



WHAT'S ON YOUR WALL?

In a fancy food world, boring beige walls no longer cut it with shoppers. For stores looking to excite, a little artistic flair can go a long way

by Mark Cardwell

Photography by Name Lastname

Mike Pugliese says grocery decor and signage was plain and unsophisticated when he started working alongside his late father, Angelo, at their family's 45,000-sq.-ft. store in the then-small town of Markham, Ont. on the outskirts of Toronto in the 1970s.

"Simplicity was the focus back then," Pugliese recalls about that stack-'em-high-and-watch-'em-fly era. "Most of our customers were families that bought staples to cook and eat at home. I remember selling 50-pound bags of potatoes. Decor and signage didn't need to be complicated. Just clean and clear."

But times have changed. Markham has grown into a fast-paced, upscale place (population 340,000) where shoppers now a premium on smaller quantities of high-quality fresh and ready-to-go foods sold in classy surroundings.

Two years ago, Pugliese brought in retail brand and design firm Watt International to rethink the Markham store—one of three his family owns around Toronto under the Michael Angelo's banner. Reopened last spring after a six-month makeover, the sleek 14,000-sq.-ft. store is designed to look like a European-style market where fresh and prepared foods are sold from visually striking in-store departments.

Among the elements that make the store spring to life

is the treatment along the interior walls. They feature oversized, art-deco lettering, hanging rolling pins, and 12-foot-high colour and black-and-white images of people, animals and food. "The idea is to communicate both the history of the Pugliese family in the grocery business, and the farm-fresh quality and authenticity of the foods they sell," explains Watt project leader Jean-Paul Moressi.

Michael Angelo's redesign notably won gold in the supermarket/grocery store category of the 2015 International Association for Retail Environments Design Awards. The jury raved about the "visual warmth" created by the store's use of neutral woods, terrazzo flooring, and vintage brick, and "strong graphics (that) feature unique fonts and an overscaled persona to guide customers from area to area and elevate each department as an authority within in its own specialty."

According to Pugliese, the store's new look was popular with customers from the get-go. "These days store design and signage is about creating an atmosphere that's warm and inviting for customers, and that distinguishes you from the competition."

Grocers, especially those in large urban centres, appear to be following suit. Instead of using simple photos or images, plainly worded signs like "Meat", "Dairy" or "Bakery", or



leaving white- or beige-painted walls bare, they're opting for rich colours, bold geometric shapes and lavish works of art and ornamentation to bolster their foodie credentials.

"Grocery is highly competitive and is the (store) people visit the most," says Glen Kerr, a Toronto-based interior designer and principal with Ampersand Studio who has created retail concepts for Longo's, Earth Fare, Fresh Market and Sobeys. "People expect grocery stores to be as good aesthetically as other (retailers). So a brand needs to be unique and proprietary with its customers."

Kerr took that approach when hired last year to design Longo's new 8,500-sq.-ft. store in the old Imperial Oil office building on Toronto's St. Clair Avenue. "Since it was a heritage building, we approached it like an art show (and) used each communicative piece to help create a full fresh urban food experience, both visually and aromatically," he explains.

In addition to hiring Toronto artist Jeremy Kantor to do original ink artwork applied to the tiled walls behind the kitchen area and meat and seafood service points, the store features chalk illustrations of various foods for the kitchen

and cheese bulkheads.

The pièce de résistance, however, is the original existing mural at the store's entrance and exit that tells the story of oil, a leftover from Imperial Oil's time in the building. "We worked around it and highlighted it as part of our store design," Kerr says about the painting on the 22-foot-high marble wall, which he accentuated with 1950s-era lights. "We wanted to create a great visual experience for customers that is unlikely to be copied and will get them to come back and tell their friends about."

Not all stores need to have as fancy a wall treatment as Longo's Imperial store or Michael Angelo's Markham. However, too many blank walls are like an artist's empty canvas: not offensive, but hardly inviting. For Marjorie Mackenzie, vice-president retail activation of Figure3, a Toronto-based design studio that's done stores for Loblaws, McEwan and other grocers, spending on wall decor is a good investment, provided it's done for the right reasons.

Rule No. 1 is work around your store's brand. "Never decide on something because you like blue or think it's pretty, she



says. “In-store art and decor needs to be tactical. Customers come first, so any changes you make need to contribute to their desires and their emotional connection to your brand.”

Also skip putting anything on your walls that risks becoming quickly dated. For instance, lifestyle photos of people will look dated as soon as fashions and hairstyles change. “Permanent art collections get old and boring in five years, so if you go that route, be prepared to keep updating it,” says Mackenzie.

Most important: never forget you’re running a grocery store. A discount store, for instance, should emphasize value and good prices in its decor. On the other hand, a grocer heavy on produce and fresh food should highlight its farm credentials. For instance, Farm Boy in Ontario commissions a mural in the produce area of all its new stores that emphasizes the Ottawa-based grocery’s connection to farms and local food.

Heritage can also play a part. Some Longo locations feature large black and white photos of the company’s founders—Gus, Tommy and Joe Longo—working at its early stores in the 1950s and ‘60s. “The bottom line,” says Kerr, “is to sell groceries and create an experience that your customers can relate to. You don’t need to break the bank to do that.”

Of course, all artwork needn’t be on the inside of a store. Take Richard Veenhuis, for instance. Last summer, he paid a local artist \$10,000 to paint a 78-foot-long historical mural on the side of his Foodland store in Minto, N.B. “People love it,” Veenhuis says about the mural, which depicts four scenes from the history of the town of 3,000, 50 kilometres east of Fredericton. “I’ve gotten lots of great comments from people, and it makes me feel good personally to give something back to the community. It’s been worth every penny.” **CG**