

THE SHELBY REPORT *of the West*

MAY 2026



MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN PEOPLE'S
LIVES THROUGH FOOD SINCE 1986



MOLLIE STONE'S 
MARKETS

4  TH
ANNIVERSARY
YEARS
– OF GIVING BACK –

“THERE IS NO GREATER NEED DURING ONE’S LIFETIME THAN TO SUPPORT OUR COMMUNITY... IF I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN ONE PERSON’S LIFE, WHAT GREATER GIFT IS THERE?” – MIKE STONE, OWNER & CEO

Making a difference in people’s lives through food since 1986. This community-first ethos is the cornerstone of who we are. Serving our communities has always been just as important as providing fresh food and high-quality services for our shoppers. Supporting our community is of paramount importance. We are proud to donate to many local non-profits throughout the Bay Area, as well as to national and global causes.





The Shelby Report of the West congratulates Mollie Stone's Market on 40 years of excellence



Celebrating four decades of making a difference through food in the Bay Area

In 1986, Mike Stone and Dave Bennett opened the largest natural food store in Northern California at the time. They named it Mollie Stone's Markets to honor Mike's late mother, Mollie, who spent 45 years working in the grocery industry.

The stores carry not just her name but her desire to enhance the lives of those around her. Through the efforts of Mike Stone, owner and CEO (Bennett retired in 2012), along with his sons Elliott and Aaron and a host of other dedicated team members, Mollie Stone's Markets provide customers with a wide range of food choices – many of them fresh, local and healthy.

In fact, the first Mollie Stone's was all about health; it sold only natural and organic products.

But when he had the opportunity to purchase a conventional store a couple of years later, Stone came to the realization that he could create a store where people could do their full shop and still offer the organic and natural products that a contingent of shoppers was looking for.

Being able to do "necessity" and "passion" shopping under one roof "sets our stores apart from most," according to the company – the best of both worlds.

Over the years, the company has evolved, as is

required in the competitive grocery business.

Today, the company operates eight distinctly different stores in and around San Francisco. With their carefully curated product offerings – which still emphasize healthy, natural and specialty foods – as well as their dedication to serving their customers and communities well, Mollie Stone's stores can be confident that they continue to make a difference in people's lives through food, as they have for the past 40 years.



Mollie Stone's guiding lights

MISSION

Our mission is to surpass customer expectations with superior customer service, exciting variety and quality products in a fun and positive environment for our customers and employees. We want our passion and love of food to extend to you – our customer.

VISION

Making a difference in people's lives through food is our north star. We are committed to cultivating our community by supporting local farms, purveyors and local nonprofits. We pride ourselves on being the first store to carry many local brands that are now national staples. We

are also committed to supporting the community, especially in times of need.

VALUES

Treat people the way you want to be treated. That old saying is simple, but when embraced can be so impactful. This is a through-line for how we support our customers, employees, vendors and the community. We care about offering the best customer service and products that pass our rigorous standards for high quality. We care about our employees' success and well-being. We care about our community. When we all thrive, the positive impact is felt deeply.

Anniversary: CELEBRATING 40 YEARS



CEO, founder: 'It is so rewarding to satisfy people and get them what they want'

Mollie Stone's Market owner and CEO Michael "Mike" Stone gained an appreciation of good food early in his life, thanks to his grandmother.

That early appreciation for food has not waned over the years and has been a key component in Stone's enduring passion for making Mollie Stone's a place where people can indulge their passion for food (and drink).

His grandmother and grandfather lived with the Stone family in their San Fernando Valley home, having immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900s. Neither Stone's grandparents nor his parents had a lot of money, so living in the same house was a necessity.

His grandparents didn't work outside the home, and Stone's parents typically worked six days a week. Mike's mother, Mollie, worked in the grocery business from a young age – first at Boys Market and then at Vons for most of her long career – and his father sold periodicals. So when Mike and his older sister came home from school and some on weekends, they spent time with their grandparents.

"They kind of brought me up," Stone said. "My grandmother was a great cook and a great baker, so I got an affinity for food and baking and recipes. She just had all the recipes in her head. She would make dinner six out of seven nights a week, and I would help her do that."

Stone followed his mother's footsteps into the grocery business. As a child he would sometimes go to work with her and sit in the back room. She spent most of her career in the deli, so he learned at an early age how to slice hams. When he was 15, his mom got him a job at Vons.

He worked as a bagger for two years, then as a clerk and checker. He worked for Vons for about seven years through high school and college. The grocery company asked him to keep working in the store after he got his degree, but he said no thanks.

He did stay in the grocery business, however, taking a job in retail accounting for United Grocers in Richmond, California. He received a job offer from a Thriftway operator that had a couple of stores and,



Mike Stone

during his tenure there, they doubled their store count to four.

It was while he was there that his life was upended; both his parents passed away within nine months of each other.

"It kind of hit me over the head to want to have a purpose and make a difference in people's lives," Stone said.

Making a difference came in the form of opening a natural food store in the Bay Area, in Redwood City, California, in 1986. The store, the first Mollie Stone's Market – named for his mother – sold only organic and natural foods. The store was seeded with investment from two partners – one a silent partner and one that worked in the business with Stone, Dave Bennett.

The silent partner had the borrowing power to be able to get a loan to open up the first store, Stone said.

Those early years required a lot of hard work and determination.

"I took every penny I had and put it in the business, and we were working seven days a week for at least three or four years," he said.

Stone was the produce buyer, which meant he woke up at 11 p.m. to drive a truck to the produce market.

"I would buy the produce, load the produce, deliver it to the store, work in the store all day, get home about 7 o'clock and then do the same thing, so I was only getting about three or four hours of sleep then," Stone said. "It's the sacrifice that you have to make to make something work."

In 1988, Stone got the opportunity to purchase a conventional grocery store, and he realized that combining his organic and natural store with the conventional store would create a destination for more shoppers to find everything they needed in one place.

Over its four decades, Mollie Stone's Markets has grown to eight stores through additional acquisitions, all within a 30-mile radius in the San Francisco area. Each has its own size, look and personality, based on its locale and the needs of the community's shoppers.

Desire, passion for learning

Stone said one of his drivers for the Mollie Stone's business has been a desire and the passion to want to learn. He has traveled extensively, "seeing grocery stores, meeting people, talking to people," and has picked up ideas that he wanted to try to keep Mollie Stone's stores as cutting-edge as possible. Some ideas have worked; some haven't.

Among those that have stuck, the Pacific Heights store was the first food store in the world to have a Starbucks inside. That was back in 1998, and it's still serving coffee today.

Mollie's was one of the first stores to offer Instacart service for shoppers. It also was among the first grocers to offer a fresh sushi counter inside its stores and also was one of the first to drive shoppers who arrived on foot or by other means home after shopping via "The Mollie Bus" service at some stores.



