



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL DINNEEN

Ethnic Groceries in Anchorage

An International Tour

BY TOM REALE

If all of your grocery shopping consists of weekly visits to Carrs or Fred Meyer, you're living a very sheltered existence, gustatorily speaking. There are foodstuffs available in Anchorage that are way beyond the experience of your standard American grocery store.

Browsing the shelves and freezers of some of Anchorage's smaller grocery retailers is truly a multicultural experience. You can buy fresh cactus and frozen frogs, canned quail eggs and Japanese eggplant, beef brains and duck feet, chayote squash and mangrove crabs, all in stock, no mail ordering required. And one surprising constant—Spam. Evidently, it crosses many cultural boundaries. Venturing into these little stores, a couple of things are readily apparent. The first impression is of aromas unfamiliar to the uninitiated. Molecules of spices and fresh produce waft through the air and hit your nose when you walk through the door. Also, most of the stores don't survive "by bread alone." They offer lots of nonfood items and community services such as bulletin boards, phone cards for international calls, gift and clothing items, video rentals of movies in languages you're not going to find at Blockbuster, music CDs and tapes, religious icons and votive candles, etc.—a little slice of home for people who find themselves far away.

A good place to begin an exploration into this world is the concentration of Asian grocery stores and restaurants along Fireweed Lane. For a truly comprehensive selection of Thai, Korean, Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian and Japanese foods, check out the Oriental Shopping Center in the one-story red building on the south side of Fireweed near Eagle Street. The surprisingly large interior space is a kind of Asian Costco, with gallon jugs of kim chee (made at the store), wholesale restaurant supplies and a dazzling array of frozen, fresh and canned goods. An entire aisle of open freezers features frozen



Ok Soon [LEFT] stocks a vast array of Asian foods at her Midtown Oriental Shopping Center.

seafood, from octopus, mackerel and crab to Korean beltfish, clam meat, mussels, prawns and sea cucumbers. An in-store deli features take-out meals of kim chee, bean sprouts, cuttlefish and seaweed.

Farther east on Fireweed the front window of the Asiana Market serves as a community bulletin board, while inside the store Chinese Matrimony Tea and mung



Local entrepreneur Prince Albert brings a bit of the tropics to Anchorage with his Muldoon shop, J.C. Reggae Etc.

bean flour share shelf space with pumpkin candy and Japanese buckwheat noodles. Store clerk Haeil Yi works the butcher counter in the back, among other duties. His job is a constant juggling act. "Operating a small business like this, you deal with so many cultures, and they all have specific items they want," he said. "What we can carry depends on the season and time of year."

At the Suda Asian Market, owner Suda Powers has set up shop to serve the Thai, Cambodian and Laotian community. Besides grocery items such as bamboo shoots, noodles, spices, sauces, rice and flour, she carries some rare foods such as fertilized chicken eggs and the odoriferous durian, a fruit that excites feelings as strong as its infamous smell.

Known among the cognoscenti in Southeast Asia as "The King of Fruit," the spiky, football-size durian has inspired websites in its honor, while simultaneously being banned in many hotel rooms and on public transportation in Thailand. Eating a durian, in fact, has been described as akin to "eating custard in a sewer." After buying and cutting open one of the fruits, I can report that actually eating one requires more of a commitment to participatory journalism than I could muster.

Sharing mall space with Timeframe on 36th Avenue and C Street, the A.P.A. Grocery offers Thai, Cambodian and Laotian groceries and supplies ingredients for the adjacent Sawaddi Midtown Restaurant. Manager Sammy Abbott arrived in Anchorage in 1980 from one of Pol Pot's interment camps with little more than the clothes on her back, and now manages the grocery store and helps in the restaurant while serving as the president of the A.P.A. Corp. The store stocks a variety of canned, frozen and fresh Southeast Asian groceries, and Sammy is especially proud of the fresh produce she gets from growers in the Lower 48.

