

Shelf Life



*In these days of mega markets and upscale chains,
Roy Pope survives, and thrives, on customer loyalty*

By Tiffany Figueiredo Photography by Robert Hart

At 62, Roy Pope Grocery may not have the slick good looks or brawny market share of its younger competition, but with age comes a certain wisdom and the ability to pare down to the essential and suss out what is important. At this family-run market located on the edge of a west Fort Worth neighborhood, you won't find 50 brands of olive oil or 25 varieties of tomatoes. Instead you'll find a carefully edited selection of imported customer favorites, local gourmet gems and the best of the national-name brands backed by a decades-long commitment to quality and simplicity.

That's just the way owner Bob Larance wants to keep it. Larance, who took over the market in 1990 from his father-in-law after working as the store manager for 15 years, has seen Roy Pope survive a demographically changing neighborhood, shifting financial climates, a devastating fire and, during a three-month period in 2001, the retail-gutting 9-11 tragedy and the opening of an outpost of gourmet grocery chain Central Market less than a mile away.

"This is a tough industry anyway, always has been," Larance says. "But the time after 9-11 and Central Market opening was a unique period for us. We heard lots of dire warnings about how [Central Market] would put us out of business and, of course, we had seen that happen to a lot of other small Fort Worth businesses that lost customers to the big chains."





You'll find Bobbye Ellis behind the deli counter or at the grill at Roy Pope. She'll make you one of the best burgers in town, or maybe a generously battered chicken-fried steak with all the trimmings.

Instead of tucking his tail, Larance sent members of his team down to Austin to investigate the two Central Market stores, which at the time drew about 1.5 million visitors a year, almost as many as the State Capitol. "I wanted to find out what they were doing and how we could do it better, but in the end, it all came down to honoring our customers the way we always have," he says.

Although Larance says Roy Pope suffered a loss in business for about a year and a half, his commitment to respecting his customers' time and knowing their likes, dislikes and eccentricities eventually leveled things out. "We have no lines and a small footprint," he says. "You're not going to face a maze every time you come in. You grab a basket, fill it up and you're out in 15 minutes. We've spent a lot of years getting to know what our customers want and providing it to them."

That might include squeezing 2 quarts of fresh carrot juice each week for one woman, cutting off a quarter of the best-looking watermelon in the store for the elderly gentleman who can't finish the whole thing alone, Frenching and tying half a dozen crown roasts for the cook of a prominent Westside family and, now that the neighborhood is attracting younger residents — some the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the store's longtime customers — stocking



Roy Pope offers a private-label line of preserves, dressings and more.

more baby food.

As one of only three owners in the store's history and with 33 years in the business under his belt, Larance has a pretty good idea of what his customers want, but he's always open to suggestions. "Our customers travel all over the country and abroad, and when they find something they really like, they'll come back and tell me," he says. "We pride ourselves on carrying hard-to-find products from small companies." Not that you'll find many random odds and ends here. With only

6,000 square feet of floor space, the store has little space for "dead weight," Larance says. If an item is on the shelf, then Larance is a fan. He's happy to rhapsodize about Picolos handmade bread-and-butter pickles from Corsicana, Gundelsheim sauerkraut from Germany or marinara sauce from Dean & DeLuca in New York.

The produce display, which is renewed and trimmed daily, is one of the prettiest in town, filled with Cisco hothouse tomatoes, hand-bagged salads, Pecos melons, meticulously sorted berries, sweet Texas 1015 onions and always-ripe avocados mostly grown by local farmers, some of whom have been delivering produce to the store for more than 20 years. What isn't delivered is hand-selected on daily early-morning trips to the Dallas Wholesale Farmers Market.

Meats, seafood and wild game are given

Market manager Carey Wilson caters to his customers, whether it's grinding an order of sausage just so or selecting a prime piece of tenderloin for a special-occasion dinner party.





Renee Larance, Bob's wife, can usually be found behind the customer service desk/office in the front of the store, but don't be surprised to see her manning the cash register.

careful attention as well. Everything is ordered in small quantities and butchered and trimmed onsite. Even the beef jerky is made of tenderloin. Fresh prime and choice beef is ground by hand to make what many people think are the best burgers in town.


They are just one of the hot items made from scratch each morning and served until 6 p.m. There is also, depending on the day, chicken potpie, thick-battered chicken fried steak with all the fixings, greens, macaroni and cheese and desserts. Hot and cold salads and deli sandwiches also are available for takeout or, if you're really hungry, to eat at one of the concrete tables outside, where there's not much atmosphere except for the neighborhood traffic. Custom party trays, to-go entrees and Roy Pope's private-label line of salad dressings, preserves, salsas and ready-to-eat fruit cobblers make lunch or dinner quick and convenient.

Because of Roy Pope's limited buying power, prices are slightly higher than those at chain stores such as Tom Thumb, although the grocery runs frequent specials, the most popular of which are the steak sales.

Walking into Roy Pope is like traveling back in time.



Browse the aisles and discover brands such as spicy Picoles pickles from Corsicana.




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Aside from new products and an occasional wine tasting event, the store has remained virtually unchanged since the early '70s. Deliveries are still made to select areas and longtime customers, some of whom also maintain credit accounts, something practically unheard of in the grocery business today. Although Larance has been approached many times about opening a store downtown Fort Worth, he has no plans to change anything.

"I know downtown needs a store, but we've spent 10 years trying to figure out how to make it work, and it's just not economically feasible because of the rent," he says. "Besides, our business has never been about growth and expansion. We like things the way they are, and so do our employees and our customers."

As a testament to that customer loyalty, Larance says that when a fire destroyed the store on Christmas Eve in 1970, Stanley Marcus offered space in his old Neiman Marcus store on Highway 80 until the rebuilding could be completed. Bookkeeping records were lost, but customers sent in checks for their bills anyway, many adding donations to help keep the staff on, some of whom paid back that loyalty by staying 20 years.

When he's ready to retire, Larance says he has two people ready to take over the reins and keep the store going. "I never thought I would go into the grocery business, but it has been so much fun," he says. "This store is like a family, and it breaks people's hearts when they leave, but it isn't about me. It's about these personal relationships we've built and this neighborhood and this tradition."

Who was Roy Pope?

After serving in World War II, Roy Pope returned home to Fort Worth and opened a combination grocery, laundromat, dry

cleaners and shoe repair.

As the grocery became successful, the other businesses were shuttered to make way for expanding the store. Pope eventually went into the restaurant business, opening

The Carriage House on Camp Bowie, one of Fort Worth's first

In the produce section, you'll find seasonal offerings from local vendors.

and best-loved fine-dining establishments. When Pope died in 1967, the grocery store was bought by longtime employee John LeMond, who ran it for 23 years before retiring and selling it to son-in-law Bob Larance.

Roy Pope Grocery

2300 Merrick, Fort Worth
8 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Saturday; 817-732-2863 or
www.roypopegrocery.com