The Mollie Bus at the Pacific Heights store

In line with its focus on fresh, Mollie's also was one of the first grocers in the country to employ produce "butchers" to cut fruits and vegetables for customers specific to how they're going to use them.

"All these different ideas, we're not afraid to try something," Stone said. "Ever since I was a kid, that entrepreneurial blood has been in me to want to do

No two stores are the same

Mollie Stone's Markets is a family in which none of the stores look like another.

"What's unique is all of the stores are different," said founder Mike Stone. "We've got a quonset hut, a Lucky Store, a Petrini's store. It's a lot of different older stores, especially in the San Francisco area."

But the grocer has made each one special, playing up the uniqueness rather than tamping it down.

The Mollie Stone's Market in Burlingame, for example, is the former Lucky store. When the company remodeled the store – which reopened as Mollie Stone's in 1998 – it removed the drop ceiling and decided to paint the now-exposed ceiling beams in a color reminiscent of its brand

"Customers would come in here saying, 'Wow, what'd you do the store? You increased the size of the store,' because it brought their eyes up to something," Stone said. "And we added skylights to bring some natural light in. It's not a huge store, but the scenery makes it feel that much bigger."



Nothing like the food industry

Mike Stone said in an interview with *The Shelby Report of the West's* Bob Reeves: "I think one of the most exciting things about the food business is the people that are associated with the food business, whether they're grocers or wholesalers or people like you.

"I'm not sure there's another community or industry that's quite like the food business. And the thing about the food business, it's never the same. It's constantly changing, so we're all learning from each other ... the involvement and giving back to the industry, you get that back tenfold. It's really powerful."

Anniversary: CELEBRATING 40 YEARS



something that excites me. I love retail. I love making people happy. And I think the grocery business is about satisfying people. It is so rewarding to satisfy people and get them what they want.”

A lot of people, especially in the areas where Mollie Stone's operates, find satisfaction in food and entertaining, he said, “so if you can make it better or easier or more impressive and healthier at the same time and provide the quality, I think that's what it's about, and that's what our goal is, to try to make people happy. And have all our employees happy at the same time and have them be engaged and have the passion that we have.”

Second gen fully engaged

The “we” that Stone speaks of includes the second generation of the family. Sons Elliott Stone and Aaron Stone fill key roles in the company – Elliott as chief operating officer, Aaron as VP of special projects.



Some Mollie Stone's offer high-end specialty ice from a local company, Abstract Ice.

“I let them decide if they wanted to come in the business, and I think both of them knew they [would],” Stone said.

Starting in their early years, they were in the stores and heard their father talking about the business. Stone said he was still working six days a week when the boys were born.

Though it's understandable to be hesitant to brag on one's own children,

Stone says his sons have traits that he admires.

“I'm extremely proud of their sensitivity to other people, how they treat other people because here at this company, we're about ‘you treat people like you want to be treated.’ They really exemplify that, and they're good with younger people and ... they have the affinity for older people, too.”

Both Elliott and Aaron are graduates of the Food Industry Management (FIM) Program through USC's Marshall School of Business, and both attended Arizona State University. Elliott, who is four years older, is an operations-minded person, Mike said, so he served as a store manager for a number of years before being named general manager and then chief operating officer.

In addition to his role at the company, Elliott serves on the boards of the California Grocers Association and the National Grocers Association.

Aaron is more into strategic thinking and planning and new opportunities, so he is thriving as VP of special projects.

“Both of them have their strengths,” their dad said.

The next 40

Based on his confidence in his sons as well as the Mollie Stone's executive team, headquarters team and store associates, Mike Stone is optimistic about the future.

“I think the boys are going to take over the company and want to grow it, but be selective in how we grow,” he said. “I think that's one of the things that has made us successful, picking our spots [well].”

While there's no question larger corporations can dole out more capital for technology and the like, Stone believes independent grocers can still thrive.

“We can satisfy the communities a lot better than the bigger guys can,” he said, as independents can quickly adapt to what customers are seeking.

“We keep changing and investing back into the stores to create new and exciting things for the future.”



Mr. Goodchoice is an animatronic figure in the produce department of the Palo Alto store. At the push of a button, Mr. Goodchoice sings songs like the Mollie Stone's brand jingle (“Best of Both Worlds”), “Home on Range” and “This Land Is Your Land.” There is a “Just Say No” PSA as well to steer kids away from drugs.

Health leads giving priorities

Mollie Stone's has two charitable funds it uses to support causes important to the company – the Mollie Stone's Fund and the Stone Family Fund.

Mike Stone said the No. 1 cause they support is health. That includes hospitals and programs designed to help people enjoy the best health possible.

Back in the early days of the pandemic in 2020, MarinHealth needed additional negative air pressure resources to prepare for the projected surge in COVID-19 cases.

“Mike [Stone] immediately stepped up to fund the entire cost of not one but two negative-air-pressure tents – a total gift of \$180,000,” according to MarinHealth.

One tent was designed for testing and treating people with mild COVID-19 symptoms; the other was for treating sicker people who needed medications or other interventions before they could be discharged.

Stone and his team also “fed our clinicians and staff delicious box lunches from Mollie Stone's,” MarinHealth said, as well as soliciting donations for the hospital's programs.

“Mike Stone has been a powerful ally in our efforts to provide the North Bay with the best possible care. His boundless generosity had been instrumental in helping our teams improve, extend and, yes, save lives, right here in the North Bay. [He] has truly made his mark on our healing place, and our community. And we are grateful.”

More recently, the family's giving to a Northern California hospital's women's services wing has led to it being named the Stone Family Breast Center. It is expected to provide mammograms for 24,000 women each year. Mollie Stone battled breast cancer during her life, which makes that cause “close to my heart,” said her son, adding that she did not succumb to the disease.

“We've bought equipment and other things for the breast center, and now we're donating more money and naming the breast center,” Stone said. “If it saves one life, there is no bigger gift that we can really do for the community ... and hopefully it'll save a lot more people's lives than that.”

After health, schools and food banks are Mollie Stone's primary areas of giving, Stone said. But that does not preclude the company from giving when crises arise at home or abroad.

The grocer matched customers' donations when Ukraine was invaded in 2022. They also gave a \$25,000 gift to the local food bank when SNAP funding was delayed last fall.

“A community is only a community if the people in the community are community-minded,” Stone said. “Maybe I use ‘community’ too much, but what makes a community strong is the people in the community and supporting the community. We feel like our stores are part of the community, so we want to give back.”

“It's much more rewarding to give than to get.”

