

A pair of Jax

By Matt Wrye Inland Valley Daily Bulletin, Calif.

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Jan. 30--With a white guy in charge, Jax Market isn't your average Latino supermarket.

"Even though I'm a gringo, I really understand what's going on," says owner Bill MacAloney about downtown Ontario's Latino community.

The 40-year grocery entrepreneur just opened his fourth Southern California location, his second site in the Inland Empire. Jax Market's other Ontario store does business on Fourth Street.

At the new Euclid Avenue store, bilingual employees, mostly Latino, busily go about their work. Customers are buying fresh produce and meats. And a mural of a countryside is on the south wall.

The appetizing smell of specialties from the bakery, or panaderia, greets you at the front sliding doors when you walk in. "We'll get as many as 10,000 to 12,000 customers a week at each store," said MacAloney, who's also a board member of the Food Marketing Institute, a trade association for the food retail and wholesale industry.

He wasn't looking for a gold mine when he opened the new market -- he just felt like expanding his miniature empire a bit more at a time when several mom-and-pop businesses are either shrinking or have no plans to grow. The economy's recent setbacks have changed his customer's habits.

"People are buying specials -- they're very savvy shoppers," he said. "They're eating the same amount, but they're eating differently. People are trying different things that cost less money."

Jax has plenty of competition in the Inland Empire. A mosaic of Latino supermarkets have established themselves to cater to Hispanic-predominant communities, including Liborio, Gonzalez Northgate Market and Cardenas. MacAloney's three-store operation was already garnering about \$27 million a year in sales. He's shooting to add an additional \$8 million every year to the bottom line with the new Ontario site. "But I'd be a happy camper with less than that," he says.

The Massachusetts native has a long story. At 16, he ran away from an orphanage in his home state and found his way to California in the early 1950s. After working miscellaneous jobs in the grocery business, he got brave in 1970 and opened his first Latino grocery market in Hollywood. "I knew we were getting

more and more Latinos," MacAloney said. "I started watching their buying habits, which told me this is probably the direction I should go in." Things were "pretty tough" for the first nine years. "We had no cash flow," he said. But hard work paid off. MacAloney eventually relocated, with Jax opening in Santa Fe Springs and Anaheim, and then in Ontario.

Tammy Wilson, MacAloney's daughter, says the sky's the limit. She manages the company. "We'll grow as the opportunities come," she said. "Grocery is in your blood. I think for my father and I it's a passion we've always had."

On Thursday, the 72-year-old businessman inspected his new Ontario store, asking customers if they found what they needed and talking to employees about making the community feel welcomed.

He's frank about success.

"To be successful, you've gotta work hard," MacAloney said. "Nothing comes easy."

matthew.wrye@inlandnewspapers.com

909-483-9391

The 4-1-1

Jax Market

426 N. Euclid Ave., Ontario; 909-983-7617

1337 E. Fourth St., Ontario; 909-983-7617

www.jaxmarkets.com