

After the last balloon bursts

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Hollywood, MD - St. Mary's County experienced one of the world's greatest spectacles last week. Communities all across the globe go bonkers when a new grocery store holds a grand opening. I remember as a very small child—which seems like an eternity ago—when Giant Food opened a store in my suburban Maryland community. After being schlepped around various smelly fish markets and cramped corner grocery stores by my shopping-savvy Mother, the trips to Giant were like a visit to a theme park—Disneyland with food! The colorful packaging was spellbinding, the smile on the face of the image of a fetching young woman named “Heidi” on several products was enchanting and observing the live lobster swimming in the seafood section's large tank was fascinating and educational. The company hired a singing cowboy from local television to host the grand opening festivities. There are even rumors that when she visited the Washington, DC area, England's Queen Elizabeth II (that's right, the one who's still queen) came to shop there.

A similar experience—minus the singing cowboy and her majesty the queen—occurred when Harris-Teeter opened its new location in California. There wasn't a parking space to be had as hordes arrived to behold the spectacle of a new grocery store. Smiling young women and men handed out free food samples, a fuzzy green dragon gave high-fives to children, and many grown-ups were blown away by the food bars, the selections and the welcoming atmosphere. There was a ribbon-cutting along with balloons and big-time ballyhoo!

Grocery stores, especially major chains, always open, it seems, by putting their best feet forward. The largest ones give the impression that they are too big to fail. That's where it's always good to temper the enthusiasm with reality. Eventually, the excitement will plateau. Those amazing prices will begin to inch upward and some of the smiles will be replaced by the look of an individual who might be having a bad day at work. What seemed like an unattainable parking space will be easy to find. Not everything you buy at a local grocery store smells great when you get it home and you could get ill from eating something you bought there—it happens all the time—food recalls are a common occurrence at popular grocery chain stores. The festive balloons will all burst and the locals will discover that this new grocery store is also in business to make money. Shoppers will have good and bad experiences and no doubt will continue to compare prices and product value. Assuming they will be made, other stores will benefit from the bigger store's mistakes.

The good news is people still love to eat and despite its rural history, much of Southern Maryland has become a bedroom community where self-sufficiency is, in many cases, either a trendy lark or a complete non-option. With that said, we hope there will be some commercial interaction between the new store and the local farming community. Nothing beats local, fresh food.

We welcome Harris-Teeter to Southern Maryland and wish its many co-located businesses in the new St. Mary's Marketplace equal success and prosperity. It's great to have all these businesses here to give consumers greater service and more options.

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