Anniversary: CELEBRATING 40 YEARS



Second-gen COO enjoys dynamic business, finding ways to 'get better every day'

The *Shelby Report of the West* EVP Bob Reeves sat down with Mollie Stone's Markets COO Elliott Stone, older son of founder/owner/CEO Mike Stone, at an Italian restaurant in Sausalito – which has a Mollie Stone's – for a meal and a talk about the company.

Stone's grocery roots run deep, and not just through his father. His maternal grandfather, Rich Moresco, also owned grocery stores, one of which Mike Stone purchased to add to the Mollie Stone's stable. It's located in the Pacific Heights area of San Francisco (known as the Grand Central store inside the organization).

"There are grocers on both my mom's side and my dad's side of the family. Aaron and I grew up in the stores, and we have the passion to be in the business and make a difference in people's lives through food," Stone said. "Our dad had the vision to create an incredible experience for customers and good-paying jobs and benefits for our employees."

Though Mollie had passed away before Elliott was born, his grandfather who owned the Grand Central store is in his mid-90s and still lives in San Francisco.

A couple of possible factors in his longevity is that he remains in close contact with his family and eats healthy, but also his pride in seeing his legacy being carried forward.



Elliott Stone

"That's what excites him – seeing us in the business, seeing us passionate about it, because he was very passionate about it. He's loving life and living it vicariously through us," Stone said.

Elliott began working in stores as a freshman in high school at the in-store Starbucks – the first in-store location in the world.

The Starbucks opened in 1998, the result of his dad's visionary thinking, Elliott said.

"My dad looked at coffee shops and felt like a coffee shop was a great way to drive traffic into grocery stores. We had a really cool, unique store in San Francisco, and he had the vision of putting a coffee shop that people are going to know, that was on the rise. So that's what he did."

A raised plaque on the counter commemorates its status as the first store to have a Starbucks inside.

Elliott would work at the Starbucks within the store for the morning rush before heading off to school.

That coffee counter has become "kind of iconic in San Francisco,"



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Warmest congratulations to Mollie Stone's Markets on celebrating 40 remarkable years!



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CONGRATULATIONS MOLLIE STONE'S ON YOUR 40TH!



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Versatile VP grateful that family is able to ‘do it together, enjoying every day’

For Aaron Stone, working at Mollie Stone’s Markets was never really a question. Growing up surrounded by the family business, it always felt like the natural path. And that’s where he is now ensconced after stops at a top business school in Arizona and a semester living in Spain.

“It’s like a dream,” said Stone of working for the family business. He serves as VP of special projects and business development at the Bay Area grocery chain that his family has built over four decades.

“We’re grateful that we’re able to do it together, enjoying every day and our time together,” said Stone, who is the younger son of co-founder Mike Stone. “It’s a great opportunity to be able to work with your family.”

Stone and his older brother Elliott both attended Arizona State University’s W.P. Carey School of Business – one of the country’s most well-regarded business programs – where Aaron earned a bachelor’s degree in business communications with a minor in real estate.

The brothers had one year of overlap on campus, shared a friend group and the same fraternity and have remained close. “We’ve always been really close and have a great relationship,” Aaron said of the COO.



Aaron Stone

Starting at the bottom – and staying hands-on

Stone has been clocking hours at Mollie Stone’s since he was a teenager. That ground-level experience has shaped the way he approaches his role today, even as the company has grown significantly over the past 15-plus years.

Aaron, now 32, started working at age 15 and has filled numerous positions around the store. And he keeps those skills sharpened by pitching in at the stores in the peak season, particularly during the Thanksgiving and Christmas weeks.

“Each holiday season, I get to work in meat and seafood, cracking crab and serving customers at the counter,” he said.

His formal title is intentionally broad, reflecting the reality of running a family-owned regional grocery chain.

“We are in the people business,” Stone explained. “For me, it’s being able to zoom in and zoom out at different projects or tasks to best understand what the needs of the team are and how, together, we can make a positive difference for our customers and teammates.”

Catering to community

Mollie Stone’s Markets began as a health food store, and while the chain has evolved considerably since then, its commitment to quality, customer service and offering items that shoppers want has remained a constant thread throughout its history.

“We’ve been in business for 40 years, and we couldn’t have done it without our relationships with our vendors and partners that are looking out for us throughout the supply chain,” Stone said. “I’ve been fortunate to learn and almost work

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Celebrating 40 Years of *Mollie Stone's*



For 40 years, Mollie Stone's has been stocking more than shelves — you've been building trust, serving communities, and proving that doing things the right way never goes out of style.

In an industry where everything moves fast and margins matter, staying fresh for four decades says a lot. It takes sharp instincts, strong relationships, and the ability to adapt without losing what makes you...you.

We've spent our time in the grocery industry too — working behind the scenes with businesses that keep things moving. We know the risks don't clock out when the doors close, and the details matter more than most people realize.

So while today is about celebrating, Mollie Stone's (as it should be), we'll just say this: it's always good to have the right people in your corner.

Congratulations on 40 years done right — and here's to what's next.

Nicholas Charton

Program Specialist (and Grocery Expert)

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People first: How family-owned grocer builds culture of longevity

In a grocery landscape heavily dotted with national chains, Mollie Stone's Markets has carved out a distinctive identity as an independent Bay Area institution. A significant part of that staying power, said VP of Human Resources Erika Deschodt, comes down to how the company treats the people who show up for work every day.

"The employees make the company move forward," she said. "Without them, we would not be."

Deschodt's path to Mollie Stone's was anything but a straight line. A Costa Rican native who met her French husband at St. Mary's College in Moraga, California, she launched her career in Las Vegas after earning her undergraduate degree in hospitality.

She went through a program that required students to log hundreds of real-world hours in hotels, casinos and convention centers, which was valuable "lab" experience, as she described it.

Her first job back in the Bay Area was as a front desk manager at the Marriott Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, where she rotated through every hotel department, including HR, which initially struck her as purely administrative and, frankly, dull.

That perception shifted dramatically during a routine benefits presentation. A Spanish-speaking employee approached her, unable to understand anything that had been said. Deschodt translated everything into Spanish on the spot. The next morning, she arrived at her desk to find a handwritten thank-you note and a small offering of fresh fruit from the man's garden.

"He said, 'My wife got all her answers.' I felt so fulfilled," she said. "With guests,



Erika Deschodt

you have to make an impression; with employees, it can be life changing."

That moment redirected her career entirely. She pursued a master's degree in HR from Golden Gate University while working full time, then spent years in hotel management, real estate, software and consumer goods, including a three-year stint at The Republic of Tea in Novato.

A recruiter eventually brought her to Mollie Stone's, where she has now been the VP of HR for eight years. The hospitality instincts she developed early on, she said, have never left her.

