



Woodlands Market's Kentfield Location

## From a Convenience Store to a Supermarket Chain

By Sam Lyons

Woodlands Market has been a central element of the Kentfield community for decades. Located in the heart of the neighborhood's hub, Woodlands is always heavily populated by grocery shoppers, wine connoisseurs, cafe dwellers, and more. However, the market wasn't always the bustling hotspot that it is today.

"It was a funky, little, dirty, grungy gourmet convenience store," founder and CEO Don Santa explained. "I bought the store in 1986, over thirty years ago. I had all of 11 or 12 employees, and without a whole lot of resources, I went about cleaning the place up, meeting and greeting my customers, and building my business." Although he wasn't yet accustomed to the complexities of running a

business, Santa worked tirelessly for years to get his company off the ground.

"I kind of became a student of the trade because I had zero experience at the time. It became a process with a lot of trial and error."

Over time, Woodlands Market became a major contributor to the community around it. Being within a mile of College of Marin, Kent Middle School, and Bacich Elementary School, Santa found many opportunities to maintain a positive relationship with his customers. "We got behind the community in terms of fundraising and supporting the people's needs. We became the schools' flagship sponsor, and we still are. That was a big part of our business model."

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Woodlands Market's success has led the company to many expansion opportunities which Santa has fully taken advantage of. Firstly, Woodlands Market purchased Ross Grocery — better known as Eddie's — back in 2010, after the third generation of the family's owners announced their retirement.

"They came to us and asked if we were interested in buying their store. While I wasn't looking for that project, we bought the store for the interest of the community." However, years later, Santa eventually decided to sell the old-fashioned shop. He assured me that he made it his duty to search for a worthy owner who would preserve the traditional values of the store for the sake of the community. "It was more of an operational distraction because it's so small compared to what we normally do, so we couldn't yield the results we expected."

Later, in 2011, the market agreed to open a new location in Tiburon after noteworthy demand from the town. "We basically outgrew that space and took on a store in Tiburon," Santa explained.

Woodlands is also planning to open a new location in San Francisco this Summer, which will introduce an entirely new community to the business. "San Francisco has a whole other growth opportunity. If you're not growing, you're at risk of dying," Santa quipped.

Although the expansion of the corporation has boosted sales significantly, other grocery businesses still compete for customers around Marin.

"The competition has grown in the past few years," noted Kentfield store manager, Glenn Dal Porto.

"Paradise Markets, Beverages and More, Trader Joe's,

and Whole Foods' new store in Mill Valley have all been started recently which has caused some competition for us." Dal Porto recognized, however, that Woodlands will continue to thrive in this community because of the company's work ethic and willingness to take risks. "The market has grown, but the philosophies are the same."

While the Ross location may no longer be a branch of the Woodlands family, Santa still admires the community feel that a smaller market like Eddie's provides. Particularly, he appreciates the account system in which customers can pay for their groceries by telling the cashier their name. "I think it shows a lot of trust between the store and the community," Santa mentioned. "There was a strong intention to [use an account system in our bigger stores.] Some people thought it was such an old school thing, but I thought quite the opposite."

Woodlands Market has completely renovated their image and reputation from the grungy convenience store in 1986. However, their willingness to contribute so much time and effort into their surrounding community keeps their customers loyal. The admiration that customers have for the business derives directly from the hard work and dedication that Don Santa and Glenn Dal Porto put into it.

"Next to my kids and my family and all the stuff that's obvious, Woodlands is the best thing that's happened to me," Santa added. "I still feel like I'm sort of at the halfway point. I started relatively young 30 years ago, but I think I have another 30 in me so we're just getting warmed up."