

# PYBURN'S FARMS FRESH FOODS: PLACE AND GROCERY SHOPPING IN HOUSTON

by Todd Romero



Left, Zaniah Jackson.  
Right, Pyburn's Grocery.  
Photos Todd Romero.

**I realize that lunchtime is closing on us, as patrons gather, singly or in small groups, at the Pyburn's Farms Fresh Foods hot food counter. Steam rises from oxtails, chicken wings, boudin balls, and other delicacies—soul food by way of south Louisiana with stops in China (egg rolls), Mexico (menudo), and Italy (spaghetti). This is not your ordinary supermarket food counter, where the victuals are primarily prepared off-site before being assembled, reheated, and, at times, even cooked; dreary fare that is rarely attuned to place or clientele. It's a very different scene here.**

Wearing a green Pyburn's t-shirt and hat, nine-year-old Zaniah Jackson, a seasoned store expert, percolates a wonderful, bright energy. She catches my eye, as if to suggest, hey, listen, this is important: "I have a lot of favorite parts of the store... jalapeños, the breakfast aisle, the snack aisle, the cereal aisle," trailing off just as a chorus of adults interjects, "Everything!" Zaniah's grandfather "Rev" Ivan Jackson, considers her with warm, smiling eyes. Rev, a reverend who lives in the neighborhood, works at Pyburn's—a busy man. New lunch counter arrivals nod, smile or exchange pleasantries, alternately calling him Rev or Ivan. He breaks from a variety of other tasks on Thursdays to make a special chicken wing recipe, which the Pyburn's Regional Manager Larry Johnson explains is a steady seller at the South Union store, the company's newest property and the only one of his markets that grocer John Vuong has built from the ground up. Place plays an important role in how he operates his Pyburn's Farms Fresh Foods stores. Vuong's stores primarily cater to food insecure or underserved areas in greater Houston. Independent grocery stores like his are more varied, engaging, and dynamic consumer and community places than the typical American supermarkets. Moreover, his approach to successfully running his string of grocery stores points to the crucial ways in which immigrant entrepreneurs are quietly reinventing food businesses in a manner that suggests a rather keen ear for tuning place to community needs in a complex competitive environment.

The Rodney Dangerfield of place, the modern supermarket gets no respect at all; at least from academics and critics, who see a contrived space as tired as the old comedian's set-piece quip. Cast as oversized, sterile and impersonal, the grocery store is most often viewed as a soulless shopping zone devoid of meaningful human interaction—a place embodying little community spirit. Comparing North American grocery shopping to the lively and engaging experience of her fieldwork at a long-established open-air market in her book *Porta Palazzo: The Anthropology of an Italian Market*, the anthropologist Rachel Black laments, "Back home in North America, buying food was always part of domestic drudgery, carried out in giant, impersonal supermarkets; these were solitary outings in which I rarely met or talked to a soul, not even in the long check-out lines." As she makes clear, her engaging ethnography builds on a longstanding strain in sociological and anthropological thought. The modern supermarket remains, in this view, corrosive to social bonds and serves as the locale where the connections between food production and consumption are magically erased—a dangerous place where the "delocalization" of the food system undermines sociability and community.

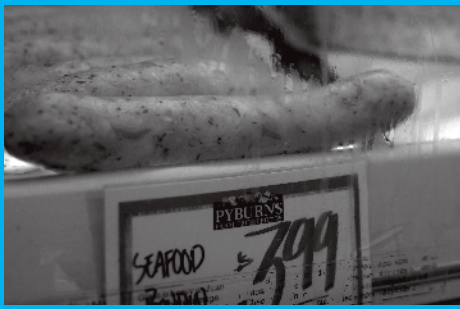
Such criticisms are not entirely

wrongheaded. And, yet, the critique of the modern grocery store as a Janus-faced symbol of American plenty and empty consumerism resonates most loudly in neighborhoods of plenty. Play with the USDA Food Access Research Atlas, which defines food deserts as census tracts where a third or more of the residents live a mile away from the nearest supermarket, and you will quickly learn what a legion of researchers, activists, and food policy wonks have long known. The distribution of the archetypical supermarket marks high points in a depressing topography of want across impressive swaths of urban and rural America. Of course, Houston's pitched food access issues are deeply rooted. The larger story of segregation, institutional racism, educational inequality, and political hostility or neglect, among other issues, tied to the complex development of food deserts, remain beyond the scope of this essay. Food deserts neither solely develop nor can be magically resolved by the absence or presence of grocery stores—inequality remains a broader and more pernicious problem.

