

By [Patty Wetli](#) Tuesday, August 23, 2011

Grocery stores, with all their coolers and freezers and air conditioners, consume massive amounts of energy. They're like the Hummer of retailers.

Chris Dallas, one of four brothers who co-owns HarvesTime Foods at 2632 W. Lawrence Ave., is aiming to transform his business into a Prius. He started with small changes, like swapping out traditional light bulbs for compact fluorescent and LED alternatives. "We've been doing a lot of things that aren't visible to the customer," says Dallas. That's about to change too.



Customers may have noticed scaffolding along the market's south wall, which faces Lawrence Avenue. Crews from Athens Construction have been busy installing a new awning that's a first for the United States. It's made out of solar panels.

Dallas, who exudes enough wattage that ComEd ought to investigate using him as a back-up generator, is no stranger to solar power. In his native Greece, it's typically used to heat water, and small plots of non-arable land are frequently converted into fields of solar panels where the crop is essentially the sun. Here he's aiming to capture solar rays in order to light his entire store.

Make no mistake, the project is about saving energy, not costs. "My banker asked, 'You're going to spend what for an awning?'" says Dallas. One contractor actually priced the job higher than the amount Dallas paid for the building itself back in the mid-'90s.

"It's a crazy sum of money," Dallas says of the awning, adding that the state of Illinois has provided financial assistance. (As a frame of reference, the screening alone on his previous awning, which was added to deter pigeons, set Dallas back thousands of dollars.) But ultimately he's focused on the big picture, not the bottom line. "This is about what's better for all of us, not Chris Dallas or HarvesTime Foods," he says.

The awning has been a year in the planning. "It's not an overnight kind of thing," Dallas says. "I wish it was. I've lost a lot of sleep." When completed sometime in late August or early September (an LED sign is also being incorporated into the awning, adding to the time line), the awning will consist of 96 solar panels that will spotlight what HarvesTime stands for in the community. "Having my name on an array of solar panels says I care about the

environment, I care about where my energy comes from," says Dallas. "With the sun, you're harvesting something that's already there. You don't have to pollute anything."

Dallas' environmentalism stems from his experience as a triathlete. Although this seems like a curious association, he explains that while riding a bike for a hundred miles at a stretch, he started to notice all of the heat and fumes produced by car exhaust, along with trash strewn along the roadside. "You wonder, 'Am I doing anything not to contribute to the mess? Am I doing anything to reverse the mess?'"

**HarvesTime Foods opened on Lawrence in 1995 and underwent a major expansion in 2005. Credit: Patty Wetli.**



Efforts to reduce HarvesTime's carbon footprint include recycling four to five tons of paper products each week and the introduction of reusable shopping bags. "Those bags are one of the best things I've

done," says Dallas. On holiday in Canada, Dallas picked up a bag at an outdoor market, fell in love with its construction and design, and noted the manufacturer's phone number on the bottom of the bag. "The best thing about that vacation was the bag," he says, not necessarily joking. Informed that a customer was spotted carrying one of his totes to a concert in Millennium Park, Dallas reacts with the broad smile of a proud parent.

"If you take a bag you paid a dollar for and you use it 10 times, which is nothing for those bags, obviously you've done something better. There are small changes, that if we all make them, add up to large changes."

He's been less successful at capitalizing on another popular green initiative: the local-organic-sustainable trend. Though HarvesTime is local in the sense that many of its customers live within walking distance (something Dallas confirmed during last winter's blizzard when the streets were empty of traffic but his store was full of shoppers), Fuji apples from New

Zealand aren't exactly earning points from the locavore crowd. "We carry a lot of organic product but not necessarily organic produce," says Dallas. "In America, we

have created a monster. We want every fruit we have ever tasted to be available year round. As a business, I have to have watermelon in stock in winter. As a person, that appalls me. It comes from Honduras and burns so much fuel to get here.”

