Online Grocery Store Relay Foods Expands into Williamsburg

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A Relay Foods truck sets up to deliver orders in New Town. (Photo courtesy Ashley Smith-O'Meara)

Relay Foods, an online grocery store offering both brand-name and local artisan items, has expanded its service to the Williamsburg area.

Relay Foods is a Charlottesville-based grocery store providing customers the opportunity to shop online and either pick up or have their purchases delivered.

They also offer a refill option for shoppers to have the same items automatically purchased and delivered on a set schedule. After starting in Charlottesville and serving the first customer in 2009, the company has expanded to other markets including Metro D.C., Baltimore, Richmond and now Williamsburg.

"The main difference from buying from us is that it's very convenient. You buy online and then you zoom by and pickup your food," said Arnie Katz, co-founder and president of Relay Foods.

The decision to expand to Williamsburg followed several inquiries from people who wanted the service made available; the company relies heavily on word of mouth for advertising and values customer feedback. Relay Foods researched the area, looking at the demographic, and "saw there was a great potential," Katz explained. "It's been a great success, we're very happy about the expansion."

So far, there aren't any Williamsburg- or James City County-based vendors supplying products to Relay Foods, but Katz said there is an upcoming discussion about adding new vendors. A group meets every two weeks to discuss new vendors who apply with the company. Farmers or businesses interested in becoming vendors should email Williamsburg@relayfoods.com.

Current vendors for the Williamsburg area are located mainly in and around Richmond and Charlottesville, with two located in Charles City County and another in Mathews County.

Whole Foods is one of the company's vendors. Katz said a lot of Williamsburg-area customers choose to use Relay Foods simply to access Whole Foods products.

"We want the food that you eat in Williamsburg and Richmond to be from that area, and we see a lot of value in that," Katz said.

The company offers fresh produce, which Katz said could be picked the same day it is delivered to a customer. With local farmers markets being opened limited hours for shoppers and some farmers not wanting to spend time selling their items at markets but would rather have someone else handle the sale, Relay Foods offers options for buyers and vendors, Katz said.

"We're not trying to stop people from going to the farmer's markets at all and many of our customers, probably even most, are going to the farmer's markets every week in addition to buying from Relay," he explained.

Local business owner Tess Schaffner, owner of Off the Vine Market, opened a retail location in James City County on May 1, just two days before Relay Foods celebrated a launch party for expanding into Williamsburg. She said she is unsure whether Relay Foods will prove to be a competitor, saying they don't offer any local, fresh produce — and so far she has noticed she can offer a lower price for items both she and Relay Foods sell.

Off the Vine also offers home delivery service and is planning a summer special for free home delivery.

Relay Foods currently has grocery pickup locations in New Town. There are plans to expand delivery services by the end of summer to include home and business dropoffs.

"We have a very wide range of customers. We have people who have the convenience of not having to shop at the store. This service works for a lot of different people and that's why we're growing so quickly," Katz said.

The company has plans to expand again next year. It's looking at Charlotte, N.C., Raleigh/Durham, N.C., the Norfolk area, Atlanta, Ga. and then to the mid-west.

For more information about Relay Foods, visit its website or Facebook page.