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The Trader Joe's Adventure: Turning a Unique Approach to Business into a Retail and Cultural Phenomenon

Len Lewis
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Reader beware—do not dive into this book before a meal. While this is primarily a tale of strategic success, no story about Trader Joe's, the gourmet shop for bargain hunters, can be told without liberal mention of its products, from mahi mahi and arugula to peanut-butter-filled pretzels and Two Buck Chuck wine. Tough to take on an empty stomach. With a properly full belly, however, this peek into the making of a food-retailing phenomenon is a tasty treat.

Though Trader Joe's hasn't yet conquered the entire nation, it has expanded successfully from its humble West Coast roots to the East and Midwest. That is only one thing that makes this small chain unique, contends the author. Lewis, a journalist who has covered the food industry for thirty-plus years, marvels that Trader Joe's continues to resist the temptation that has ruined many a marketer: though growing by leaps and bounds, it has retained the original features that make it unique. The company was born in California in the late 1960s, when the burgeoning 7-Eleven convenience store empire threatened Joe Coulombe's three little Pronto stores.

Inspired by the adventure story *Trader Horn*, Coulombe changed not just his store's name, but also its décor, and he began buying closeouts and overstocks from gourmet food manufacturers and wine importers. Though it may not seem so remarkable today, contends the author, it was a risky move at that time, when iceberg, not arugula, was the lettuce on everyone's plate.

The author, former editor-in-chief of *Progressive Grocer* magazine, is also a popular speaker and moderator at supermarket industry conventions around the country. His book is organized around those principles that keep this chain from looking like every other in the grocery biz. A few may seem obvious, like "Maintain a Consistent Philosophy" and "Outsmart the Competition," while others somewhat less so, such as "Uncover the Right Location" and "Don't Be Boastful." For example, in "Uncover the Right Location," Lewis documents one of the chain's most unlikely bull's-eyes: rather than locate in tony areas with heavy foot traffic but high price tags, Trader Joe's is typically found in somewhat grungy and off-the-beaten-path strip malls. Despite that, devoted customers can often be found lined up outside the stores or circling the parking lot looking for a space.

For those interested in retail, or why some companies succeed when so many fail, or simply in a tale of the upstart upsetting conventional wisdom, this is a good story. And though the author could have taken a small lesson from his subject and edited down his content a bit more thoroughly—the same examples are repeated through multiple chapters—this stroll through the aisles and back offices of Trader Joe's is ultimately quite satisfying.
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