



## Sacramento's River District a hotbed of kitchen/restaurant equipment and supply stores

By Mark Glover

[mglover@sacbee.com](mailto:mglover@sacbee.com)

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Food aficionados regularly queue up at opulent downtown Sacramento restaurants and suburban dining hot spots, but there's another destination that likely does not jump to mind as a foodie favorite: Sacramento's River District, the 830-acre area north of Sacramento's downtown core.

The district is home to five sizable kitchen/restaurant equipment and supply businesses – believed to be the largest cluster of such businesses in the state – serving restaurant owners, managers, designers, contractors and chefs from Fresno to the Oregon border.

Amid this cluster, wholesale prices are the norm. Variety is king, including some 350 types, styles and sizes of refrigerators on hand at any one time. And the stores are not exclusive to cooking pros. Individual foodies are welcomed with open arms.

“The real foodies love to come here. They're great customers ... They come here to find all the things they need to cook, and they want the good stuff,” said 53-year-old Art Oelsner, operator of Cresco Restaurant Equipment at 951 Richards Blvd.

Oelsner's 36,000-square-foot store dates back to 1983, when Raley's supermarket patriarch Tom Raley sold the building, then a warehouse, to Art Oelsner's father, Paul. Art Oelsner recalls: “When Tom Raley learned that we were an independent family business, he turned to his finance guy and said, ‘Make it happen.’”

Part of Paul Oelsner's past business experience was as a pharmacist in Nevada. When the Oelsners made the move to Sacramento, they patterned their Richards Boulevard kitchen/restaurant store on a typical drugstore. To this day, Cresco – short for California Restaurant Equipment and Supply Co. – has drugstore-style shelving, with thousands of items displayed to pick up and pay for. That includes dinner plates, pots and pans of all sizes, restaurant-grade industrial equipment, hundreds of kitchen knives and scores of cutting boards made of various woods and plastic.

“It's all out here for our customers to see,” Oelsner said. “We don't have one on the shelf and make you wait while we get what you want from the back. When a spot on the shelf is empty, we know it's time to restock.”

Oelsner says the old-school manual stocking system “works perfectly” in an age of computerized [inventory management](#), and “our customers love it. If they come in here and need three (meat slicers), they can pick them up right off the shelf and go out the door. Usually, when restaurants call, they need it now. ... If a refrigerator breaks down, they need it replaced today.”

A short list of Cresco restaurant clients includes Cattlemens steakhouses, Little Caesars pizza restaurants, Sacramento's Pangaea Café and the Virgin Sturgeon on Garden Highway in Sacramento.

Today, Cresco has affiliated facilities throughout the West, but when the business opened on Richards Boulevard 30 years ago, Oelsner said, “It was very isolated. We were kind of out here by ourselves.”

That’s no longer true. Cresco has four competitor kitchen/restaurant supply businesses within a short bike ride of its location. Oelsner said the close-quarters competition is no surprise because Sacramento “is right in the middle of the majority of restaurants in the region. You can reach out to (the Nevada and Oregon borders), south of here and over to the [Bay Area](#). It’s the perfect central location.”

As for the nearby competition, Oelsner said, “I don’t mind it at all. Competition makes you better.”

The other four River District stores have unique identities:

- Cash & Carry Smart Foodservice at 1101 Richards Blvd. is a branch of the Portland, Ore.-based discount chain. Walking into its River District store makes you feel small, with walls of produce, dairy, deli and other food items stretching for yards. Big items are no problem. Fifty-pound bags of all-purpose flour are as prevalent as chewing gum packs in a grocery checkout line.
- East Bay Restaurant Supply at 522 N. 12th St. is overseen by the Oakland headquarters of a company that has been serving the restaurant industry since 1934. East Bay in Sacramento touts cooking classes taught by local chefs, and it stocks merchandise that runs the gamut, from gleaming KitchenAid mixers to tomato presses to 3-foot-long whisks just perfect for whipping up five dozen eggs at a time.
- TriMark Economy Restaurant Fixtures at 415 Richards Blvd. has a comparatively modern look outside (clean, big-box lines and spacious, well-groomed grounds) and inside (a contemporary V-layout of shelves and colorful holiday decorations, including a giant, decorated [Christmas tree](#) at the center of the store).
- Restaurant Depot at 1275 Vine St. appears stocked to feed the Sacramento region for years, with floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with food and cooking equipment, a giant walk-in cold storage area and some 50 yards of meticulously displayed wines and spirits.

On any given day, the River District stores are abuzz with activity, with restaurant workers rolling out 6-foot-high carts overflowing with merchandise to waiting trucks, event planners picking up large orders for special events and professional chefs carefully examining various foodstuffs.

Shoppers outside the professional realm are easy to spot, typically pushing shopping carts alone and seemingly in awe of the volume of merchandise surrounding them. Generally, they pay the same prices as commercial companies.

“Can you believe all this? Talk about the land of plenty,” said Sacramentan Dwayne Davis, strolling the aisles of the Restaurant Depot and shopping for an upcoming Christmas Eve family feast.

Over at East Bay Restaurant Supply, Cathy Jordan of Sacramento said, “It doesn’t matter what I want, I can find it here, even the smallest little dessert spoon.”

Random shoppers who talked with The Bee said they had their favorites among the five River District stores, and reasons varied widely – from food preferences to the variety of kitchen utensils. Ann Caldwell of Sacramento said she preferred the TriMark store “because it has a warmer atmosphere, more like a mall store than a warehouse.”

Nearly a dozen people said they shopped all five stores in the district. “Coming here is like going to a kitchen or restaurant outlet mall. It’s all right here, so we shop for the best prices,” said Andy Perez, who made the trip down from Folsom.

Patty Kleinknecht, executive director of the River District nonprofit association representing business and property owners, believes that the number of individual shoppers has swelled in recent years with the proliferation of Food Network watchers and increased awareness that the River District stores are open to all: “For some time, I think people were driving through the district and thinking, ‘Well, that’s a wholesale store or for the trade only,’ but now, they’re walking in and making purchases.”

The stores reach out to consumers with modern-looking, colorful circulars and ad sheets, and most offer extra services that include restaurant designing.

Oelsner puts out his own glossy ad booklet but says he’s sticking with the bedrock retailing foundation his father passed along to him, with a heavy emphasis on **customer service**. Paul Oelsner is now 80 and living in Reno, Nev., and Art Oelsner’s business card identifies him as simply “son of owner.”

“We want to look like Staples and treat customers like Nordstrom,” Art Oelsner says.

Oelsner has incorporated his own tweaks: There’s “a five-second rule,” the time in which a newly arriving customer must be greeted by on-site staff. And Cresco is ultra dog-friendly. Staff have dogs on-site, kept in immaculately clean areas, and customers are encouraged to bring their dogs into the store, because, Oelsner says, “I don’t think some of my customers would come here if they had to leave their dogs at home. So I say, bring them in.”

The five stores reported mixed results during the recession, but all appear to be humming along now.

“We were off a little in second quarter of 2008. It started picking up in 2010 and has only gotten better since,” said Nader Monem, manager of TriMark Economy Restaurant Fixtures.

*Call The Bee’s Mark Glover, (916) 321-1184.*