



JENNIFER HENDERSON

City Harvest teams up with bodegas to distribute healthy food

Wilfredo Reyes, owner of E&G Grocery in Inwood, is seeing brisk sales for an unlikely corner store option: freshly prepared chicken Caesar salads.

The salads, along with other grab-and-go items, including yogurt parfaits, are part of a new business line for the store. Most of the items are priced around \$4, and they're all nutritious and ready to be eaten. E&G began selling the grab-and-go foods about two months ago, and they've been a big hit.

Reyes hadn't been planning to update his business model. "One of the staff members from City Harvest just walked into my store," he said. "We talked for a little bit, and he explained what City Harvest is doing and asked if I wanted to be part of the program."

City Harvest, a citywide food-rescue organization, is expanding its efforts through a collaboration with Citi Community Development. The two organizations have worked together for more than a decade. Citi Community Development leads financial services firm Citi's work with nonprofits and is focused on economic empowerment for underserved communities.

"More recently we really felt the need with corner stores—that people are wanting more convenient, healthy items," said Rosanna Robbins, director of food access at City Harvest. "The biggest barriers to healthy eating are time and money."

Food costs in the city are among the highest in the nation. Many low-income families struggle to find healthy, affordable food in their own neighborhood, City Harvest noted. The organization also pointed to a survey from Washington, D.C.–based nonprofit Share Our Strength. In it, nearly one-third

of families said price and time commitment are the main obstacles to cooking healthy meals, and 1 in 4 families reported skipping healthful food because of the price.

Supermarket chain Fairway has signed on to produce the grab-and-go food, which participating corner stores then purchase. For the first 12 weeks, City Harvest will buy back up to \$100 worth of items per week that are not sold. City Harvest is paying for \$1 and \$2 coupons to entice customers to buy the food at bodegas as well as providing certain infrastructure for the stores, including point-of-sale systems. In Reyes' case, City Harvest bought him a bigger cooler in which to store the items.



The program is also designed to help preserve local businesses fighting to keep up with rising rents, more competition and changing neighborhood demographics, City Harvest noted.

"In all our work with corner stores and supermarkets to help them bring in healthy foods, you can't address that portion of their business in isolation," Robbins said. "It's about running a better business."

Reyes has owned E&G for more than two decades, and he said lately the competition and rents in his neighborhood have intensified.

"That's really what aligns with our work here, which focuses on the areas of small-business development and neighborhood revitalization," said Colleen Galvin, senior vice president of the New York tristate market for Citi Community Development. "These businesses are important to the vibrancy of New York City neighborhoods, and it's becoming harder and harder for them to compete."

In the past five years, Citi Community Development has provided \$1 million to support and defray the operating costs of City Harvest's corner store work, Galvin said.

The hope is that once the buyback period and initial investment end, participating stores will continue to sell the grab-and-go items.

City Harvest has 80 corner stores and supermarkets in its network. Eight stores, including E&G, have signed on to participate in the grab-and-go food program so far, with another 10 in recruitment, Robbins said. The initial goal is to bring on 50 stores across the city.

The stores that City Harvest has been working with have been excited about providing healthy and affordable food options and making a profit from doing so, Robbins said. "They're very willing to explore doing business a little differently."

Although Reyes is focused on selling chicken salads, in the coming weeks City Harvest plans to indulge briefly in turkey, delivering 12,000 of them to more than 200 community food programs across the city to help residents put a Thanksgiving meal on their table.

Ultimately Reyes and his customers are thankful for their new healthy choices.

"Customers are very happy that I'm introducing this type of food; they don't have it right now in the neighborhood," Reyes said. "I want to offer my customers something different, something healthier." —Jennifer Henderson