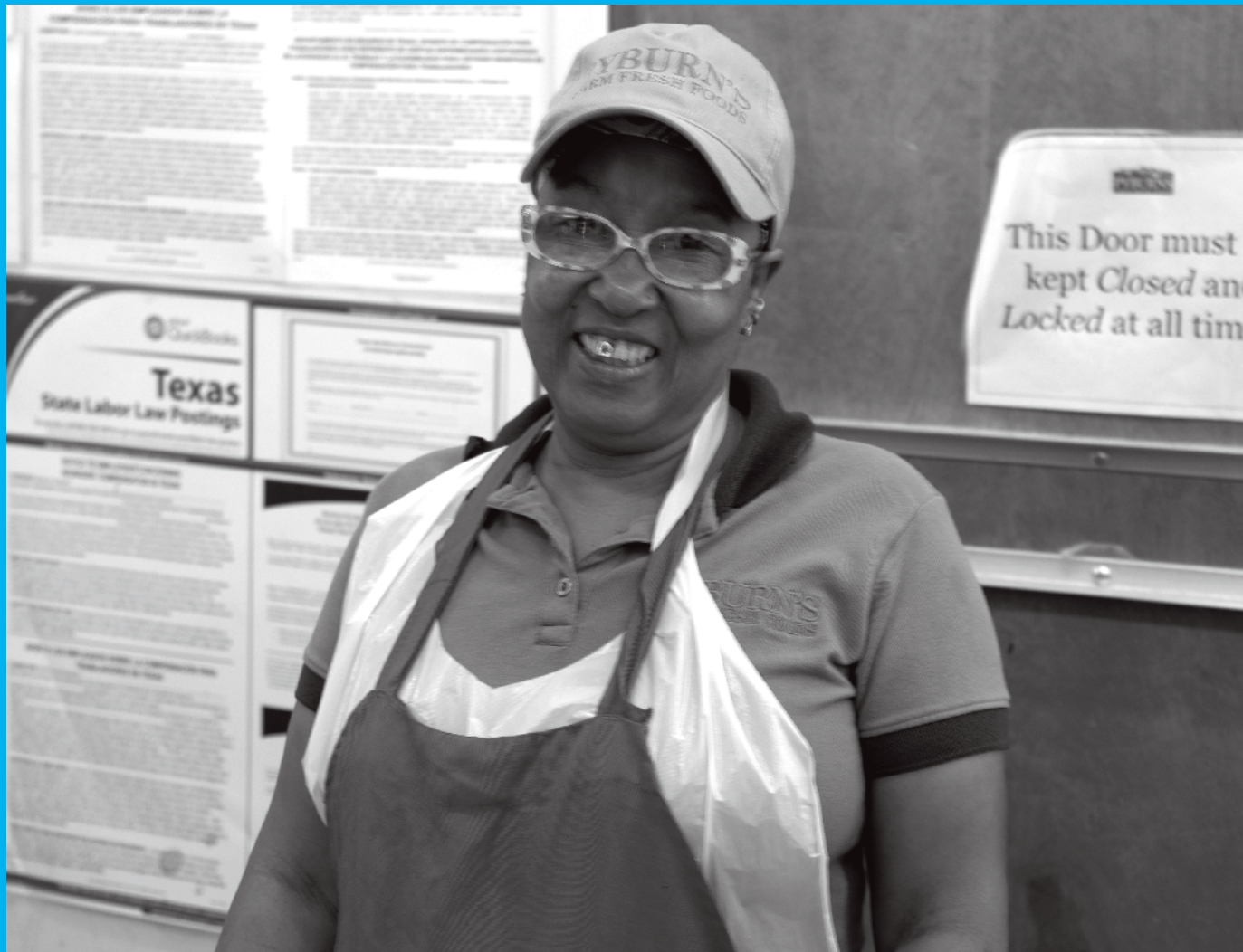
Nonetheless, the history of the American supermarket is instructive. In the 1930s, midsized chains muscled out small independent stores that had predominated. A&P markets proved an important bellwether; centralizing distribution and employing economies of scale to drive down costs and raise profits. The Great Depression stalled the development of the supermarket, but the end of World War II witnessed the growing dominance of supermarkets that popped up wherever postwar suburbs developed. Independent grocery stores proved the rarest of birds, never fully extinct but increasingly difficult to find. As supermarket chains came to dominate the market, enjoying more than 60% market share by the late 1950s, they largely eschewed inner city areas to develop new properties. They pitched their wares at a growing suburban and largely white middle class.

In the absence of large supermarkets in underserved areas, an impressive array of smaller independents has emerged to market groceries to Houston's increasingly diverse communities. Using Harris County Appraisal District information in a 2015 article, *The Houston Chronicle* Data Reporter John D. Harden estimated that 500,000 Houstonians live in food deserts. At the beginning of the same year, a jubilant business article in the newspaper noted that it was a banner year for retail development, according the 22nd Annual Wulfe & Company Real Estate Survey, with the grocery sector leading the charge with 32 new supermarkets planned. Eleven months later, Harden's piece reported that one new grocery store was built in a Houston food desert, a lone outpost of the German discount grocer Aldi. He identified 98 different grocery stores in underserved areas with bigger chains—Fiesta (12 stores), H-E-B (7 stores), Kroger (6 stores), Randalls (4 stores), and Wal-Mart (3 stores)—only comprising 24% of the market for a sizeable chunk of the city's population. Independent grocery stores matter a great deal in Houston's food system.

