

D.C. store makes up-Hill climb rewarding

Vicky Umland

It seems that a natural foods store and deli only three blocks from a massive government building overflowing with lunch-starved workers would do a brisk business.

But if the building is the U.S. Capitol and the natural foods store is in Washington, D.C., that's not always the case.

"It's not like in California, where you see a health food store or a wheat-grass juice stand on every corner. Here in D.C. and the East Coast, there's not as much interest in healthy food," says Sky Uzay Turker, owner of Wellness Café on Pennsylvania Avenue, a mile and a half from the White House.

Sure, Sen. John Warner, the Republican from Virginia and Elizabeth Taylor's ex, is a regular customer. So are senators and representatives from Kansas and Kentucky. But other Capitol denizens aren't as health-minded. On any given day at the Wellness Café, the gym rats outnumber the fat cats.

That's because Turker has a marketing deal with the 2,500-member health club a few blocks down the street. Members receive store discounts, and the gym coadvertises with Turker's store. In return, he stocks plenty of sports nutrition and bodybuilding supplements. Health club members now make up 10 percent of Wellness Café's customers, and supplements total 40 percent of sales.

Wellness Café also offers 10 percent discounts to government employees and has started a Wellness Club in conjunction with a local chiropractor and nutritionist. Members pay \$25 a year and get 20 percent discounts throughout the store, along with occasional deals of 30 percent to 40 percent off. In addition, there are monthly or bimonthly get-togethers where members discuss health topics.

The club is a way to educate people who might otherwise never venture into a health foods store. "People are coming here with no idea what to get or no idea what our products are," Turker says.

The discounts also are key in helping the 800-square-foot store survive and thrive: Sales are up 16 percent this year.

Founded as Good Health Natural Foods in 1964, the store stocked only vegetarian foods until Turker and his wife, Alana, bought it five years ago.

Although the neighborhood vegetarians were loyal to the store, they were only 10 percent of the clientele. Turker, an immigrant who had managed five-star hotels in his native Turkey, knew he had to diversify to attract more customers. So he began by adding chicken and salmon to the deli menu.

"There were a lot of complaints, but the organic salmon burgers were so good, even the vegetarian people began

eating them," he says.

Now, the deli, which accounts for 35 percent to 40 percent of total store revenue, features natural and organic ingredients in entrees designed to appeal to mainstream customers. There are paninis and build-your-own pizzas, along with barbecued natural chicken wings and garlic-chicken wraps. There's also a juice and smoothie bar.

"No other store makes what we make. Our smoothies are only fresh fruit and one or two cubes of ice, and then you can add things like milk, yogurt, multivitamins, calcium, bee pollen or hemp oil," Turker says.

Wellness Café also does catering for groups smaller than 250 and has a mini health and beauty section and a grocery section that carries staples such as rice, soy milk, cereal and a wide supply of fresh juices. Because there's a large natural foods store three blocks away, Turker doesn't even try to compete in departments like produce or frozen food.

Along with revamping the stock, Turker also redesigned the store. "It was kind of ugly and dirty and run-down when we bought it," he says. So two years ago, he hired a store designer and spent \$45,000 to unclutter the space and give it "more of a purchasing feeling."

The designer created 10 arches to bisect the long, narrow store and highlight the building's architecture. "It's designed to look like Capitol Hill," Turker says. The store is part of a 120-year-old building with high copper ceilings. The arches end 10 inches from the ceiling, drawing the eye to the copper and also serving as anchors for the shelving.

The arches not only allow more shelves throughout the store, but more open space as well. "It's a healthy working environment now," Turker says.

Turker celebrated the renovation by rechristening the store Wellness Café. Even though he had to close the store for two weeks to complete construction, the neighborhood clientele stayed loyal.

"Some people have been coming here for 20 years," he says. "If they go out of town, they stop by and tell us 'I won't be here for about a week,' so we won't worry."

