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ONE DOLLAR

Offseason Is Key For Citarella Impact

BY ERIN MCKINLEY

Two weeks before Memorial Day, Joe Gurrera opened his latest gourmet supermarket in the Citarella dynasty, a highly anticipated, 10,800-square-foot store on Hampton Road in Southampton Village.

"I had been looking for a store in Southampton Village for years, and it was difficult to find a proper space," Mr. Gurrera said in an interview earlier this summer.

Established in New York City in 1912 and now owned by Mr. Gurrera—whose first store on the East End was a 12-foot-wide seafood market that opened in 1983—Citarella now has three stores in the Hamptons, as well as one in the city. Mr. Gurrera opened the first one in Water Mill in 1999, another one in East Hampton in 2002, moved the Water Mill store to a larger space in Bridgehampton in 2009, and then this year opened the Citarella in Southampton Village—which he said thus far has been a big hit.

"The customers are making me feel really good, and they are all coming over to me to say that this is the best Citarella location," Mr. Gurrera said, "so it appears the fruits of my labors have paid off."

Even before the Southampton store opened, it had been a topic of conversation in the village for years, while rumors swirled and approvals were mulled over by Southampton Village officials. Some noted that a grocery store of some kind in the center of the business district could serve to benefit the entire downtown area by bringing more activity to the heart of the commercial district.

Certainly the new store seems to have been drawing a steady crowd of customers throughout the summer, with some local businesses benefiting from the increase in foot traffic along the already busy Hampton Road.

According to Southampton Village Mayor Mark Epley, it is clear that the new business is having an impact on the business district—but how large an impact might not be known for a few months. With the busier summer months, he said, it is easy to see that the gourmet market—which features a bakery, pizza station, salad bar, and deli—is thriving. But the real test will be to see how it affects businesses during the off-season, when activity slows and customers become more scarce, and more fought over.

Southampton Village, Mr. Epley said, has needed another supermarket for several years, but it was a difficult need to fill due to zoning, space, parking and taxpayers' concerns. The mayor said Citarella was a nice compromise between a larger store like a Stop & Shop or a King Kullen on County Road 39, and one offering the feel of a small-town market. He said Citarella offers a variety of food options while other items like paper goods or diapers can be easily found in other places in the village.

"It is complicated," Mr. Epley said. "I think a big store like King Kullen out here, that would have a very negative impact on the village, while Citarella is actually overall very positive."

Based on conversations he has had with the owners of other local businesses, Mr. Epley said, Citarella seems to be helping some, although he could see how the store could have a negative impact on others.

"Obviously, the impacts are on some of the delis and food providers that are out here," he said. "But from an overall standpoint, I think that it has brought traffic in and is benefiting the stores adjacent to the store."

For some businesses, the store's opening is more palpable than others. Rosalva Urgiles, the manager at the neighboring Blue Duck Bakery, said this week that there has been a noticeable decrease in business from last year, citing the vast bakery selection just a few doors away. Ms. Urgiles also said parking remains an issue along Hampton Road.



A customer leaves Citarella on Hampton Road.

ERIN MCKINLEY

"It has been very busy on Hampton Road, but over here it is a bit more slower," she said. "So everybody goes over there, where they have more stuff. We only have pastries and bread—so we have business, but we are not as busy as last summer."

Down the street at Sean's Place, employee Jorge Castro echoed Ms. Urgiles's sentiments, saying business has been a little off. However, Mr. Castro said he did not believe the changes were due to the opening of Citarella, but rather the change on Hampton Road to diagonal parking, which was implemented one week before Citarella opened. The new alignment can make it more difficult to park on the eastern side of the street near the traffic light, he said.

"Business has been slowed down a bit this summer," Mr. Castro said from behind the counter this week. "But not because of Citarella opening, but because of the increase in traffic and there being no place for people to park."

Some business owners declined to comment on the impact of Citarella's arrival on Hampton Road. Other businesses said they have not felt a sting from Citarella opening, nor much of an upswing.

Mark Parash, the owner of Sip 'N' Soda, said he has had a very busy summer, but that it is too early to tell if the uptick in customers was from increased foot traffic from Citarella.

"Business has been very strong this summer," Mr. Parash said. "I don't know if it is attributed to the parking or Citarella bringing people over—I haven't made that decision yet—but I really won't know the impact Citarella will have until the off-season, when we can see what the increases or decreases really are."

"We have had a great summer, and I have talked to other business owners, and they say the same thing," he continued. "So it is all good for right now."

Meanwhile, Mr. Gurrera said he is happy to be up and running in Southampton, and that he hopes increased foot traffic will benefit both his store and the entire community.



"I think I have proven myself in Bridgehampton and East Hampton," he said. "We have been here for a number of years. We are here to stay, not a fly-by-the-night city guy who is coming and then leaving."

Mr. Gurrera also said he is excited to see how the store evolves, noting that as the

months go on the staff will tweak anything necessary to keep the market running efficiently.

"I see that things are going in the right direction," the market owner said. "I think it is going to take a little bit more time, but it has been good."