A shrewd businessman, John Vuong flourishes in underserved markets often avoided by bigger food retailers. He is a compact, thoughtful man with a warm smile contained by a careful manner. At age seventeen, he arrived in Houston from South Vietnam to Houston, part of the second wave (c. 1978-1982) of Vietnamese immigration to



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the United States. He joined a quickly growing community that would profoundly shape the city’s history, especially how Houstonians eat, now possessing an abiding love of Bánh mì, phở, and Viet-Cajun crawfish, among other riches. Well before this fare became commonplace in the city, Vuong found the American food system alien. “It is very different in Vietnam,” he explained to me a few years ago, “there are no grocery stores that carry everything like we do here.” Often a daily activity, shopping unfolded in open air markets with “two or three hundred vendors,” each specializing in a foodstuff. “So, you would have to walk, maybe, the whole open market to get what you need.” It was completely different than how Americans shop. When the market was oriented around Vietnamese housewives shopping for daily family meals, he underscored, freshness proved the supreme consumer value—wise purveyors delivered or failed.

Shopping for food in the United States proved a strange exercise. Open air markets akin, perhaps, on Vietnamese terms, to the Italian market that Rachel Black celebrated, were not to be found in 1980s Houston. Instead, Vuong discovered food proved difficult to secure in his corner of the city. “It was very difficult,” he reflected. “I did not have any transportation and I could not afford to live anywhere else but in those underserved areas.” Unhappily, he became accustomed to walking a mile or more to the grocery store. “It was hard,” he recalled, “and that was when I had an idea of coming back to the underserved areas to offer fresh food.”

As a young man, Vuong briefly worked in a 7-Eleven convenience store before earning an Associate Degree in electronics, a field he left after being laid off. Joining other Vietnamese-Americans, he fished the Texas Gulf Coast as a crabber and shrimper for nine years. During

the period, he “dreamed of having a grocery store” and carefully “saved up money to start up a business.” Vuong secured his first store in 1994, quickly learning that the business proved “very competitive” but developed a successful approach to flourish in underserved areas that the big chains often avoided.

Most of his thirteen stores follow a similar formula. As he explains, Vuong acquires struggling grocery stores “at a fair price that helps me with startup costs. I can keep my costs lower. That way I don’t have to make a lot of sales to stay in business.” This approach served as the foundation for a smart business strategy tailoring neighborhood stores to place in interesting ways. Dry goods in the store are more-or-less a breakeven proposition. Independents lack the buying power to secure the low prices offered by larger competitors. Vuong structures the Pyburn’s stores around a unique business model. He provides fresh fruit and vegetables at competitive prices. But the key to Pyburn’s appeal remains the hot food counter described above and a meat market that departs from the big retail model by appealing deeply to place. The Pyburn’s meat market offers all of the basics but specializes in high-quality boudin and other house-made sausages, stuffed pork chops, and other specialty items that speak to the Creole and Cajun foodways of numerous Houstonians with roots in South Louisiana.

Thomas Smith, Jr., a senior-citizen and regular at the Missouri City Pyburn’s, sits in the blue motorized wheelchair that he uses to visit from the Oak Tree apartment complex across the street. He enthusiastically praises the courtesousness of the staff and the quality and variety of food available. “It’s like the neighborhood, for me,” he explains, when I asked why he comes into the store several times a day. “I love coming in here, meeting people.” Like most everyone I spoke with at

different Pyburn’s locations, he lingered on the house-made sausages and semi-prepared foods like the stuffed pork chops. When I asked him if there were one item he would encourage a Pyburn’s newcomer to try from the hot kitchen, Smith got serious, paused for a moment, and answered in an unquestioning tone: “The oxtails.” A South Union store regular, Gertharine Laws, who Rev Jackson affectionately refers to as “City Lady,” also highlights the store’s friendly service. She’s not a neighborhood shopper but hits the hot lunch counter regularly and “loves” the meat market. “You can’t get that kind of meat, especially where I live, homemade sausage, boudin, pork chops, all that back there.” For Laws, the tastes of South Louisiana make their way back to Humble, TX via Vuong’s South Union store. She also recommends the oxtails.

After Laws departs, Pyburn’s Regional Manager Larry Johnson explains to me some new additions that they are working on for the South Union store’s hot food counter. Portability is important, he stresses, for mobile workers seeking lunch. Not everyone can hunker down over a styrofoam box of oxtails, rice, and greens. I spy a couple of hard-hat guys chatting in line and see his point. He highlights a new fish sandwich before lingering on, what strikes me as an impressive stroke of genius, oxtail tacos, which encompass so much about place and Houston. The migration, loss, opportunity, and reinvention that make the city offers unique dividends like a dish employs a Mexican and Soul Food grammar to create something new and beautiful. I’ll be back for the tacos.