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WholeFoods[®] MAGAZINE

Informing and Educating the Natural Products Industry



2021
RETAILER
OF THE YEAR



Marlene's[™]
— MARKET & DELI —
shop local, eat organic

2nd
Generation
Success!

"The era of CBD prohibition
in California is over"
—pg. 10

The Special Touch that Sets Independents Apart

For successful independent natural products retailers, it's the personal touch that makes the difference. That's certainly the case for Marlene's Market & Deli, **WholeFoods** Magazine's 2021 Retailer of the Year.

"Marlene's journey to 45 years of a successful business is about people," says Lisa Gebhardt, daughter of Founder Marlene Beadle and now CEO of the family-owned business. "If you don't have people who care, it doesn't work. We have built relationships with our customers, our staff, our vendors, our brokers, and our distributors all along the way. I feel if we have that solid network of good people with us and add trust, good work ethics, common sense, and creativity, we are good to go."

Given this mindset, it's not surprising that one of Gebhardt's favorite memories of her time at the store centers on others: "One of our longtime customers recently celebrated her 100th birthday," Gebhardt told **WholeFoods**. "Mary and her husband Ed became good friends of Marlene many years ago when Ed sold his Early Girl tomato plants to us each spring. Mary and Ed were customers, vendors, and friends. Being able to celebrate Mary's birthday with her reminded me how many special people we have known over the years."

As an independent, family-owned media company serving the natural products industry for over 35 years, the team at **WholeFoods** loves hearing—and sharing—stories like these. And we want to hear your story, too. Drop us a line at editor@wfcinc.com so we can share insights and inspiration that helps lift others in the industry up. We'd love to know: What's your favorite work memory? What motto or mindset fuels your success? What is the best lesson passed to you by your mentor? What is the biggest message you would like to leave for future generations? What actions would you like to see members of the natural products industry implement to help our collective success? Send us your thoughts on one—or all!—of these questions and we will share in future articles.

To kick off the inspiration, turn to page 16 to hear what the team members at Marlene's Market & Deli have to say about their mentor, mindset, and more....including how they dealt with the hard times of 2020-2021. Get more motivation and success secrets by searching "Retailer of the Year" on www.WholeFoodsMagazine.com for profiles of independent natural products retailers and co-ops that have made a positive impact on their local communities over the decades.



Lisa Gebhardt, CEO of Marlene's Market & Deli, our 2021 Retailer of the Year.

While you are at it, check out page 39 of this issue (search "Happy Customer" for more on our site) to hear directly from consumers about the touches big and small that have made them loyal shoppers at their local natural products store. And please let that shopper who is always coming through your doors with a smile and a kind word know that we would love to hear from them too—happy customers can email editor@wfcinc.com to share what keeps them coming back to their favorite shop.

Looking forward to hearing from you, and sharing your story!

Maggie Jaqua

Maggie Jaqua
Content Director

Master the Top Trends of 2022!

Join us for A+ education and grow your business in the coming year. Powered by **WholeFoods** Magazine and Trust Transparency Center, the Naturally Informed program is designed to keep suppliers, brands, retailers, and other industry players informed on developments in the natural products industry so that you can make better business decisions.

Save the date for these on-trend topics in our Mastering the Market virtual event series:

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Microbiome
May 17-19

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Stronger & Healthier**
November 16-18

If you missed any of our events from 2020 and 2021, you can now access that content on demand for free thanks to your sponsors. Scan the code or register at www.NaturallyInformed.net for emerging science, category trends, formulation opportunities, marketing and merchandising strategies, regulatory insights, and much more!



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Marlene's children, including daughter Lisa Gebhardt, carry on their mother's legacy of serving the community in the South Puget Sound area.

2021 Retailer of the Year:



BY MAGGIE JAQUA

The words “customer” and “employee” don’t seem to fit when talking about the people who make up the community at Marlene’s Market & Deli. Everyone who walks through the doors at Marlene’s is treated much more personally. It’s been like that since the start, when Marlene Beadle opened her first store in Federal Way, WA on April 1, 1976. It was a 2,000 SF space operating under the name Federal Way Health Foods, and Marlene wasn’t just in the business of selling nutritious foods—she was in the business of nurturing relationships.

