods surrounding Zilker Park, a UT film school graduate, and veteran employee of the Chuy’s family of restaurants, he’s had his finger on the pulse of Austin life for a long time. It began nearly 20 years ago, when he and a friend set off on an all-nighter from New Orleans and landed at the top of Mount Bonnell at sunrise.

“There was this guy up there singing and playing the guitar,” he remembers. “Austin has this great combination of civilization and nature.”

While managing the kitchen at Shady Grove, the restaurant he credits with teaching him the art of customer service, Scariano contemplated doing his own thing. Knowing he also wanted to spend as much time as possible with his wife

and two young sons, he chose to forge a path in food retail instead of restaurants.

And so George Scariano became a grocer, a grocer not unlike the kind who inhabited downtown Austin 75 years ago. The kind who—“bye, Rita! See you soon!”—knew his customers by name. He credits his wife’s courage and the expertise of his partner, local businessman and fellow Chuy’s veteran Craig Staley, for making the Royal Blue Grocery such a welcome reality.

“Is this your store?” asks one half of a young urban couple.

“Yeah, I’m George. Nice to meet ya,” he says, shaking the guy’s hand, and his wife’s as well.

“Listen, can you build one over on East Sixth? I live in the Pedernales Apartments over there. This is exactly the kind of thing we need.”

“Well, we’re thinking about everything right now,” George says, beaming with the satisfaction of having made the right leap of faith. He thought downtown needed a grocery—and it looks like he was right.

“There it is,” he says happily. “We really got it right. If we did expand,” he decides, “the trick would be to keep the charm.”

Royal Blue Grocery, 247 W. 3rd St., 512-499-3993

royalbluegrocery.com, Open daily from 7 a.m. to midnight.