

Hartford Getting Back A Taste Of Bliss

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For Hartford's new empty nesters and young urban professionals who develop a hankering for a bowl of pasta and some thyme roasted vegetables, a new store is coming to downtown.

Bliss Market, a grocery store with a long Hartford history and a reputation for serving gourmet prepared meals, has signed a 10-year lease in the new Hartford 21 tower. Announced Thursday during the tower's grand opening ceremonies, it was touted by politicians and developers as a sign that the effort to revitalize downtown was moving in the right direction.

With 1,000 housing units either planned, in development or already open, downtown boosters have long said that a new array of services would soon follow.

"It is the linchpin to this whole development," said Kevin Bell, executive vice president of the Northland Investment Corporation, which developed the city's tallest residential tower with 36 stories and 262 living units. "You have people living downtown and there is no place for them to get groceries. But Bliss Market will deliver that."

Bliss, which will add the new store in Hartford to its current location in Wethersfield, will serve mostly prepared food from a menu that rotates each week and features the likes of pan-roasted sea bass with tomato mushroom cream sauce.

Bliss will also operate a café at the downtown store. The operation was compared by some Thursday to the famous Dean and DeLuca market in Manhattan, but in a 7,000-square-foot storefront on Asylum Street and with a long Connecticut history.

Bliss opened its first store in the 1930s on the corner of Bliss Street and Franklin Avenue in Hartford's South End, said John DeFrino, who is Bliss' current owner and chef and the grandson of the store's founder, Anthony DeFrino.

The grocer eventually moved to Wethersfield, where it maintains a 32-employee operation. The same number of employees or more will be needed in the Hartford location, which aims to open on March 1, DeFrino said.

"Northland wooed me for about three years. We just closed today," John DeFrino, 49, said Thursday. "Everything people living in the towers need they will be able to get."

Mayor Eddie A. Perez said Thursday that having a grocery store move in is a clear sign that Hartford's downtown is on its way to revitalization.

"We have said in the past that - shortly after the housing - the next benchmark for downtown would be a grocery store," Perez said. "And this grocery store is a very well established niche store for this type of urban housing. ... This is a big sign of confidence in retail in downtown Hartford."

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