

Whole Foods opens Tuesday, minding the community



The atrium of Refresh, the fresh food initiative where Whole Foods will open Tuesday.

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The New Whole Foods at the intersection of S. Broad and Bienville will have a gumbo bar. The base of the gumbo sold in the gumbo bar, which will include both vegetarian and traditional sausage options, will be made by New Orleans youth at Liberty's Kitchen, which shares building space with the new grocery store.

That's one example of how Refresh, the project that broke ground last May, transformed what formerly housed a single grocery store into a collaborative fresh foods initiative for the developing neighborhood. Liberty's Kitchen will source 100 percent of its ingredients from Whole Foods, and, in addition to the gumbo bases, at-risk youth involved in the culinary program will make salad dressings and eight varieties of cookies for the grocery store.

"This is where the grocery world and the public health world are coming together," says Jeff Schwartz, executive director of Broad Community Connections (BCC), the non-profit developer who, along with L&M Development Partners Inc. has made the Refresh concept a reality. While most Whole Foods stores have a full coffee bar, this one will relegate coffee duties to Liberty's Kitchen, giving it an additional source of revenue (though Whole Foods will serve basic drip coffees).

Tulane's Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine, which will open in March just across the atrium from Whole Foods, will teach members of the community how to cook healthy recipes within a budget, complete with a shopping list to recreate the dishes at home. According to Whole Foods spokeswoman Kristina Bradford, the store will also host value shopping tours to educate shoppers on how to stretch dollars.

The store is smaller than its Arabella Street and Veterans Boulevard locations, and this one has an emphasis on locally sourced goods. Most of the breads, for example, come from Breads on Oak, and Laurel Street Bakery will provide the bagels. The store hosted workshops for local businesses to adapt their goods to sell on Whole Foods shelves. Even the graphics and murals were done by local artists and designers. Both Schwartz and Jake Pine, a developer with L&M, have reached out to the Lafitte neighborhood and beyond, attending community meetings to get residents on board with Refresh, particularly with job sourcing. Pine even plays tennis with kids at Sojourner Truth Neighborhood Center.

Upstairs, BCC has an office next door to FirstLine Schools. The second floor opens onto an outdoor community space, which Schwartz and Pine say they hope will play host to yoga and Zumba classes, not to mention SNAP and WIC sign ups. In the parking lot beyond that, Schwartz and Pine, both smiling, make the possibilities seem endless. They hope to host outdoor movie nights with food truck roundups there, and to plant a community garden. In the parking lot below there are not only bike racks, but fix-it stations for bikers in a pickle.

"This is going to have such a positive impact on the community," says Pine.

"This building could have been a strip mall," Schwartz says.

A map of the neighborhood is posted right at the entrance of the new Broad Street Whole Foods.

The store will hold its grand opening Tuesday, Feb 4, and be open for business that morning.