A culture built on passion, mutual respect

Walking into any of Mollie Stone's locations, customers likely will be greeted by a familiar face. Employee longevity is a point of pride at the company, and Deschodt believes it stems from a foundational philosophy: take care of your team members first, and they'll take care of your customers.

"I believe that if I am going to expect that employee to treat a customer well, I have to treat that employee well first," she said. "If we do that, we create a foundation ... for the customer to feel that experience."

The culture Deschodt describes is fast-paced, food-obsessed and deeply collaborative.

Every Tuesday morning, the leadership team gathers, and buyers, directors and department heads from deli, bakery, cheese, wine and spirits and beyond take turns sharing trends and market developments.



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“This is the most dynamic company and dynamic industry I’ve worked in,” she said. Passion, she notes, flows from the top: the Stone family’s own work ethic and commitment set the tone for everything else.

The company also proved its values during COVID-19, when owner Mike Stone arranged personal protective equipment for employees before it was even required by state or federal authorities and made it available at no cost.

“It just improved the strength of the team,” Deschodt said.

When it comes to hiring, the company looks beyond a résumé. Skills matter, but so does personality.

“We have to have very kind, very open, very positive personalities,” she said. Candidates who can’t demonstrate in an interview how they would handle a difficult customer moment are unlikely to advance.

Once someone is hired, the message from leadership is consistent: you’re on stage. “You come as a professional and bring the personality,” she said. “If you are not in a good mood every day, we’ll help you through it. We’ll coach you. But on the floor, that is what is expected from everybody.”



Onboarding that feels like a welcome

Deschodt is particular about how new employees are brought into the fold. The company draws on training portals from the National Grocers Association and customizes the content carefully.

“I want to choose the right ones,” she said. Even the employee handbook reflects this philosophy. Deschodt insists its tone be welcoming rather than legalistic. Its intent is to say, “Welcome to Mollie Stone’s Markets – you belong here,” she said.

The same spirit applies to orientation, which Deschodt is working to return to an in-person format after the disruptions of the pandemic. She wants new hires to be able to ask questions, interact and feel the company’s culture firsthand.

“I want them to feel it, not just sit at a computer and go through training,” she said.

For Deschodt, all of it – the hiring decisions, the training philosophy, the leadership meetings – traces back to one idea: that a company’s relationship with its employees is the foundation everything else is built on.

Forty years in, Mollie Stone’s is living proof.




Happy 40th Anniversary!


MOLLIE STONES

Wishing you continued success for years to come!

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'We do it all' – Marketing team shapes shopper touchpoints with pizzazz

When Erika Petryszyn walked into her job interview at Mollie Stone's Markets in 2018, she wasn't sure how her eclectic résumé would land. A career that had taken her from New York City's fashion industry to San Diego's action sportswear scene to a decade at Pottery Barn didn't exactly scream "grocery store."

But Mollie Stone's owner and CEO Mike Stone saw something he liked and offered her the job on the spot.



Erika Petryszyn

"On paper, it could sound odd," Petryszyn admitted, "but we just clicked."

Nearly eight years later, she serves as marketing manager for the Bay Area grocery chain, overseeing the three-person team responsible for virtually every customer-facing touchpoint the brand produces.

Petryszyn's path to Mollie Stone's was shaped by a foundation in fine art. She studied illustration in college with a minor in graphic design, and those dual disciplines have defined her career ever since. After stints in fashion and co-founding a sister brand to Osiris action sportswear, she spent more than a decade at Pottery Barn before eventually going independent, leading to a life chapter

she found creatively fulfilling but isolating.

"Working for yourself is really fun but really lonely," she said with a laugh.

At Mollie Stone's, she found the opposite. Starting as a senior graphic designer, she was promoted to marketing manager and now leads efforts across every channel, from in-store signage and social media to email campaigns, packaging, photography, billboard design and even commercial production. The team

also handles its own photography in-house.

"We do it all," she said. "The impact is huge and really rewarding. That's what makes it fun."

Embracing collaboration

That breadth stands in sharp contrast to her Pottery Barn days, where corporate structure kept employees narrowly focused. The family-owned environment at Mollie Stone's, she said, invites contribution at every level.

A creative highlight of her time at Mollie Stone's was the privilege of designing the 40th anniversary logo. She's also developing a social media campaign called "40 Years of Giving Back" to spotlight the company's long history of community philanthropy – something she is doing of her own initiative, not because she was asked.

On the marketing strategy side, Petryszyn's team manages one of the more quietly effective email programs in regional retail. The grocer's weekly newsletter boasts an open rate of around 42 percent – well above the industry average of 25 percent – with the weekly ad and a Friday recipe feature drawing the most engagement.

The company's relatively new loyalty card program also is beginning to generate useful shopper data, though Petryszyn noted that Mollie Stone's has been intentionally cautious about how deeply it mines customer information.

"We really do try to keep privacy a priority," she said.



Giving is in Mollie Stone's DNA

Mollie Stone's Markets donates to hospitals, food banks, schools, first-responders and various nonprofits in the community through direct financial support, food, PPE, time volunteered and customer match programs.

"We feel it is important to support our local communities through food drives and direct donations to food banks, local schools, hospitals and many other non-profits," said Erika Petryszyn, marketing manager for the grocer.

Here are some support highlights:

- **Grab & Give Campaign:** Since 2016, Mollie Stone's has partnered with the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank, offering pre-packed bags of non-perishable food items that customers purchase. All Grab & Give bags are discounted with a 10 percent contribution from Mollie Stone's. Since the beginning of the program, 128,176 pounds of foods – which equals 106,813 meals – has been donated, with a contribution of \$32,000 from the grocer.

- **Stamp Out Hunger Campaign:** Mollie Stone's and San Francisco-Marin Food Bank together have sponsored the National Association of Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger food drive in Marin County. The food drive encourages residents to put bags of food out for donation on their front doorsteps, which the letter carriers pick up during the regular mail delivery. Mollie Stone's Markets provides campaign-branded recyclable paper bags to Marin households. Since 2016, a total of 344,000 brown paper bags have been donated.

- In 2020, Mollie Stone's made a \$100,000 direct



cash donation to San Francisco-Marin Food Bank to help fund its expansion; in 2025, the grocer donated \$25,000 to help with food insecurity.

- **San Francisco-Marin Food Bank Fresh Rescue Program** – Mollie Stone's has donated excess food to San Francisco-Marin Food Bank Fresh Rescue Program every week for the past 10 years, totaling more than 1 million pounds.

- **Food Runners** – The organization helps alleviate hunger in San Francisco and prevents waste to help create community. Since COVID-19, Food Runners acquired a kitchen and hired chefs to create meals from donated food that are distributed to the homeless and seniors. Mollie Stone's San Francisco markets have donated excess food to Food Runners every week for the past eight years. The Pacific Heights and Twin Peaks locations donate seven days a week; the Castro location donates three days a week. Over the past eight years, more than 500,040 pounds of food have been donated.