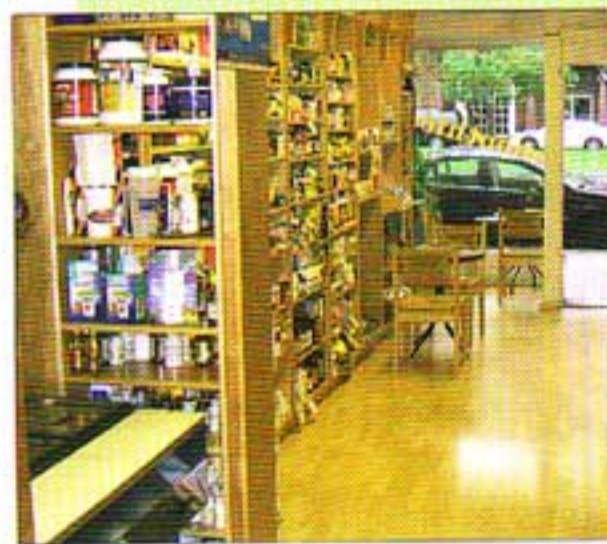
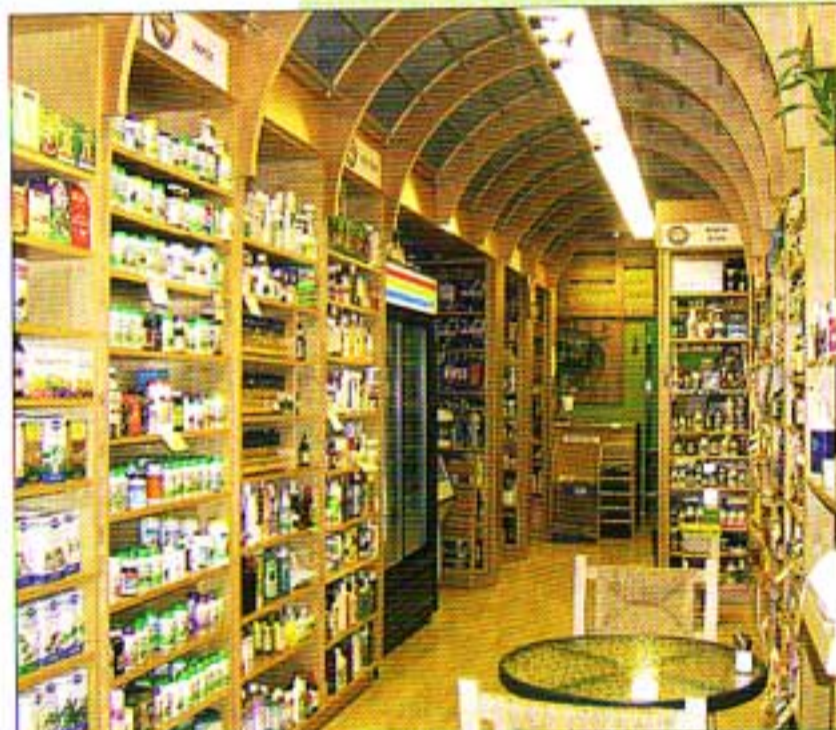
Others venture in to visit the Turkers' 2½-year-old son, Kaan, who naps in a small bed in the store office.

"The UPS driver stops by even when he doesn't have a package for us, just to see Kaan," Turker says. ■

Vicky Umland is a freelance writer and editor in Denver.



Photo courtesy of Wellness Café



Sky Uzay and Alana Turker with son Kaan (top right) have worked hard to add appeal to Wellness Café, whose arches (above) evoke the architecture of Capitol Hill.



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www.wellnesscafedc.com

Owners: Sky Uzay and Alana Turker

Retail space: 800 square feet
2004 revenue: \$250,000
Employees: 3

Best-selling department:
Supplements

Sales by department:
Supplements, 40 percent;
deli, 35 percent to
40 percent; health and
beauty, grocery, gifts, CDs
and jewelry, 7 percent to
10 percent; catering,
5 percent to 7 percent

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