“Marlene had two innate qualities that were perfect for natural foods retail,” shares her daughter, Lisa Gebhardt, CEO of the family-owned business. The first: “Marlene loved to meet people and could relate to everyone. She never met a stranger; each person she met was going to be a friend.”

The second quality that fueled Marlene’s success was her common-sense business approach. “Her first decision as a business owner was to immediately double the inventory, knowing that her customers would want a good selection of products,” Gebhardt says. “She then developed a customer service policy that taught caring, understanding, and tolerance. She would remind us that many people who come to our stores do not feel well, so we need to be kind and compassionate no matter what. Those two qualities plus her passion for health and education were great examples of what it takes to grow a business.”

Business has grown, with Marlene’s marking its 45th anniversary this year. That original 2,000-square-foot store was embraced by the community, and in 1980, Marlene moved to a larger location. That’s when the current name was born—Marlene’s Market & Deli. More growth followed. “In 1988, we moved to a new location, increasing the size of our produce and deli departments, and adding an espresso shop,” Gebhardt recounts. “We moved yet again in 2004 to our current Federal Way location reaching 22,000 SF in size, adding a large area for educational seminars.” Marlene’s expanded its reach again in 1995, opening a second store in Tacoma that has been enlarged and remodeled twice, to its current size of 15,000 SF. And as the locations grew, the opportunity to bring more jobs to the local community grew as well, from 5 employees in the first couple of years to 150 people currently on staff between the two stores.

It’s still a family affair, though. “I started working with my mom, Marlene, while I was in college,” Gebhardt says. “I would package bulk foods in a tiny little space in the back of the store. As the store grew, I learned more about the natural food industry and the details of running the business and I discovered that I shared my mom’s passion for both. I worked in every department over 10 years, then started managing the Federal Way store. When we opened our Tacoma store, we established Store Managers in each store, and I moved to a General Manager position. My sister and brother grew up in the business as well. Jennifer is the Finance Director and my brother, Tim, worked in produce and now handles all maintenance.”

The mission at Marlene’s Market & Deli has evolved over the years, but the core beliefs have not changed, with a focus on excellent customer service, high-quality products, and a commitment to health and education for both customers and staff. The generational wisdom passed down by the founder is deeply ingrained in operations. “As Marlene’s daughter, I remember the phrase she used when my siblings and I had chores to do: ‘If a job is worth doing at all, it’s worth doing well,’” Gebhardt says. “She would explain that we should always do our best, no matter how small the task may seem. Marlene taught that to her family and then taught it to her staff. Marlene was a stickler for details, believing strongly that every detail was important for the business—from wringing out a towel properly to using ‘elbow grease’ when cleaning, to caring for customers with sincerity and friendly professionalism. Marlene emphasized that our customers are guests who we are inviting into our home. We greet them, take care of them, and thank them for coming in. She would tell us to look around and see if our stores look welcoming and inviting. Exemplary customer service, with attentive and courteous care, is our goal.”

And while Marlene Beadle laid the foundation, and Gebhardt honors that legacy, it’s the employees who make it all sparkle. “Our employees have been the biggest part of our success,” Gebhardt says. “I wish I could list them all here. Whether they stay a few years as they work their way through school, or stay and make a career with us, we have been so lucky in the people who helped us grow our business. Many have been

with us over 20 years and even some for 30 years! Each time we moved or expanded; they were all just as excited as we were."

Francesca Siena is one of those team members. She's been with Marlene's since August 1997, starting as a Produce Clerk, and working up to Store Director, leading the Store and its Team through all aspects of customer service, operations and staff development. Siena was drawn to the job by a passion for the environment, nourishing foods, and social justice. "Healing, caring and educating our Community has been so rewarding," she shares.