- **Food rescue:** The Mollie Stone's Markets in San Francisco and Marin rescue excess fresh food from

businesses, schools and gardens and immediately delivers it to people facing food insecurity. Since 2023, more than 336,855 pounds of food have been rescued and delivered.

- **COVID-19:** When the pandemic broke out in 2020, Mollie Stone's started a customer donation drive with a 100 percent matching program to hospitals around all of its store locations in and around San Francisco. The grocer was able to donate more than \$200,000 to local hospitals from that drive. That was in addition to donating meals and two "negative-pressure" disaster-medicine treatment tents to help with hospital overflow at Marin General Hospital.

- **Far-ranging support:** Mollie Stone's has held donation drives for the Maui wildfires as well as the World Food Programme when the war in Ukraine broke out.

Owner and CEO Mike Stone's efforts have not gone unnoticed. He received the AFP Outstanding Corporate Grantmaker Award in 2021 and the Robert B. Wegman Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence in 2022 from FMI – The Food Association.





She's also helping shape in-store identity through a "Love Local" signage system she designed. It's a blue branded hang tag used throughout stores to identify products from regional vendors.

"To this point, our north star is 'making a difference in people's lives through food.' We do this through offering an exceptional variety of high-quality products for our customers, with a focus on local vendors and purveyors," she said.

For Petryszyn, the job represents something beyond a career milestone.

"I feel incredibly privileged to get to work for a family business with leadership that leads with integrity. They have created a wonderful 40-year legacy that has made us a nationwide jewel," she said.

"With our devotion to good food and supporting community, I have no doubt Mollie Stone's Markets will be around for another 40 years, continuing to make a difference in people's lives through food."



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Anniversary: CELEBRATING 40 YEARS



The art of the buy: how Mollie Stone's Markets stays ahead on the shelf

At a time when independent grocery chains face mounting pressure from national giants, Mollie Stone's Markets has carved out a durable niche in the competitive Bay Area grocery landscape – and a big part of that edge comes from the leadership of Tamira Franz, senior procurement director.

Franz has been with Mollie Stone's since 2007, but her relationship with the company goes back to her days as a natural foods sales rep when owner and CEO Mike Stone was operating his first store, the purely organic market in Redwood City that predated Whole Foods. She was selling him bulk food then. Today, she's the one deciding what earns a place on Mollie Stone's shelves.



Tamira Franz

On both sides of the table

Franz's career arc is unusual in retail grocery: nearly 15 years in distribution before crossing over to procurement. She started at Falcon Trading Company/SunRidge Farms, a Santa Cruz-based bulk food company, then moved to Nature's Best and eventually Unified Western Grocers, where she

was brought in specifically to build a natural foods portfolio as consumer demand for healthier products began to surge.

That experience – understanding how products move from producer to distributor to retailer – shapes how she evaluates vendors today.

"Having the experience of understanding not only logistics of how one thing gets to retail, but then all of the details that go along with it ... it supports my endeavor into finding and resourcing new, unique and innovative products that we can hopefully wow our customers with," she said.

When a vendor sits across from Franz with a new product, her approach isn't formulaic. If it's a founder pitching something he or she made, the conversation goes deep on story and origin. If it's a broker presenting a line extension on an item already proven in the store, that's typically a quicker decision.

"If we bring that new product line in, we're going to have a story about the product so that it becomes more of a focal point for the guests in our stores," she explained.

It helps if the founder is willing to go into stores, demo the product and share their story to help customers make that connection.



Integration before it was standard

One of Mollie Stone's longstanding differentiators, Franz noted, is that the company integrated natural and conventional products into unified shelf sets long before it became common practice. While competitors were corralling health foods into a separate "store within a store," Mollie Stone's chose a different path, placing organic cereal next to conventional cereal, natural beverages alongside mainstream ones.

"When a shopper walks into the store, they should have a range of choices. If you're in the cereal set,

Shared Values

As we celebrate our own 40th anniversary, we congratulate Mollie Stone's Markets on four decades of dedication to a community-centered grocery experience for their customers, vendors, and employees.



FIELD
PAOLI



Anniversary: CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

you would have a wonderful variety to choose from. You could get your Cheerios or your Captain Crunch. You can also get your locally made granola,” said Franz, who added that she has always had a love for natural, healthy food to fuel her athletic pursuits such as running and bicycling.

But each store may not be a candidate for every product; Franz is emphatic that Mollie Stone’s doesn’t operate on a one-size-fits-all model.

“Each of our locations is unique. Every store is customized with its own personality and assortment tailored to its customer base.”

What’s driving the buy today

When asked about what influences product selection now, Franz points less to traditional demographic segmentation and more to the cultural appetite being shaped by social media.

“It’s really about the global influence of flavor. Younger shoppers, especially, are discovering foods and flavors on platforms like TikTok, whether shakshuka eggs or a completely new flavor profile. There’s that excitement of ‘we want to create that recipe’ or ‘we want to find that item.’ I’m seeing that more as an influence than an ethnic influence per se.”

Kosher certification remains a meaningful filter.

“We certainly hang our hat on kosher,” Franz said, noting that kosher has long been associated

with cleaner, more carefully processed products. It’s a natural fit for a customer base oriented toward quality and transparency.

The goal, she added, is balance: meeting customers where they are while introducing them to what’s next.

“I want to buy my Coke, Diet Coke, Olipop. I want to also get a sparkling water. So it’s having the selection, because people want to try things and they also want to find things that they expect.”

Leadership has been key

Ask Franz about the culture at Mollie Stone’s, and the conversation quickly turns to its owner. She describes a workplace where longevity is common and loyalty runs deep; a reflection, she believes, of how Stone leads.

“What I really appreciate most is how much Mike values his employees, and there’s a strong level of engagement across the company, including with his sons, who are actively involved and working hard to move the business forward,” she said.

“In a family company you don’t always see that level of involvement, but here, it’s real. That energy is motivating. It pushes all of us to keep improving and doing better every day... Being surrounded by that is an experience I wouldn’t find anywhere else.”

For Franz, the draw of Mollie Stone’s wasn’t just the

job – it was what the company represented. She left a stable distribution career to join the retail side, a move some colleagues questioned.

“I’m very proud to be a part of Mollie Stone’s and have seen over the years how the company has grown, adapted and continues to stay relevant,” she said. “It’s not getting any easier, but every day we do the work to make Mollie Stone’s the best.”



