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Wegmans Opens in Brooklyn; Fans Wait in the Rain, and Rejoice

The beloved suburban grocer, which has attracted a cult following, opened its first New York City store at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.



Employees cheered as the first shoppers entered the new Wegmans at the Brooklyn Navy Yard during the store's grand opening on Sunday. Credit...Brittany Newman/The New York Times

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When Alexis Grafakos moved to a small town in western New York in 2013, she couldn't find empanada dough anywhere.

One day while shopping in Geneseo at her local supermarket, Wegmans, Ms. Grafakos mentioned to the staff how she wished she could buy some of the ingredients

for her Caribbean dishes that she could find easily in Brooklyn. Within a week, she said, the dough was on the shelves. She could make her new life taste a little more like home.

Now living back in New York City, Ms. Grafakos, 30, woke up at 5 a.m. on Sunday for the opening of a Wegmans at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the first of the chain's supermarkets in the city and the 101st nationwide. She drove from the Bronx to wait in the rainy chill before sunrise because she remembered how well Wegmans had treated her, she said.

Ms. Grafakos also recalled how her co-workers in Geneseo used to tease her that New York City would never get a Wegmans because "we were too mean," she said.

Ms. Grafakos was one of the more than 1,000 people who visited the new store to be among its first customers. Wegmans comes to the area after nearly a decade of [stalled promises](#) to bring an affordable, quality supermarket to this [once-derelect](#) stretch near Brooklyn's harbor.



Fans of the beloved suburban grocer, some sporting "Wegmaniac" T-shirts, waited in the rain for the store to open on Sunday morning. Credit...Brittany Newman/The New York Times

The chain has quite a cult following: Fans across the Northeast call themselves "Wegmaniacs," a grocer's version of the [BeyHive](#). One Wegmaniac [knitted a suit from the store's bags](#). Another wrote a [high school musical](#) love story as an ode to the chain.

On Sunday, shoppers, glassy-eyed from having gotten out of bed so early, spoke of the immaculate bathrooms, the tomatoes that never rot and the kindness of the staff. ([In worker satisfaction](#), Wegmans routinely ranks among Fortune magazine's Top 10 companies.)

"I don't wake up at 5:30 to do anything, ever, but I did today," said Brittany Hank, 31, who grew up in Rochester, N.Y., and admits to being a Wegmaniac. "There's pride in it, being that it's a hometown favorite."

Even Ms. Grafakos, who swore to herself that she would never engage in a Black Friday-style rush, risked it. "I told my mom, 'I may actually die here,'" she said, laughing.

The [zeal around the opening](#), and the lengths fans go to proclaim their Wegmans-phililia, may confuse some New Yorkers. Isn't Wegmans, [which was founded in 1916 in Rochester](#), just a grocery store? Sure, at 74,000 square feet and with over 50,000 products, it is bigger than most in New York (although smaller than most Wegmans). And sure, it has prepared foods and a bar on the second floor, but Whole Foods has places to eat, too.

Is it the result of a marketing tactic, [à la the Popeyes Chicken sandwich](#)? Is Wegmans a nostalgia trip for those suburban transplants who miss massive grocery stores?

Whatever it is, people love it.



Once inside, shoppers were greeted with roars of applause from the Wegman's staff. Credit...Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

At a time when [Amazon has prompted a change in retail](#) and [small grocers have been battered](#) in the so-called "[grocery wars](#)," Wegmans is thriving.

"Food is something you have to do in person," said Barbara Kahn, a professor of marketing at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. "You have to touch and feel food."

The Wegmans at the Navy Yard arrives during a [busy period in the New York area's retail industry](#); [Nordstrom](#), in Manhattan, opened on Thursday, and the [American Dream mall](#), at the Meadowlands in New Jersey, opened an ice-skating rink and a Nickelodeon amusement park on Friday, with promises of future retail space to come. Although Wegmans works with the delivery service [Instacart](#), brick-and-mortar is still the focus.

"We've wanted a store in New York City, but finding the right site took time," Danny Wegman, the grocer's third-generation chairman, wrote in an email. "Everything we needed was right here in Brooklyn, including all the great people we were able to hire."

During former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's tenure, two developers tried and failed to win a bid for the coveted Admiral's Row site at the Navy Yard. One, PA Associates, was dropped after it was charged in an unrelated bribery scandal; another, Blumenfeld Development Group, said it couldn't find a supermarket willing to pay insurance premiums after Hurricane Sandy.

Residents of nearby buildings run by the New York City Housing Authority often had to leave the neighborhood to buy affordable produce in bulk.



The Wegmans at the Navy Yard became the 101st store for the supermarket chain. Credit...Brittany Newman/The New York Times

“You’ve gone from where people were really, really low-income, and now we’re talking about million-dollar apartments,” said Natasia Pinkney, 47, a full-time employee in the cheese section of the new store, whose mother has lived in the neighborhood for over 30 years. “And still, there wasn’t much to choose from.”

Eventually, Steiner NYC was awarded the contract to develop Admiral’s Row, and in 2015 [Wegmans signed on](#) to be the supermarket in the complex.

Over 200 of the store’s 540 employees were hired by the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation, which recruits from lower-income areas and assists with résumé writing and interviewing skills.

“When we were seeking a grocery store to operate here, we wanted to not only deliver a grocery store, but we also wanted a good employer,” David Ehrenberg, the development corporation’s president, said.

Karen Lighter, 49, and Debby Eckstein, 49, who are next-door neighbors in Flatbush, Brooklyn, rolled carts through the aisles after the grand opening on Sunday, marveling at the variety. To find reasonably priced kosher meat, they said, they used to have to drive an hour each way to Queens.

“We don’t have anything like this — it’s huge!” Ms. Lighter said. “I’ve never seen so many choices. Out of New York, I’ve seen it. But not here.”



The new Wegman’s is 74,000 square feet and sells over 50,000 products.
Credit...Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

Correction: Oct. 27, 2019

An earlier version of this article misstated the day Nordstrom opened in Manhattan. It was Thursday, not Wednesday. It also misstated the day the American Dream mall opened. A small part of it — an ice skating rink and an amusement park — opened on Friday; the entire mall did not open on Thursday.