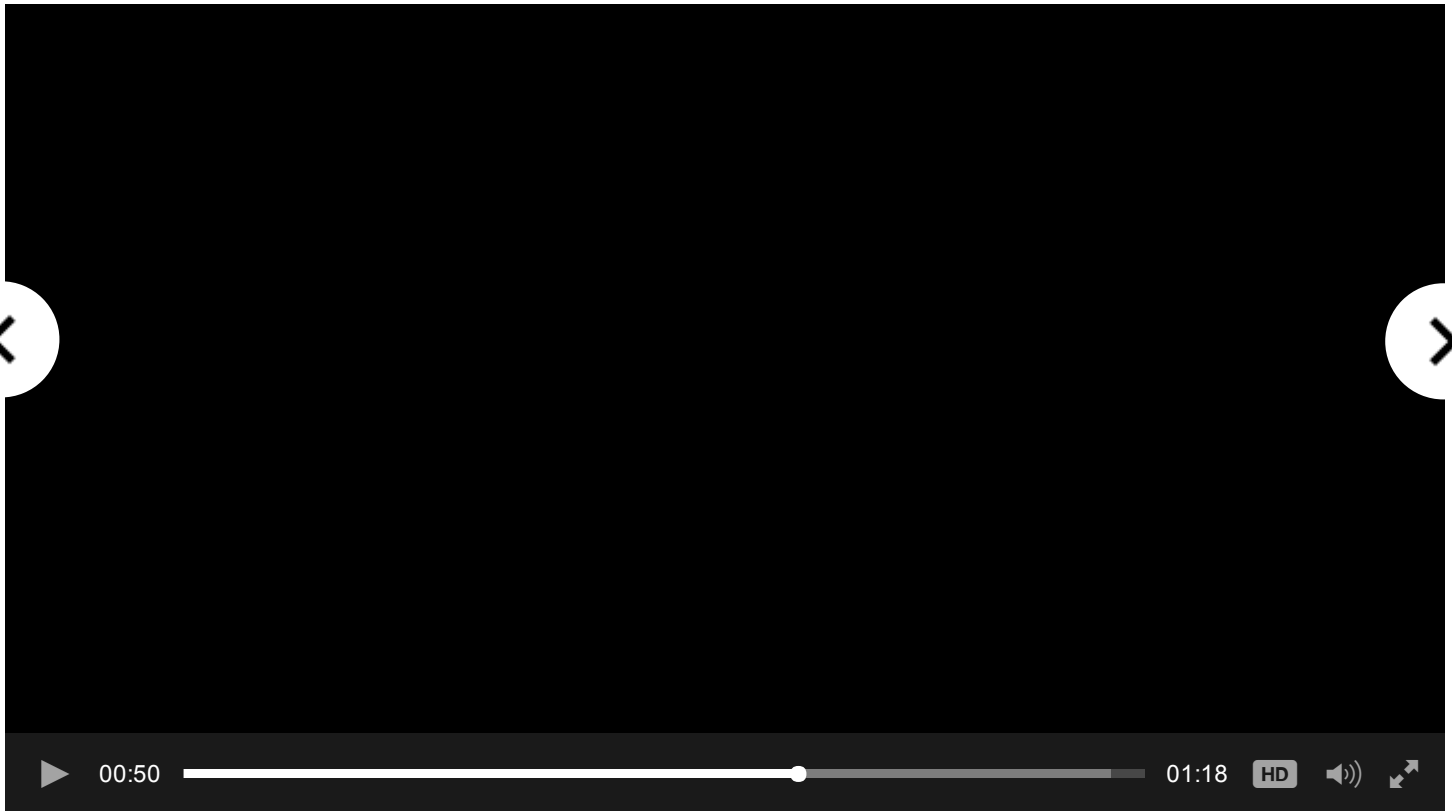


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# Natural Grocers opens Grand Forks store Tuesday

By [John Hageman](#) on Aug 29, 2016 at 7:34 p.m.