Gold Rush is pleased to celebrate Mike and Mollie Stones on their anniversary. Both Gold Rush and Mollie Stones are Bay Area based family companies that share a common goal of satisfying the Bay Area’s consumers unique needs. Many of Gold Rush’s employees have serviced our key brands of Dreyer’s and Haagen Dazs at Mollie Stone’s for nearly 40 years. You represent the best of the Bay Area and congratulations on the achievement.



Long-tenured Greenbrae store manager: 'Let's make a difference' each, every day'

When Jeff Laine joined the grocery business in the early 1990s, he had no way of knowing he was stepping into what would become a decades-long career path at the same Marin County address. As store manager of Mollie Stone's Market in Greenbrae, California – the chain's fourth location – Laine is approaching his 30th anniversary with the company this September, a milestone that speaks volumes about the culture he helps steward.



Jeff Laine

"Mike's passion and vision have driven our company to an amazing success," Laine said of Mollie Stone's owner Mike Stone, who doubled the size of the company some 30 years ago by acquiring the Greenbrae store and a fifth location in the same move.

Laine came with the building, having already been at the location since 1991 under the prior operator, Petrini's Supermarket. The transition to Mollie Stone's, he said, was seamless because many of the people stayed on.

A culture of loyalty

Walk the aisles of the Greenbrae store and you'll find employees who have been there nearly as long as Laine himself. Retirement, it turns out, is rarely the end of the story.

"No one ever really leaves – we offer those who retire to come back, and many do," Laine said.

He attributes this unusual loyalty directly to Stone's leadership. With about 100 employees at his store alone and around 700 companywide, Laine recounts a moment that illustrates what sets the ownership apart: an employee who suffered a heart attack and faced what could have been a financially devastating

recovery instead emerged owing roughly \$1,000 out of pocket on a bill that likely ran close to \$400,000.

"He told me, 'Go tell Mike Stone thank you for the medical benefits,'" Laine recalled. "When you have an owner that cares like that, it makes people want to work for you."

What shoppers come for

The draw for everyday shoppers is quality, service and freshness, particularly in produce. Unlike many retailers who source through distributors, Mollie Stone's operates its own produce distribution center.

"It literally comes into that warehouse and hours later it's here," Laine said. "This allows us to control the quality and get it to the stores much faster."

To reinforce accountability, every produce box is marked with the date it arrived, giving floor managers a real-time read on what's fresh.

"That's how we make sure we're staying fresh constantly."

Built for the unexpected

Three decades of managing a grocery store comes with stories. During a 1999 plumbing failure, a broken fire riser elbow sent water shooting through the floor and flooded the store from the meat department all the way to the frozen food aisle – six days before Christmas.

Rather than close for the holiday stretch, Laine rallied his entire staff, flagged down a passing fire truck and had the store back open within three hours. The health department arrived at 12:30 that afternoon to shut things down. Inspectors found no water.

Two decades later, a power outage – mid-remodel and four days before a grand opening – forced the team to empty every refrigerator in the store and pack the contents into diesel-powered refrigerated trucks from the company's produce operation. Not

a single product was lost. The grand opening went ahead as planned.

"I didn't do it by myself by any means," Laine is quick to say of both crises. "It was a full team effort."

Eyes on the future

What keeps Laine energized after nearly 30 years with Mollie Stone's? Partly, he said, it's that Mollie Stone's never stops evolving.

"We're constantly looking at what's new out there, what's worth trying," he said, describing a recent company trip to scout a store concept in San Diego. "Over the last 30 years, we've developed ourselves, and people are starting to look at us now."

As Mollie Stone's marks its 40th anniversary, Laine sees a company that has earned its standing not through scale but through consistency – in quality, in care for its employees and in a willingness to adapt. For a manager who has spent nearly all of his professional life within the same four walls, that's not a small thing.

"Mike takes care of us," he said. "Let's make a difference each and every day."

(Note: Since this interview, Laine has been promoted to general manager of Mollie Stone's.)



Brent Richards, cheese manager at the Greenbrae Mollie Stone's Market, stocks some Mollie's Irish Soda Bread.

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twice as long as my age at this point, which sounds weird, but it's great. I learn new things every day. Every season is different.

"We look to bring in the best quality items for people and their families that are shopping with us," continued Stone, who is a married father of one son, with another child on the way.

"We look at what would we want to eat and serve to our families, because we're shopping at the store."

The marinated air-chilled chicken selection, as well as the garlic shrimp skewers, are some of his family-favorite dinner choices.

Situated near what Stone calls "the salad bowl of California," the company's markets benefit from proximity to some of the region's most productive agricultural land. But sourcing quality product, he notes, requires relationships as much as geography, and Mollie Stone's has been building those for decades.

"It's been a part of our fabric to work with small businesses and local produce companies to bring a unique experience to the customers in our store. My father, Mike, started us on this journey in 1986, waking up in the middle of the night to go buy produce at the

San Francisco Produce Market, load it in his pickup truck and bring it to the store daily."

That foundation lives on today, with quality and variety abundant throughout the produce department. Aaron oversees produce operations and the Produce Distribution Center, maintaining and growing those relationships that his father forged.

Building brands, partnerships

One of Mollie Stone's most distinctive roles in the regional grocery landscape is its history of introducing emerging brands to consumers – a function Stone sees as central to what independent grocers do best.

"The independent grocers play a huge role in the incubation of emerging brands," he said.

The company's contribution to that tradition is even documented in popular culture; Mollie Stone's is mentioned in an episode of the podcast "How I Built This" with Guy Raz, in the story of Method soap's rise from small-batch product to household name.

Stone also is personally invested in finding new products to bring to shelves. On his honeymoon in Italy, he photographed a standout olive display, tracked down the supplier and used AI translation tools to open a dialogue, entirely in Italian.

"I emailed the supplier in Italian, ran it through an AI tool to translate it and sent something like 'Hey, this is my name, this is my story. Your olives are some of the best olives I've tried ... Teach me about the crop.'"

Long-tenured team

One of the most visible signs of Mollie Stone's culture is its employee retention. The company has long-tenured team members in all its stores, a fact Stone attributes to leadership at every level, not just at the top.

"I like to say that we [the family] have an impact, but really, it's the culture and leadership at the stores," he said.

Stone explains that "store teammates make hundreds of decisions each day that make a difference to our customers in a positive way. We work together and



Please see page 69



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Focus firmly on quality – ‘You can get things here you can’t get anywhere else’

Michael Tomasello, director of meat and seafood, encapsulates the philosophy at Mollie’s Stones in general and the meat department in particular: “Our focus is all about quality.”

Mollie Stone’s branded items in the fresh meat department are procured from a family-owned producer, and a barbecue restaurant out of Folsom smokes the sausages that are produced at the stores’ kitchens.

Mollie Stone’s stores often are recognized for having the best meat, poultry and fish departments in Marin County “because nobody provides service meat like we do. And all the cuts, from veal to lamb to beef,” Tomasello said. “You can get things here you can’t get anywhere else.”