Seconding that: long-time employee John Kay, Category Manager for the supplement department. Kay is finishing up his 21st year with the company, and says the atmosphere and the values of what the store offers as a family-owned independent health food store are draws. "If you have helped someone get a good night's sleep or improve their stress levels or energy and they come back to share how much better they are feeling," he says, "that is moving and powerful indeed!"

As happens to so many of us in the natural products industry, what starts out as a job becomes a passion, and a mission. Darcie Sage, Market Manager, sums it up: "Twenty years ago I was so very curious about healthy living, coupled with a craving for a more holistic lifestyle. I had already been delving into and being exposed to alternative ideas. It was a friend who told me about Marlene's and the great sandwiches and bulk foods department. I drove my orange VW bus over to see for myself and the rest is history! I had no idea it would be my career and such an important part of my life and my journey."

Connecting with the community is part of that journey. "Sometimes I think customers share feelings with us that they won't even share with their families," says Siena. "There's such tenderness and vulnerability; at times it's a lot to carry. Time after time I would catch an employee offering to pay for someone who doesn't have enough change to cover their lunch, or taking the extra time to listen to a personal story. A tender spot for me is an older gentleman who walks all over town with his walker. When he gets to our store he eats a small snack, gets coffee and then falls asleep for a quick nap. He always has a joke—some of which are as old as I am—but they still make me laugh. He teaches me that being exactly who we are, not letting our bodies dictate our mobility, being brave and staying in connection, are all aspects of what makes life worth sharing."

To support team members so they can give their best back to the community, the core tenet at Marlene's is to provide a harmonious work environment for employees. "We support social justice and diversity, especially in the workplace," Gebhardt says. "I have always been proud of our team and how they work together no matter what differences there are among them, whether it's race, gender, background, etc. Acceptance has always been an inherent part of the Marlene's society." She adds that the expectation is that everyone at Marlene's promotes teamwork and caring. "Grocery retail is a tough job and supporting each other is what works as we take care of customers and the many day-to-day details."

Enduring Through Challenging Times

The team at Marlene's strives to smile through their masks, but of course it isn't always easy. "I'm grateful we are an essential business and have been able to stay open during COVID, though we definitely had a drop in sales and still struggle to find staff," Gebhardt shares. Regarding staffing, Gebhardt is having the same issue as so many throughout the U.S. "Our core team has been steady and flexible, but not having staff to provide backup and support has added even more stress."

It takes a toll. Siena recalls the early days of the pandemic: "Somehow, we had to put the future plans on hold and focus on the day to day, hour to hour, needs. Sometimes even minute to minute as the phone would literally ring incessantly with call outs, emergencies, and staff, vendors or community members in distress. It was like having a snow day every day, and here in the PNW, west of the Cascades, that's a big deal!"

Through the years...



Founder Marlene Beadle (June 8, 1934 - June 16, 2019) was a pioneer in the Natural Products Industry.



Marlene's expanded its reach in 1995, opening a second store in Tacoma, WA.



Led by Beadle's vision, outreach, education, and welcoming smiles have been staples at Marlene's.

2021 Retailer of the Year

On top of that: "COVID has added many difficult layers to our operations, including working hard to keep a positive atmosphere for our staff and finding extra ways to support them," Gebhardt says. "Along with that comes the layer of trying to keep up with the mandates and requirements that are announced, and helping everyone understand and accept these mandates—I've never written so many memos in my life!"

The pandemic is affecting how people behave, Gebhardt adds, and that shows up in the stores. An effort is made to protect store staff from verbal confrontations from customers who won't follow mandates. "Those few customers cause stress for our employees," she laments, adding that people are on edge, so their tolerance and understanding of others is waning.

"I think we are all still processing what we have gone through and are going through, individually, as a team, as a nation, globally," Sage says. "For us, and my team, it has been the fatigue that still lingers. As frontline workers, we have shouldered a lot through this: being short staffed and overwhelmed. Dealing with supply issues to enforcing mask mandates. All of this is understating the toll it took on the staff. I have seen the most resolve and resilience in my team during the pandemic."