No discussion of Asian groceries in Anchorage is complete without mentioning the New Sagaya markets. Selling an amazing variety of both food and nonfood items to retail and wholesale customers, the stores occupy an enviable position in Anchorage. Starting out as what owner Paul Reid describes as a "Little hole in the wall in Spenard" in 1973, New Sagaya opened at its present Old Seward Highway location in 1991. A second store, City Market New Sagaya, opened at 13th Avenue and L Street in 1997. Reid says there's a key reason for Sagaya's success: "We focus on everybody, not just our ethnic customers, and we sell both

ethnic and 'conventional' groceries. Even Asians need to buy milk, butter and eggs, and this fusion of backgrounds makes for an interesting store."

The Red Apple Market on Bragaw Street carries the widest variety of ethnic foods in town. Selling canned, frozen, and fresh specialty items, it serves the Asian, Hispanic, African-American and Pacific Island communities. Fresh produce varies from season to season, but produce manager Tom Watkins tries to match demand with supply as the year progresses. On a recent day, the produce aisle contained mustard and collard greens, fresh jalapeno, serrano, habanero and Thai peppers, prickly pear cactus, plantains, several varieties of taro root, papayas, mangoes, Thai coconut and lemon grass.

Meat department manager Barb King also has had to learn which foods to stock in combination. "For some dishes, taro leaves are used in baking like Americans use aluminum foil," she said, "and if you don't have the taro leaves in stock, you won't sell any of the meat that's normally wrapped in them."

The store's frozen meat sections are a revelation to anyone accustomed to consuming "standard" cuts of meat and animal parts. Here you can find beef heart, tongue and kidney, goat meat, turkey tails and chicken feet, as well as pork feet, ears, hocks, snouts, tails and maws—everything but the oink.

Scattered around town you'll find other pockets of ethnicity, often in unexpected spots. For example, behind a nondescript building front on International Airport Road, the Taco Loco grocery store and tortilla factory makes fresh corn and flour tortillas and corn chips every day. It also sells Mexican specialty food items to retail customers and restaurants.

For a touch of the Caribbean, local entrepreneur and reggae disc jockey Prince Albert is in his second year of operating J.C. Reggae Etc., a Muldoon shop that lives up to its motto, "A taste of the tropics." Jamaican sauces and jerk seasonings, African spices and frozen goat meat vie for attention surrounded by Bob Marley posters. Fast-food cravings can be satisfied on the spot by microwaving a frozen Jamaican

Continued on page A21

ETHNIC GROCERIES

Continued from page A17

meat patty or two.

Since the 1960s, George's Market in south Anchorage has sold traditional foods to Anchorage's Alaska Native population. However, market owner Spiro "J.R." George says that may be coming to an end. Since he can't find a licensed processor for such foods as seal oil, muk-tuk and whale meat, he'll soon have to discontinue selling these unique Alaska items.

Now, if you still can't find enough hot and/or spicy items to suit your tastes, try the Salsa Vita shop in the Sears Mall for hot stuff or the Summit Spice and Tea Co. in south Anchorage for exotic spices and teas. Your taste buds will thank you.

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Some Ethnic Food Purveyors:

- **Bodega Hispana**, 3849 Mountain View Drive, 277-3310
- **Bokeo Oriental Market**, 4040 Mountain View Drive, 274-4229
- **Red Apple Market**, 131 S. Bragaw St., 279-2367
- **Suda Asian Market**, 515 W. Fireweed Lane, 258-3466
- **Asiana Market**, 208 E. Fireweed Lane, 272-5949
- **Oriental Shopping Center**, 408 E. Fireweed Lane, 277-0107
- **New Sagaya Market**, 3700 Old Seward Highway, 561-5173
- **City Market New Sagaya**, 900 W. 13th Ave., 274-6173
- **J.C. Reggae Etc.**, 171 Muldoon Road, 222-6688
- **Taco Loco**, 600 W. International Airport Road, 561-1648
- **New Fil-Am Market**, 1201 W. Tudor Road, 562-0018
- **George's Market & Native Foods**, 10240 Old Seward Hwy., 349-6023
- **Masarap Bakery**, 750 W. Dimond Blvd., 336-2253
- **Salsa Vita, Sears Mall**, 600 Northern Lights Blvd. 274-5830
- **Summit Spice & Tea Co.**, 1120 E. Huffman Road, 348-2585
- **A.P.A. Groceries**, 300 W. 36th Ave., 561-4460