Much of the meat comes from the Midwest, but from select plants, he said.

“We carry specialty items like Piedmontese Beef and Beeler’s [Pure] Pork (Duroc),” he said, adding that Mollie Stone’s marinated items are popular. There are more than a dozen different marinades available.

While some are rotated out to “keep it fresh,” he said, there are certain ones such as carne asada, citrus/lemon and wild garlic that are always available

Operating in a coastal area, Mollie Stone’s gets seafood right from the wharf, inspecting it as it comes out of the water.

“Fish, we get daily – fresh catch every day,” Tomasello said.

This includes 10 to 12 different varieties of tuna, along with swordfish and salmon (at certain times of the year). Mollie Stone’s standards mean that “it’s totally different quality” than is found at the typical store.

The mix of proteins can change based on which Mollie Stone’s one is visiting.

“Every community has its own tastebuds, palate, so all of our stores are different; we really try to satisfy what the community wants,” Tomasello said.

“The stores are also different sizes, too.

“While there are some things that are the same, a lot of things aren’t,” he added. “Some of them ask for certain products, and we get it for them.”

John Ness, corporate chef at Mollie Stone’s, noted some differences in food preferences among stores.

“San Bruno is a little bit more, I would say, a steak-and-potato crowd, chicken parmesan. You go to our Pac Heights store in San Francisco, and the seared plank salmon is a hit. The vegan Wellington is something they go after as well.

“But rotisserie chicken is popular everywhere,” he added. “Customers come in and they want a hot chicken. They’ll pick up some side dishes, maybe grab a bottle of wine, a baguette, and call it dinner.”

Rotisserie chicken

Speaking of rotisserie chicken, over in Mollie’s Kitchen – the name for the in-store deli and prepared food operation at Mollie Stone’s Market – these chickens are a little different.

They’re free range, local, clean-label and plumper than normal, and Mollie Stone’s knows the producer personally.

“Our specs for our chickens are different than others,” said Mike Stone, CEO and founder. “We

inspect the chickens, and we’ll buy the chickens that have the best weight. If you buy a cheaper chicken somewhere, it might be a pound and a half, where our chickens are close to three pounds.

“It’s hard to compare things in our store to another retailer because we know where they’re coming from and what they’re fed.”

Greenbrae store features popular ‘Experience Room’



The Greenbrae store features a multipurpose “Experience Room,” complete with audiovisual equipment. It has been used for tastings for wine and cheese – two expansive departments at Mollie Stone’s – as well as food sampling for customers who are considering using Mollie’s catering services.

Community members can reserve the room for meetings as well. Mollie Stone’s also utilizes the space for food photography that will be used on social media channels, advertising, etc. Or if Mollie Stone’s chefs want to test a new dish, “we do it in that room,” said Mike Stone, owner and CEO. “It’s kind of universal use; it’s a good place where we can do a lot of different things.”

Corporate chef enjoys mix of product and people in his role

John Ness is corporate chef at Mollie Stone’s Market. He worked for the grocer from 1996 to 2004 before leaving to study physical therapy. But Ness, whose father ran a seafood restaurant in San Francisco when he was growing up, decided to leave PT for culinary school and then spent time in restaurants, as a private chef and doing catering. In 2015, he rejoined Mollie Stone’s, combining culinary and retail as corporate chef.

The job has an interesting mix of food and people. “It entails the human resources element of hiring folks, training folks, but the retail aspect is fun because people buy with the eyes first, then you’ve got to back it up with, obviously, quality,” Ness said.

Mollie Stone’s offers an extensive catering menu, he said, “something for everybody.”

And the grocer does its best to make catering orders as easy as possible to place.

“We’ve got an actual human you can call,” Ness

said of the catering director, adding that she can offer additional assistance if there are dietary restrictions that need to be considered.

“Catering is fantastic; it’s a growing segment,” he said. “Holiday meal packages are very popular, and vegan, vegetarian is popular as well.”

Grab-and-go meals are very popular at Mollie Stone’s due to “quality of ingredients, the clean ingredients, but then I would go right back to variety,” Ness said.

The stores offer options like meals for one, meals for two, a la carte items and side dishes.

If someone wants to not think about it and pick



Prepared foods in the Greenbrae Mollie Stone’s



A bright green van accented with tomatoes advertises and delivers Mollie Stone’s catering.

up a meal for one, where your protein, starch and veggie are all together, great. Or they can come in and pick what they want – some slices of tri-tip, roasted potatoes, a date-and-kale salad – essentially customize a meal, he said.

Thus, those who want to pick their food and those who don’t want to think about it can both find what they’re looking for, Ness said.

Some stores offer hot bars, either service or self-service, and “we do our own pizzas,” he said.

On the sweet side, “the Mollie Stone’s cookie is famous. I can’t tell you how many of these we do a day,” said Ness. “Got to have a gallon of milk with them.”

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he said, pointing out that now there are thousands of in-store Starbucks across the country.

"It's pretty cool that my dad had the vision to do it," Stone said. "It was a small local grocer in San Francisco that had that vision, not a big chain that struck the first deal.

"It's an honor to have the plaque that says we were the first," he added. "There's a lot of pride in that."

It's not uncommon to see people taking photos of the plaque, he noted.

Forward thinking led to the founding of Mollie Stone's in the first place, in fact.

When his dad opened the first store in 1986, he sensed there was a need for stores to assist customers in their quest for more health-conscious eating.

"He saw the trend coming before it became what it is today," he said. "He's always thinking multiple years down the line and how can we be in position to be as successful as possible?"

Mission-focused team

While running a grocery store is quite complex, with many moving parts each and every day, the COO said the goal at Mollie Stone's is to keep things simple and focused on the company's mission – making a difference in people's lives through food.

"Our people know us," he continued. "We go in the stores all the time, and we have a relationship with the people that work for us."

Average tenure was about 16 years when the grocer studied it a couple of years ago, which is very strong in the grocery industry.

"We have many people that have been with us over 25 years," Stone said. "We're thankful to have that and to have them part of the family, because that's how we look at it."

Pins and certificates are presented to team members when they hit milestones of service. Each store holds Employee Appreciation days as well.

"The way we look at it is everybody at the office is here to support the stores, so whatever we can do to help the stores be successful, or help the teams be successful, we're going to do that right away."

Product selection paramount

With its health food store roots, it makes sense that produce is a big difference-maker for Mollie Stone's.

"Talking about what makes us 'us,' one of the biggest things is our produce operation," Stone said. "For a company of our size, it's almost unheard of that we self-distribute 100 percent of our produce and our floral."

