

(<https://adserver.onmilwaukee.com/onmilw/adclick/FCID=-4/site=OMC/area=DINING/size=1400X1200/random=977514885.25426/custid=WJSX-a3BfDgAADS3Wg/TLD=%22>) (<https://adserver.onmilwaukee.com/onmilw/adclick/FCID=-4/site=OMC/area=DINING/size=550X480/random=977514886.25426/custid=WJSX-a3BfDgAADS3Wg/TLD=%22>)



Search OnMilwaukee.com!



A food hall is in the plans for the revamped Grand Avenue space Downtown.

Can Grand Avenue really pull off this food hall thing?



By **Lori Fredrich**
Senior Writer

Published Feb. 2, 2017 at 1:01 p.m.

Back in 2013, Bon Appetit Magazine declared that "Food halls are the new food trucks."

And it seems they were correct. As Americans have grown increasingly more obsessed with all things culinary, food hall fever has swept the country like wildfire, with new inventive developments cropping up in large coastal cities like New York and Los Angeles, but also in cities like Omaha, Detroit and Nashville. For an example of how the trend has exploded, you need to look no

further than the rapid expansion of New York's Eataly, the upscale Italian food hall, which recently established additional locations in Chicago, Boston and downtown Manhattan, and will open in Los Angeles later this year.

And now, The Shops of Grand Avenue owners The Aggero Group and Minneapolis developer Hempel Cos., have announced plans for a food hall on the first floor of the development, with the upper two floors taking on a new identity as modern office space.

What will Milwaukee's food hall be like?

Very little information has been released about the food hall aspect of the project, although representatives from The Aggero Group have indicated that it will be comprised of a collection of food vendors situated within a common area. And Downtown leaders have expressed optimism about the potential of the project.

"The plan is excellent," notes Ald. Robert Bauman of the food hall. "[It] should result in greater utilization of the ground floor of the mall and more pedestrian traffic."

Stacie Callies, executive director of the Westtown Association agrees. "The adaptive reuse of the retail space at The Shops of Grand Avenue into a food hall is a concept that is definitely fitting with the transformation the area is currently undergoing," she says. "When you consider the demand that is and will be generated by the catalytic development that's occurring on or near West Wisconsin Avenue, a food hall and even grocery store are both uses that will be popular with the growing residential base and increased visitors to the area."

Food halls, as newfangled as they may seem, are essentially the modern (and generally more upscale) version of a food court. But, they speak to a key trend: Food lovers are in search of high quality ingredients in more casual settings. After all, in a food hall, menus tend to be smaller, but the diversity of choices is greater. And for restaurants, overhead is lower, meaning that entry barriers are diminished for chefs who want to take an innovative concept to market.

In addition, many of the food halls that are opening are bringing new life to historic buildings and underutilized spaces ... like The Shops of Grand Avenue.

Will it be a success? That depends

I can't adequately underscore the necessity that this development successfully capture the unique point of view and personality of Milwaukee. Vendors must be carefully curated – not just to fill spaces – but to reflect unique, diverse offerings that not only appeal to the Downtown lunch crowd,

but also to a larger population of visitors and tourists who will view the new hall as a destination worth visiting.

The destination factor is an aspect that's not lost on Beth Weirick, CEO at Milwaukee Downtown, who says a recent visit to two of Chicago's food halls energized the idea for her.

"Revival Hall is a well-thought-out concept that features locally owned fine epicurean food that gives diners the opportunity to taste and sample a variety of options," she says. "Eataly is a combination retail store food hall that feature the cuisine of Italy. Both concepts are phenomenally popular and are in sync with the new wave of diners that find these types of options extremely appealing. I think a food hall located on West Wisconsin Avenue is a destination in and of itself. I'm looking forward to the experience!"

But to build the qualities that create a food destination, it's vital that the Milwaukee food hall concept relies on looking forward – not only at what Milwaukee has been, but at what it needs to become. And that means thinking smartly and solidly outside of the box to create a unique communal space that is poised to become an integral part of the Milwaukee food and community scene.

Personally, I'd love to see a food hall that captures the spirit of popular yet unique Milwaukee spots (let's say Iron Grate BBQ, Vanguard or Gypsy Taco), a few unique new concepts from well-known chefs and a few great ethnic options headed up by some of the talented immigrant chefs who have made Milwaukee their home. Maybe a bit of ice cream or custard. A microbrewery and a hip upscale wine bar. A cheese and charcuterie counter. And a kick-ass bakery. Yeah, that would be great too. But I can't emphasize the idea of careful curation enough. Giving the vendor spots to the highest bidders, or the first spots to "sign on" will result in ... well, it won't be nearly as cool.

And then there's the space itself. Creating a truly dynamic, usable space means paying attention to trends and research, including findings like the Hartman Group's study, "Modern Eating: Cultural Roots, Daily Behaviors," which posits that 47 percent of eating occasions are experienced alone. That means it's necessary to create immersive dining experiences that accommodate both solo and small group dining. It's also necessary to create a space that can transition from day to night. It won't be a dinner destination if you make people eat their food standing up or strictly from a counter. You've got to give them a relaxed, comfortable, complete dining experience.

It also means treating the development as more than simply a place to grab a bite. It would be great to see Milwaukee's equipped with something more – be it a space to entertain live music or art installations, or maybe even a demo or incubation kitchen where local chefs and entrepreneurs can create and innovate.

For instance, venues like the Ponce City Market in Atlanta capitalize on traffic with designated entertainment spaces where they feature live music, cooking demonstrations and movie screenings. Legacy Hall, a forthcoming food hall in Plano, Texas, includes plans for a live music venue along with a 25x14-foot screen for sports and movie-watching parties. A variety of public venues are also re-imagining their spaces as a canvas for participatory experiences with multi-sensory appeal including technology integration that allows sharing of user-generated content, including social media.

In the end, there's nothing simple about creating a great well-curated food hall. But it's a mission worth pursuing. And if done well, it could be a tipping point for Downtown's transformation into a thriving, sought-after destination. I hope they make it so.