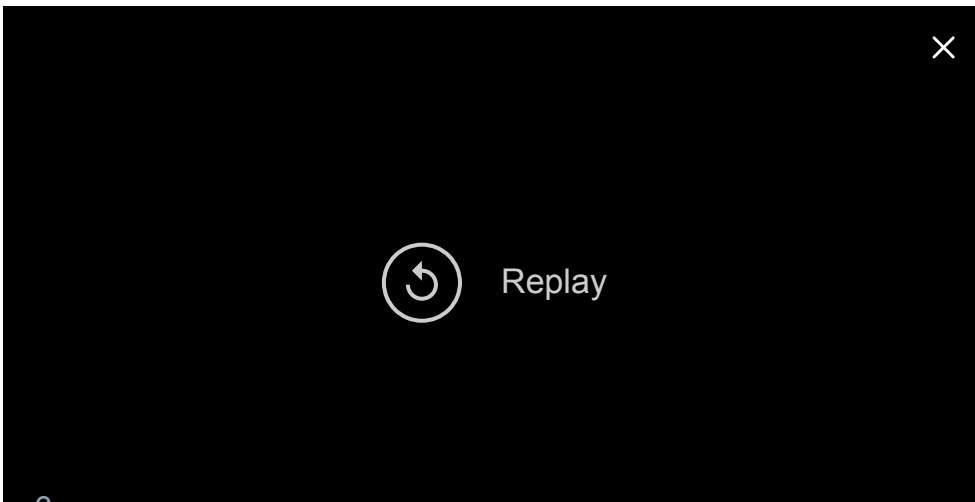
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Employees at Natural Grocers' new store in south Grand Forks had to keep an eye on their front door in recent weeks.

Eager shoppers often stopped by only to find out the store hadn't yet opened. Workers pried open the automatic doors, handed the would-be customers a flier and sent them on their way.

"We've been doing that for the past two and a half weeks," said Chantel Larabee, the Natural Grocers store manager.

ADVERTISING



That ends Tuesday.

Natural Grocers will open its doors Tuesday morning at 1901 32nd Ave. S. It's the second North Dakota store for the Colorado-based chain after its June 2015 opening in Fargo.

The company's rapid expansion—it more than tripled its net sales between fiscal years 2009 and 2015 —comes amid increased demand for natural and organic products. Organic food sales in the U.S. grew by 161 percent between 2005 and estimates for 2014, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture research that used data from the Nutrition Business Journal.

"People, I think, are becoming more aware of the impacts on their health when it comes to what they're putting in their bodies, be it supplements or food," Larabee said.

The growth in consumer demand for organic products comes from "broader health and environmental narratives," said David Wright, the senior manager of marketing at the Hartman Group, a food consulting company based in Washington state.

"Consumers see authentic organics as a gateway to better health—both personal health and from the perspective of environmental stewardship," he said in an email.

## Changing by demand

Natural Grocers traces its roots to 1955, after Margaret Isely turned to eating natural foods and dietary supplements to battle chronic illnesses. She and her husband, Philip, became "health crusaders" after her health improved, according to a store brochure.

"Borrowing \$200 to help feed the family and put gas in the car, they went door to door in Golden, Colo., lending books on nutrition and giving out samples of whole grain bread," it added.

The second generation of the Isely family took over the business in 1998, according to its latest annual report.

Natural Grocers occupies the former Grand Forks Lumber Mart building on 32nd Avenue South. Lumber Mart now has office and retail space next door on South 20th Street, where it is constructing the second of two new warehouses, said company President Trent Peabody.

Natural Grocers boasts a selection of 100 percent organic produce, grass-fed and naturally raised meat as well as pasture-based dairy products. It doesn't sell food with artificial flavors, sweeteners and preservatives.

While not everything in the store is certified organic, Larabee said their products are "natural."

And the chain has bumped up what Larabee describes as its already high standards. Instead of eggs from cage-free chickens, they now only carry free-range or pasture-raised eggs, she said.

"They very much believe that you change an industry by demand," Larabee said. "And as customers demand better products, stores demand better products, we can change the industry for the better."

It also has options for customers with dietary restrictions. Purple labels next to price tags denote gluten-free products, and the store offers frozen pizza made with dairy-free cheese products.

While Larabee acknowledged organic products can carry a higher price tag than conventional grocery items, Natural Grocers focuses on affordability.

"Generally their production costs a little bit more, the certification process costs more," she said. "I think we're going to be a decent amount cheaper than what's out there.

"There's a place for all of us," Larabee said of natural food stores. "I think the more of us there are, the better. It just gives people options."

Traditional grocery stores have also recognized the organic food trend and are expanding their selection of organic and natural foods, Wright said.

What sets Natural Grocers apart are its efforts to inform customers about its products, Larabee said. In the back of the store is a "demonstration kitchen," which will hold classes on everything from cooking zucchini to making coconut milk.

"It's one thing to have them, it's another thing for people to know how to use them," she said. "It's all about empowering them to take charge of their own health—that's something that nobody can do for you."



**John Hageman**

John Hageman covers local business and North Dakota politics. He attended the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities, where he studied journalism and political science, and he previously worked at the Bemidji Pioneer.

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