

Grocery store opening in downtown Kitchener this fall

Terry Pender

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KITCHENER — A grocery store is slated to open downtown early this fall, fulfilling what urban planners and city councillors say is a priority need for the core's growing population.

J&P Grocery will be located in the back of the building at 8 Queen St. N. It will be owned and operated by Johnny Kent and Sarah Pepper, who have worked in the restaurant and hospitality industry since their university days.

"We envision it as an urban grocer like Fresh & Wild in downtown Toronto," Pepper says.

"We live in downtown Kitchener, and always complained about having to drive to go get groceries," she says.

In the past year, the part of the former Goudie's Department Store that fronts on Queen Street was renovated and restored. Fast-growing startup Vidyard leased most of the space and moved in earlier this month.

J&P Grocery will be located in the back with an entrance off Goudies' Lane.

"We have been in the restaurant industry for many years, and knew that having a restaurant of our own is not exactly what we wanted," Pepper says.

"And then we just started talking. If there is no grocery store downtown, then why doesn't somebody local make a grocery store downtown?" she says. "So now we are at the most beautiful space, right smack dab in the centre of downtown."

Currently, Kent and Pepper oversee front-of-house operations at Public Kitchen & Bar on Lancaster Street in Kitchener. They met while working at Hannah's Bella Bistro in uptown Waterloo.

In addition to the 4,000-square-foot grocery store, there will be a 1,000-square-foot café and coffee shop on a mezzanine level. Kent and Pepper will partner with Smile Tiger Coffee, which recently opened on Ahrens Street North.

"We want to create a beautiful space that people want to be in, sit on that mezzanine, sip a coffee, have a bite to eat and get groceries," Pepper says.

The grocery will also include a kitchen to provide grab-and-go lunches as well as do catering.

"It is going to have everything you need for your daily shop, a really cool, well curated inventory, some interesting gourmet stuff, but certainly not pigeon us into one or the other," Pepper says.

"It will be for downtown Kitchener, for people who want to go somewhere and get their shopping done, and not drive," she says.

The door on the loading dock at the back of the building will be replaced with double, sliding-glass doors. A sign will be placed high on the outside wall to increase the shop's visibility for people walking on Ontario Street.

Outdoor lights have been installed along the wall of the building to make it more inviting for shoppers coming off Queen Street North.

Although J&P Grocery does not have its own parking lot, it is next to a city-owned parking garage that is accessed from Duke Street. A covered walkway takes people from the parking garage to the building.

Sarah Marsh, the city councillor representing that part of the downtown, says the grocery store fills a long-standing need.

"For over a decade, we have been looking forward to a downtown grocery store," she says.

"This is not going to be a national brand, but it is a great solution for people who live and work downtown," she adds.

A grocery store has been among the top three priorities in survey after survey asking what people want in the downtown, along with a movie theatre and restaurant patios, says Cory Bluhm, manager of downtown development in Kitchener's economic development department.



This fall, John Kent and Sarah Pepper will open J&P Grocery at the back of the building at 8 Queen St. N. in downtown Kitchener.

"They really want to build an urban grocery store and cater to the urban lifestyle. That's exciting," Bluhm says.

Brothers Frank and Steve Voisin, who bought the building last year and invested in extensive renovations, are equally excited about the store.

"Sarah and Johnny are the specialty grocer that downtown residents and employees have been clamouring for, and we are proud to support them in their latest endeavour," Frank says.

Pepper and Kent share the Voisin brothers' passion for rejuvenating the downtown and appreciate the core's stock of old, heritage buildings, Steve says.

"With 8 Queen we have maintained the heritage beauty of a historic building while embracing the needs of modern users," he says. "A big part of that includes the needs of the residents of the new downtown Kitchener, which include a specialty grocer."

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