

Long-awaited grocery store opens in downtown Kitchener

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Sarah Pepper and Johnny Kent recently opened J&P Grocery at 8 Queen St. N. It's accessible via Goudies Lane.

It's not your typical spot for a grocery store, but that's sort of the point.

"We believe we're in the Kitchener of the future," said Johnny Kent, who minimized the benefits of parking spots and flamboyant facades during a grand opening that was void of the pomp one might expect.

You probably wouldn't have known unless you saw the tweets or heard about it via word of mouth, but that's exactly what Kent and his wife Sarah Pepper are relying on to drive customers — at least initially — to their new grocery store at 8 Queen St. N.

Tucked behind Vidyard inside part of what was formerly Goudies department store, J&P Grocery is a one-of-a-kind vendor in the downtown that's planning to offer a growing populous a one-stop-shop for all things food.

It can be accessed from Goudie's Laneway, which connects Queen Street North with the Scotiabank parking lot on Ontario Street North.

Pepper calls the location "quirky," but doesn't think it will pose a problem to attract the foot traffic and downtown clientele she and her partner are banking on.

Its uniqueness has actually served as a talking point, and Pepper noted that the city is looking to revitalize laneways to accommodate such new amenities in the growing core.

"I think the big thing is that you can get produce every day, right downtown," she said. "You can get fresh meats — things that aren't available at Shoppers Drug Mart or your local convenience store."

A cold bin was filled with sausage, salmon fillets and pork chops — items that haven't been readily available in the downtown area, except at the Kitchener Farmers' Market, which is only open on Saturdays.

Pepper said the plan is to keep all essential cuts of meat such as hamburger, chicken breasts and steak in stock.

"We'll bring in more interesting and cool stuff as time goes on, but we want to be reliable first and foremost," she said.

For Kristen Teixeira, who works downtown and is planning to move to an apartment on Queen Street in the near future, the timing couldn't be better.

"There are some specialty stores like Legacy Greens (on King Street East), which is awesome," she said. "But you can't get a mixture of things."

"I think what's special about J&P is you can come and really do a full shop," said Pepper. "You can buy seafood, but you can also buy Cheerios and crushed tomatoes."

All the colours of the rainbow were present in produce bins last week, from beans and blueberries to bananas and beets.

Pepper pointed to some of the legumes and granola as local products currently on shelves. She and Kent are planning to grow their roster of local supplier lines and already have some ideas in the works.

"We're hooked up with the Sustainable Market (based out of Guelph and Waterloo) and they connect directly with farmers," said Pepper. "We've put out some big orders for the summer that we're really excited about. They're planting as we speak."

Shelves are still filling out in the 5,000-square-foot operation that includes a small café — a partnership with Kitchener-based Smile Tiger Coffee Roasters — which overlooks the store.

Both Kent and Pepper have a history in the restaurant industry and met while working at Hannah's Bella Bistro in Waterloo. In addition to the grocery store, they wanted to incorporate a place where people could meet and mingle.

"I think we bring a customer service element to the grocery store that isn't in the big supermarkets," Pepper said. "When you come here you are going to meet a staff that's welcoming and excited to help you and show you new products."

The owners hope to keep prices competitive with those of other independent grocers and say the cost of mainstream products will be comparable to other larger retailers.

And they're not too worried about a grocery chain invading the downtown just yet.

"I think it's exciting because we get to be here first and so we can sort of carve out that niche and clientele who I think will become dedicated to us," Pepper said. "I think the reason people will stay shopping with us — even if we do have Zehrs or Sobeys eventually — is these unique and local products and the tighter relationships that we'll have with our distributors."

J&P Grocery is open Monday to Friday, 9 a. m. to 8 p.m., and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.