

# La Grande Orange: Here Comes the Neighborhood

by Lori Pfeiffer

La Grande Orange rises out from the intersection of 40th Street and Campbell like an oasis in the desert. You might mistake it for a mirage in an urban landscape more given to ho-hum strip malls. The first thing that catches my eye is the movement of people—milling around outside, crossing the street, riding bicycles—which makes the rest of pedestrian-lite Phoenix look as desolate as a ghost town.

Then there's the big orange itself. An outdoor mural features two kiddie-pool sized citrus—a lemon and an orange—puckering up to each other. A rendition of an orange crate label, it's a fitting tribute to the site's long-ago incarnation as a hangout place for teenagers, back when its orange groves on the outskirts of Phoenix were far from prying parents. On closer inspection, La Grande Orange gets even better. Step past a row of bistro tables by the door - and back in time. This is the grocery store that once served neighborhoods across America, before chain grocery stores sent mom-and-pop shops the way of the dinosaurs. This is a store where select items cozy together on pyramids of wooden shelves, where I can buy both toilet paper and Castellana Foglie D'Autunno pasta in assorted pinks, greens, yellows and orange, or purchase a nice meal, organic, locally grown produce or perhaps flowers to take home. Here, the young woman who is dusting the produce smiles and says "Hi."

While I'm marveling at the assortment and taking notes, a good-looking guy ambles my way. "Are you doing inventory?" he asks. Turns out, Dante lives in the neighborhood and is picking up a few things for a dinner party that evening. (I never meet cute guys named for literary characters in the vast mega-store that serves my suburb. Possibly, the blinding fluorescent lights and the long jaunt to the back to buy beer, bread and milk scares them away.) He comes here often to read the paper and drink coffee; "It's the local neighborhood joint," he says, "everyone comes here."

He hefts a yellow can of tomato sauce and waves it in front of my face. He says it's hard to find anyplace else. "This is what I grew up having. My grandmother always made Pastene."

His grandmother would probably have felt right at home here, because you don't have to be young and hip to hang out at La Grande Orange. You don't even have to be from the neighborhood, although it's clear that this little place is creating a heart and soul in an area of dual-incomes, young families and retirees.

Nevertheless, La Grande Orange isn't entirely retro. You wouldn't mistake Craig and Kris DeMarco, proprietors of La Grande Orange, for mom-and-pop. For one thing, they don't have kids—unless you count this cute shop and its older sibling, Postino, a successful wine bar the duo opened in 2001 in an old post office adjacent to La Grande Orange. Craig DeMarco is young and fit, wearing a crisp shirt of cornflower blue and a white apron slung over slightly faded jeans. Kris DeMarco pads elegantly about the store in a long skirt, black wedge shoes and a white tank top with an Asian motif.



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With two businesses to run, Craig maintains an unflagging pace, but when I stop in the store for a bite to eat, he drops everything to give me a tour. Colleagues were dead-on when they described Craig as more the “face” man who interacts with the public, while Kris is the detail-oriented person who makes sure the operation glides.

“He’s hyper, he’s very up all the time. He never has a bad day,” says Tammie Coe, co-owner of Tammie Coe Cakes and the goddess behind the colorful cakes in the display case that look suave enough to have their own fashion show. “Kris is very level-headed; she grounds him. They have a neat role together.”

As Craig DeMarco points out the open kitchen and the deli that serves up tasty treats like French Pancakes and Croque Monsieur (toasted bread with ham, tomatoes, spicy mustard and gruyere cheese), his passion for the mom-and-pop concept is obvious. He hopes to create a venture a la Alice Waters in Arizona, where fresh food meets functionality.

“We didn’t want to be an olive oil store; we wanted to be a functional grocery store,” he says. “We did it for convenience; people shop here on a daily basis and our pricing is more in line with a Safeway.”



Such ideals have attracted a constellation of like-minded rising food stars—many of them neighbors—who spend their energy fine-tuning the tiniest details of the operation. The cooperative-like setting of the store means all the players get full billing. Tammie's husband, Michael John Coe, bakes the bread and is currently involved in refurbishing the area vacated by Dominos into a bakery. Matt Diamond selects the artisan wines. A pizza oven run by Executive Chef Doug Robson turns out a crisp-cruled wonder that's a perfect foil for fresh ingredients like sweet corn and sun-ripened tomatoes. Mark Karp, of Angelic Grove, a floral event company, does the arrangements up in grand style, bringing in affordable yet exotic arrangements like sprouted coconut palm plants, or using common items in uncommon ways such as floating miniature granny smith apples in vases. The mom-type-figure of all the players is Marie Turano, who lives across the street in Williamsburg Square and trucked her coffee cart into the down-at-the heels corner six years ago. The Java Garden was in full bloom after three years.

Of course, none of this would work without the insight of Cathy Hayes, the Valley architect who made 2,400-square-feet of space versatile enough to accommodate all these creative types. She turned a convenience store that had seen better days into an appealing, open-air market. The matte concrete floors and painted brickwork create a relaxed atmosphere. If the lamp hanging at the point of sale looks



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vaguely familiar, it should—it’s the exact halaphone that lights school gymnasiums everywhere. She found it at a shop in California and drove it across the desert to its present digs. Hayes also fabricated a little grocery store sign to make it look vintage. The bathrooms have wide tongue-and-groove wooden planks, Philippe Starck toilets with farmhouse-style hanging sinks. Moreover, there’s not a fluorescent light in the place, not even in the chillers.

Even though La Grande Orange pays homage to the mom-and-pop shop, don’t expect it to stop in time. “That whole south end is going to change very much,” says Hayes. “We want fruits and vegetables in here. We want a great cheese area. It’s really fun to say, ‘This isn’t done.’ We are letting the community help us design this place. It’s a work in progress.” ●

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