That said, there are ups and downs. "For so many we hear that we are a lifeline," Sage notes. "That lifeline comes in many forms: nourishing food, a listening ear, empathy, a safety net for those struggling with mental health. Sometimes we see customers that we haven't seen for a year and a half. Some days there were clashes with folks over masks. One interaction can wipe you out and another can fill you up."

Supply chain issues are another source of stress. "Supplies have been a serious concern during COVID," Gebhardt explains. "Customers are worried they won't get what they need, and we are worried we won't get our deliveries. All of us have cause for concern as the current supply chain is a mess. All we can do is keep going."

And be creative, adds Kay. "We have had to be quick and creative to keep up with increased demand for products and the current limited supply issues, so we can provide the items our clients are looking for."

That applies to all fronts of operations. "Improvising with creativity and a good sense of prioritization is how we instinctively adapted to the new environment," Siena explains. "Encouraging one another, supporting each other and keeping panic to a minimum was all we could do at first. Then came the notion that we were doing our best, and that our best had to be enough. While prioritizing the very-much-needed procedures (sanitizing, mask enforcement etc.) we tried to find our sense of humor, and to make the best of it. Some of the hires we had to make last year while in the chaos of the pandemic turned

out to be some of the best people we've ever hired. Resilient, generous, kind and hard working. Thank you all!"

To keep morale up, Siena adds, "We tried to have as many samples and free food and coffee for staff, so they felt appreciated. We missed our meeting and staff training, and it all felt so permanent. We had to remind ourselves to just focus on the task at hand, one day at a time."

Quick thinking and fast action were required, despite the massive uncertainty faced in those early days. "We had to make some quick decisions, such as establishing the Parking Lot Pick Up service," Siena says. "That took a couple of days to figure out, we were in such a hurry! We simplified, tried things out and then adjusted as needed. For example, hours of operation: For quite a long time the stores closed at 6pm as opposed to 8pm. Hard decisions to make, but necessary. Scheduling staff and utilizing them across the store so that nobody would miss out on hours was a big priority. Everyone got cross trained, which was a long-standing goal we could never quite complete. We can check that off our list! Best part of COVID? We got down to the studs and remembered why we love what we do!"

Caring shoppers reminded them of how essential they are, too. "We are so grateful to all those who supported us, and for our loyal customers," Siena says. "Every act of kindness mattered, and still does!"

A "Safe Place" Amid Life's Chaos

"Marlene's Market & Deli has woven a tapestry of relationships all across the South Puget Sound," says Siena. "Many local small businesses are always looking for a platform to launch their presence in the community (i.e. Alaffia many years ago!). Many educators, schools and local agencies seek connection, sponsorship and visibility. We've opened our seminar room for meetings on Urban Forestry, Mental Health Outreach, City of Tacoma and Federal Way Planning, safety, preparedness and addressing homelessness in our area. Focusing more closely on Marlene's greatest passions, of course environmental issues, Rails to Trails, preservation and non-GMO labelling... There's been so many over the years. Many of our customers refer to Marlene's as their 'safe place' in the midst of life's chaos, and I think it says it all about how connecting individuals to resources feeds the life of the community as a whole."

Education has been a focus of Marlene's from the beginning, adds Gebhardt. "Our seminars are free and have covered topics ranging from health and wellness to raising chickens in an urban setting to enjoying a 'forest bath' to refreshing mental health... We have been involved in local schools throughout our years in business. A local high school includes our Tacoma store as part of the required health class each semester. The students

A LOCAL FOCUS FOR THE GOOD OF ALL

What can industry members do better to help ensure our collective success in the future? Gebhardt reflects on what Marlene would say: "I think Marlene would say that we all need to continue to promote organically grown food locally and around the globe. Encouraging new organic farms and supporting the existing ones will mean more accessibility for everyone. It's time to stop hearing, 'I can't afford organic produce.' We are worth the cost, so let's strive to make it easier for all to buy. One of the ways we are continuing Marlene's legacy and looking to the future is by supporting organic farming. We buy local as much as possible. Our produce staff just had a tour of a local farm in September



