

Supermarket of the future?



WHAT'S IN BLOOM
At this growing chain, shoppers can scan as they go, cutting checkout time. Kiosks give info on product location, recipes, and more.



Bloom, a chain of Mid-Atlantic and Southeastern supermarkets owned by Food Lion, is designed to create a "convenient, hassle-free, and novel shopping experience" that lets shoppers get in and out fast, navigate easily, and sidestep long lines.

"We spent two years surveying customers in the U.S. and Europe, asking them what they wanted in a grocery store," says Karen Peterson, a Bloom spokeswoman. Twenty-eight Blooms opened in 2007, joining 33 already in existence.

We sent a reporter to a store in Leesburg, Va. His conclusion: Supermarkets everywhere could learn from Bloom.

It's convenient. Parking spots near the entrance are reserved for families with small children and customers who plan to be in and out in 20 minutes.

Shelves are about a foot lower than at most stores, and aisles are about a foot wider than usual, with few displays to block traffic.

It's high-tech. Touch-screen displays at kiosks let you check prices (Peterson says prices are comparable to those at Food Lion), find products, match food with wine, even scan a bar code to get recipes using that food. You can make a shopping list online at www.shopbloom.com and print it at the store. The list notes the aisle for each item.

It makes sense. You don't have to crisscross the store to find what you need. Most foods are on one side, non-foods on the other. Organics are in one section along the store's perimeter. Milk is actually near the checkout, so you needn't wend your way to the back of the store. Carts display the store's floor plan.

It answers questions. Among Bloom's staff are "taste ambassadors," chefs who offer dinner tips and recipes. A Bloom store has about 30 percent more staff than a typical Food Lion.

Checkout is a breeze. At most Blooms, you can scan and bag groceries as you shop. You sign up for a card, scan it at a rack of pistol-shaped bar-code readers, and take the reader that lights up. You then click on each purchase, bagging as you go. After some coaching, our reporter found it a snap to add and delete items. At the checkout, you scan the card to end your trip, get an itemized receipt, and pay. There's no scanning at the register and no need to flash a loyalty card: Any discounts are available to all shoppers. Bloom reserves the right to look inside bags at any time. If the scanning proves accurate, that shopper's bags are less likely to be inspected in the future.



first look

Product: Honda Accord
Full report: February 2008

The previous-generation Honda Accord was our Top Pick among family sedans. To see if the 2008 redesign still measures up, we bought two versions of the redesigned 2008 sedan: a four-cylinder LX with the premium package for \$22,795 and a V6-powered EX with leather for \$28,695.

First impressions. Staffers have praised both cars. The LX's 177-horsepower, 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine is one of the most refined of its type. Though not overly powerful, it moves the car well enough. The 268-hp, 3.5-liter V6 is punchy and quiet even when at high revs. Its cylinder shut-off system, to save fuel while coasting or under light throttle, would be imperceptible if not for a green "eco" light in the instrument panel. Both engines are coupled with a smooth, responsive five-speed automatic that automatically downshifts on downhills. Some drivers appreciated it; others said it was a bit intrusive.

The LX's suspension absorbs bumps with no complaint. The EX is slightly firmer. We hear more road noise than anything else in the cabin, but it's not too annoying. The Accords corner and steer well. Stability control is standard. The interior is roomy, with large, supportive seats, although some of us miss a lumbar adjustment in the LX. Rear-seat room is much improved. Visibility is impressive. Controls are generally simple, fit and finish is nice, and bins open and close with quiet precision.

Minor minuses. The rear seat folds down in one piece, and trunk hinges can squash luggage.

CR's take. The new Accord is an excellent car that's well rounded and easy to live with.

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