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## Asian markets flourish like kudzu

By Rachel Tobin Ramos  
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Need red jujube, soba noodles, queso blanco, instant pho or plantains?

There are 10 international supermarkets in metro Atlanta, many in Gwinnett County, competing for your business.

And soon there will be two more.

GreatWall Supermarket, a Chinese grocer with stores in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Virginia, will open its first Georgia store this month at the Gwinnett Prado in a former Target outlet. Mega Mart, a Korea-based grocer, will open its first U.S. market in the former Macy's space at Gwinnett Place Mall in late summer.

Large Asian grocers have been gravitating to Gwinnett and other northeast suburbs as they fill vacant big box stores. Metro Atlanta for a long time has been Asian centric, welcoming and providing business opportunity for that ethnicity, while watching those communities expand furiously.

The question persists: How many of these markets can the area support?

"It's not unusual to have a Kroger and Publix across the street from each other," said Harold Shumacher, a restaurant broker with The Shumacher Group, and food aficionado who shops Atlanta's Asian markets. "I'm not sure I'd want to be the last guy in."

Which stores survive – or whether all will prosper – is something the market will decide, said Ray Uttenhove, executive vice president of SRS Real Estate Partners in Atlanta, a retail brokerage. "In the retail business the market has a way of weeding out those that don't have the right offering."

The fierce competition to win over Atlanta consumers will begin with having the freshest produce and fish, cheapest prices and best displays, something the newcomers all claim they'll have.

Mega Mart will offer some of the most intriguing features. Plans call for a sushi restaurant with a conveyor belt that will promenade enticing sushi dishes around diners who can pick what they want off the line. It's a popular feature in the company's Korean stores, said Bum Ha, the operating manager for Mega Mart in Gwinnett. Mega Mart plans to fill the first floor with groceries and the second with Korean fashions.

GreatWall supermarkets in the Northeast get high marks for their cleanliness and fresh produce, according to consumer ratings online.

A key to Asian grocer success in Atlanta, said James Song, a director on the board of the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce and business owner, is increasing global diversity. "The Asian supermarket is not just for Asians anymore," he said. "They are international markets."

Shumacher has seen license plates from all over the Southeast when he shops at the local international markets.

On a recent Saturday, Charles Craven, a cabinet builder from Dacula, was at the Assi Plaza on Pleasant Hill Road with his nephew Clayton Johnston of Grayson. They come about every six weeks to fill up on fresh vegetables and Asian foods they can't get closer to home. Craven said he's been to most of the Asian markets, but liked Assi best for freshness, price and cleanliness. He also praised Assi for bringing new life to an aging shopping center.

"This is what saved this strip mall," Craven said of Assi Plaza, which is now filled with clothing and mobile phone stores, restaurants, a barber shop and other businesses.

Mega Mart and GreatWall will be located in Gwinnett not far from other football-field sized markets such as the Gwinnett International Farmers Market and Buford Highway Farmers Market.

The non-white population in Gwinnett grew 104 percent to 392,055 from 2000 to 2008 and overtook the white population, according to estimates from the Census Bureau. More specifically, the Asian population increased 73 percent to 74,425, the African-American population grew 120 percent to 170,545 and the Hispanic population grew 116 percent to 138,427. Estimates have the Korean population at 50,000 in Gwinnett.

Song of the Gwinnett Chamber board said what attracts many Asians to Atlanta is the low cost of living and high quality of life. "They can sell a house in Los Angeles, buy a nice house over here and buy a business," he said, adding that the incoming grocers know what they doing and have strongly considered the demographics. "They have very deep pockets. They are not amateurs."

Mega Mart's Ha said the company scoured the United States for a year and half before deciding to put the first U.S. Mega Mart in the Atlanta market. The deciding factor was the diversity and relative wealth. Mega Mart also liked the idea of putting the market in a mall -- something rare in the United States but common in Asia, especially Korea.

Census numbers show Gwinnett brims with ethnic groups. Diversity is one reason Assi caters its Pleasant Hill store to a broader population, said Phillip Ahn of Hanover, Md.-based Rhee Brothers Co., the wholesaler that owns the Assi markets.

"We carry over 13 countries' food and advertise in Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Korean and American newspapers, as well as Spanish radio and Korean TV," Ahn said.

Rhees Brothers took a gamble on opening two stores in the area, Ahn said, but received a favorable deal on the former Wal-Mart store on Pleasant Hill and decided the risk was worthwhile. Ahn had heard directly from Asians in Los Angeles, Chicago and other communities about Atlanta's potential. Still, he's very concerned that the market might be at its saturation point.



"With about six [international] stores in a boundary of three miles, certainly there are too many stores," Ahn said. "GreatWall and Mega Mart decided to come in after knowing H-Mart and Assi had multiple stores. I'm sure they have their reasons to come into Atlanta, but I really don't hope anyone will have to close."

For real estate-reliant businesses, the Asian market boon is welcome news. T.R. "Ted" Benning III, president of Benning Construction Co., builds grocery stores and movie theaters, counting more than 1,200 projects in the Southeast. Benning will turn the former Macy's into Mega Mart.

"I am so glad we got this project," Benning said. "Right now, the economy is terrible, especially in our field. This is a godsend."

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