A delicious selection of local, organic produce at the Federal Way location.

and learned what it is like to run a small farm. Working with local schools is a good way to teach the benefits of organically grown produce. We have done many tours for young children. The produce department is a big hit as they sample different fruits. We buy non-organic fruit elsewhere and let them try samples of non-organic and organic. Seeing their amazement as they taste the difference is exciting. I think our natural food industry is a fascinating one that is composed of people who are creative, innovative, and open minded. I believe our industry is fostering a change in the health of the world, starting with our own communities."

have a mini nutrition class from two of our longtime employees, get a tour of the store, and a treat bag full of good stuff.”

That can have a positive ripple effect, Kay points out. “When we are able to have local schools send classrooms in to learn what a store like ours has to offer, hopefully that helps our younger community members get a head start on making informed choices for themselves.”

Another offering: the Community Art Project. “An artist in the store and/or community can submit an application to have their artwork on display and for sale in our store,” Sage explains. “The art, creativity and skill of the folks in our community is not at all surprising and is completely awe-inspiring.”

The Marlene’s team is also involved in meetings about growth and development in their communities, Gebhardt adds. “We host Safe Streets meetings for local businesspeople. Marlene’s has also been very involved with environmental aspects of the South Puget Sound. Along with donations, we have done volunteer work to support parks and trails. Getting rid of blackberry bushes burns a lot of calories on a hot summer day! That day we earned our deli lunch and added to the formation of the Hylebos Wetlands Park in Federal Way.”

Outreach efforts shifted during the pandemic. “We had to stop in-person seminars and meetings. Zoom has taken over and we can’t wait to get back to in-person seminars. We had our first in-person Safe Streets meeting in September and it was great to see everyone, even though we all had masks on! We continue to do what we can remotely and look forward to the day it changes back to what we love—seeing people’s faces!”

The connection also continues on social media, and through the in-store magazine. “Our *Sound Outlook* magazine has been a great connection to our customers. I love seeing customers come in carrying their *Sound Outlook* magazine and asking about something they read or the ingredients for a recipe they saw in it or using it to shop for monthly specials. We also send e-blasts out regularly, and use Facebook and Instagram for advertising and for sharing current info. And of course, now we do our classes using Facebook and with online connections via our speakers and chefs. We also have four events each year: Gluten Free & Allergy Friendly Day; Spring Anniversary and Earth Day Celebration; Non-GMO/Fair Trade Day; and our Holiday Open House. Demos, gift baskets, samples, and specials for our one-day events have evolved to month-long fun during COVID. Who knows? Perhaps it will stay that way.”

Looking to the Future

Competition from online retail was a concern, but Gebhardt says staying true to Marlene’s roots has helped them persevere. “We decided we would continue as we always have, by focusing on what we are known for and emphasizing what is especially unique to us,” she says. “We continued strongly with our customer service and educational training for our staff. We increased advertising for specialty areas, including a biweekly hot sheet for our 100% organic produce department, new signage about our 100% non-GMO deli with everything made in-house, and increased the number of bulk specials to draw people into our specially designed bulk coolers. There was much more, but basically, we focused on what we do well and have stayed strong even with all the online buying out there.”

On the horizon? “At Marlene’s we continue to work toward providing a good livelihood for our team and a welcoming environment for our customers,” Gebhardt says. “This pandemic has reminded me that Marlene’s is comprised of a resilient, creative, and flexible team and moving into 2022, I know our business will embrace what we’ve learned and continue to thrive. And hopefully we are moving to the point where masks are optional, and we can all smile at each other again.” **WF**

PLUS: What do customers love about Marlene’s? Find out on page 39!

...Thriving today



Darcie Sage (left) and Francesca Siena are two of the 150 team members who make Marlene’s shine.



The Tacoma location offers a seasonal assortment to nourish the community.



The staff at Marlene’s promotes teamwork and caring, supporting one another through the tough times at retail.



would like to congratulate



for winning Retailer of the Year