



OUTSIDE
THE VINES

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

Southern Hospitality

By Abby Kleckler

In retail there is something to be said for sticking to your roots while also being at the forefront of innovation.

Specialty food retailer Southern Season couples these two ideas flawlessly by paying homage to its beginnings while continuing to grow its product lineup and locations.

Southern Season's flagship store is in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with four other locations throughout the South and another store opening in early 2016.

A layout that makes the store's history shine, personalized gift options, experts on staff and hundreds of events create an experience of Southern hospitality.

Start with Caffeine

Southern Season started in 1975 as a small coffee roaster.

"When you walk into every store, the first thing you'll see is the coffee," says Peyton Ware, promotions coordinator for Southern Season. "That's what we started out with and that's what we're really known for."

More than 40 years later, the flagship store has expanded to include a cooking school, a restaurant and a 30,000-square-foot marketplace with more than 80,000 items.

Still, the company's past shines with the front-and-center coffee bar and a brand loyalty to the brew.

"At each of our stores, we have who we call our experts because they love coffee, they love wine, they love cheeses and they're passionate

about it and want to engage with the customers and help them," Ware says. "We have regulars who come in and they get their coffee from Caroline [Cahan] every day, who is our coffee and tea manager. She's been with Southern Season for about 25 years."

Have It Your Way

Southern Season is known for its gift baskets, which allow customers to pick up a recognizable and personalized item.

"Our CEO says that getting a gift basket from Southern Season is the equivalent of getting a Tiffany's box in the South," Ware says. "Especially during Christmas, we have a huge gift giving business and our gift baskets sell like crazy."

A concierge in each of the stores caters to the customers and what they are looking for, always willing to work with them to package it exactly how they would like.

Whether hunting for a Southern-themed crate, a beer-and-wine-enthusiast's gift or a "taste of Italy" in the U.S., hundreds of pre-packaged gift baskets give customers a quick-and-easy purchasing option that fits within almost any budget.

Check the Schedule

Classes and workshops are not uncommon in retail stores, but Southern Season takes these to the next level. Events are a daily occurrence, sometimes with more than one on any given day.

"We've had some bigger name celebrity chefs,"

Ware says. "We have cookbook signings regularly. We always have cooking classes going on, and there's always something in the store to do."

Events attract customers of all ages. Ware says that a cookbook signing on a southern dish, for example, might attract more of an older clientele, but their popular Beer Extravaganza event spreads a wider age gamut.

"Beer Extravaganza is a huge event we do in each market with different breweries from each market," she says. "You pay \$10 and you get to taste your way through the store with food vendors and different breweries, and that definitely attracts a younger crowd because we'll get anyone from 21 upwards to 65."

The youngest Southern Season shoppers are not forgotten either. Some of their favorites are cookie decorating for the kids or breakfast with Santa around the holidays.

Whether coming to the store for events or to find a unique grocery item that you can't find anywhere else, Southern Season has created a brand loyalty in each of its markets.

Who are your passionate experts ready to engage with customers? What grab-and-go options do you have for time-crunched shoppers? How well do your events perform with customers both old and young?

"We continue to grow, but we remain a small business," Ware says. "Everyone knows everyone who works at Southern Season, so it's a very family-based company and feels that way." **LGR**