Dallas acknowledges that the expense of organic produce is another stumbling block. He recently carried a shipment of organic peaches, priced three times higher than their non-organic counterparts. Guess which ones sold? “We try to carry as much organic as we can, but that’s not the easiest proposition in this neighborhood,” Dallas says. “When it comes to putting their hand in their pocket to pay, the same person who says ‘I would like this’ sees the price and says ‘Maybe not.’”

Characteristic of Dallas’ approach to business, he takes his cues from his customers rather than attempting to influence their behavior. Though his day consists of a non-stop deluge of phone calls and requests, often requiring him to toggle between English, Spanish and Greek, Dallas is rarely found in his small, utilitarian office, which is hidden above the store’s rear produce wall and affords him a panoramic view of his domain. Instead, he prefers to walk the floor and conduct surreptitious market research. “I’m interested to see what they pick up, what they look at and especially what they put back.” Customers, Dallas maintains, are the best educators. “If a customer asks for something, you can figure another 10 are looking for the same thing.”

Dallas and his brothers opened HarvesTime in 1995 as a companion to their successful Edgewater Produce store. The partners were confident they could expand their enterprise and began searching for a second location. “I looked everywhere from Libertyville to 52nd Street and couldn’t find anything,” says Dallas. In those days, he was living on Talman (HarvesTime’s cross street with Lawrence) and just happened to see a sign on a corner building that had formerly housed a Pontiac dealership; it was like falling in love with the girl next door. (Dallas is almost solely devoted to HarvesTime at this point. “I don’t even remember where my keys are for Edgewater,” he says.)

HarvesTime, which has a staff of approximately 45 employees, quickly built a loyal following among area residents, largely Greeks and Latinos, and stocked its shelves with products that catered to those customers tastes. During the past decade, though, the area experienced an influx of young couples and families

Lincoln Park and Lakeview, refugees in search of affordable real estate.

Dallas observed that these new neighbors were not translating into new customers. “‘Why not?’ I wondered,” he recalls. “‘What were we doing wrong?’”

The answer boiled down to a lack of space; there simply wasn’t enough room to add items like arugula and peanut butter morsels, which shoppers knew they could find at Whole Foods or Dominick’s. HarvesTime reacted quickly to its changing market, one advantage of being a small business. In 2005, Dallas and his partners unveiled an expansion that doubled the store’s square footage.

“That was the most difficult project I have ever undertaken,” he says. “I was running the store and acting as the general contractor. I did all the carpentry, all the wood repair, built the counters, knocked down brick walls.” Though not with his bare hands, he concedes. (Back in Greece, Dallas was already a machinist at the age of 13. “It was common there,” he says, of taking on a trade as a youth. When he lost an eye in a work-related accident, “My parents told me, ‘Don’t even touch a pair of pliers.’” Like all teenagers, Dallas refused to listen and took up woodworking.)

“All of us worked like mad men,” he says of the expansion. “It was like having a small store one day and a big one the next.” Indeed, the first customer to enter the new and improved HarvesTime couldn’t believe her eyes. Literally. As Dallas recalls, she walked in, looked around and walked out. When she returned later in the day, she explained that she had picked up a couple of items the night before and when she came back the next morning, she thought she was in a different store.

In many senses, she was right. “After we expanded, we brought in lines of items customers were looking for,” Dallas says. He not only successfully wooed the skeptical couples and young families, but he also continues to evolve his product offerings to appeal to wildly diverse palates: marshmallow fluff down one aisle, jars of mystery spreads on another (mystery assuming you’re unable to read the Greek alphabet). “We’re still figuring it out,” says Dallas. “It’s all guesswork, but it’s good guesswork.”

There’s no guesswork involved in the future of HarvesTime. The solar awning signifies an investment not just in the health of the environment but in the neighborhood. “I’m not going anywhere,” Dallas say “I’m here to stay, not just to take from what my customers are giving but to do something to give back.”