The company has a distribution facility in San Francisco that receives deliveries between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m., then sends product out to the stores later that morning. Berries that come in at 2 a.m. would be in stores by 8 a.m.

"Just hours after we get the product, it goes right out. What does that do? Well, you're cutting the time of the produce sitting at a distributor by a day or two," Stone said.

"The quicker you get it in there, the fresher the product is going to be. I don't think anybody, unless there's a company out there that picks up directly



from the farm, is getting their product to their stores at a quicker pace than we do."

Though some may question the economics of handling produce that way, "we do it because it's about getting the best quality and having the control over what produce flows in there," he said. "I put up our produce and floral against anybody else's, because we've created a method of supply chain that really beats everybody else. We control what we buy, we control the back door, we control the inspection of the product – it's all us."

In other categories, product decisions are driven by myriad factors, including whether it is going to resonate with customers, Stone said. Figuring that out is based on knowing who's shopping with you.

"Our stores are so different that sometimes it might work for one store and not work for another, so the product variety that we offer, we spend a lot of time analyzing it," he said. "And with the size of our stores, we have to be careful because you don't want something in there that's not going to sell."

But customers do want to see new products and the excitement they bring to everyday grocery shopping, so there has to be a balance.

"We have a team of people that are constantly doing category management," he said.

As a local, family-owned grocer, Mollie Stone's strives to give shelf space to local products. The key with these products often is sampling, or maybe a really savvy social media campaign, Stone said.

"Especially with our local vendors, we really push to get it in people's mouths, as it can be hard to break that barrier of somebody buying something new," he said.

"We talk to our vendors and we work with them on it because we look at it as a partnership," Stone said. "When we bring something in, we're your partner – it's up to both of us to make it successful."

Local products in the center store categories feature tags to alert shoppers. Being in Northern California, Mollie Stone's stores have a strong

showing of locally made options in categories like wine and craft beer.

"The more we can educate the customer, especially about local products, the better, because everybody likes buying local," Stone said.

Expanded education

While he worked at the Starbucks in the mornings while he was attending high school, he worked longer hours during the summer when he was in high school and college. That was when he would be assigned to work in different departments and in different roles to give him a better understanding of the operation as a whole.

While Mike Stone made it clear to Elliott and his brother Aaron that it was their decision whether to join the family business, Elliott said the passion for the business was always there for him.

He majored in business at Arizona State University, taking the opportunity to see a different part of the country as well as attending a respected business school.

After college, he came back to the family business full time, working as a Mollie Stone's store manager for six years.

"One of the best things I did after I learned all the departments was to come back and be a store manager," said Stone, who also is a 2014 graduate of the Food Industry Management Program at USC.

"Working as a store manager taught me so much about the business. You can study the business and grow up in the business, but being embedded in it for a period of time you really learn and see the day-to-day problems and opportunities. There are so many opportunities every day, and that's what's so motivating about this business."

The FIM program was valuable to him with its grocery-focused courses, but also in the relationships that were forged. When he travels to cities where his classmates are, he tries to meet up with them in person. In the meantime, they call each other to chat about what they're seeing in the industry.

Anniversary: CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

Continued out-of-the-box thinking

Among the biggest challenges of the grocery industry is that consumers want and need change, Stone said.

“Our mentality is how can we do better, be different? And we want to continue to do that.”

Mollie Stone’s has grown through acquisition over its four-decade history, resulting in a stable of stores that don’t look the same on the outside. But there is a common denominator.

“One of the most important things that we look at in our stores is how you feel when you get there and how you feel when you leave,” Stone said. “How they feel is extremely important to the overall experience, and then that contributes to people coming back to you.”

“We try to make it different so that the experience that they get, and how they feel with us, far surpasses what they can get and feel in another store. That’s



A colorful living wall creates an oasis in the outdoor seating area at the Sausalito market.

what we’ve really tried to focus on, along with the value-added items and things we do in-house.”

The Greenbrae and Sausalito stores feature verdant living walls in their outdoor seating areas to create an inviting space for customers.

“We’ve really invested a lot into our current stores, making them the best that they can be,” Stone said.

Three of the stores are in the city of San Francisco; two are in Marin; and three are on the peninsula.

Because of how much effort goes into each store, it’s a major decision to add stores and, as a family-owned company, the decision to grow lies in the hands of the Stone family.

“We don’t pressure ourselves that we have to grow,” he said. “It’s quality versus quantity. We’re willing to expand, but we want good stores where there’s an opportunity to maximize our format at a particular location.”

The Bay Area has always been a fairly health-conscious place, with people “more in tune with what they’re putting in their bodies, so there are needs across the Bay Area,” he said.

One project currently under way is related to the Palo Alto store. The property is located along the California Avenue retail corridor that has been closed to car traffic since the beginning of COVID. It has since become a popular outdoor dining space, as well as home to the Palo Alto farmers market, Redco Development said, adding that it’s directly adjacent to the California Avenue Caltrain stop.

“We’re in the design stages now, which is fun,” Stone said.

Future generations

Stone and his wife Lexi, who met on a beach in Cabo on spring break from their respective colleges – he the president of his fraternity, she the president



Mollie Stone’s will sit at street level in this new development in Palo Alto.

of her sorority – have two young children, a son and a daughter that are 4 years and 18 months old.

So it’s a little early to determine if they will want to go into the business, but he does know how he wants to raise them.

“If Lexi and I can replicate how my mom and dad raised Aaron and I, that would be a win for me. Whatever they do, as long as they’re passionate about it, is what we’re going for. If any of our kids, whether Aaron or my kids are interested in the business, we would be really happy about that.”

In the meantime, Stone continues to be passionate about selling groceries and looking out for new opportunities for Mollie Stone’s.

“This business is so dynamic; there’s not a day you wake up that there’s not opportunities to get better.

“Our mentality is to find ways to get better every day.”

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make a great team throughout the organization.”

The company uses National Grocers Association (NGA) training programs alongside on-the-job learning, and Stone emphasized that employees are kept informed about security, safety and company mission.

Technology, trust and the future

Looking ahead, Stone is energized by what technology can do for the business, though he approaches it with the same deliberate, values-led mindset that has guided Mollie Stone’s for 40 years.

“I just think it’s such a great time with so much opportunity to be in this industry,” he said.

From modernized ordering systems to AI tools, Stone sees technology as a means to better operations and better customer experiences, not a trend to chase for its own sake. He draws a distinction between “trusted”



technology platforms and more speculative ones, noting that the right partners matter as much as the right tools.

“It comes down to trust, integrity and value,” he said.

On the question of how fast technology is moving, he said, “When I was in school, it was every 18 months a new iPhone update would come out. Now it’s like every week or month a new update hits ... It has moved more rapidly. But I think it’s an opportunity for us to do better, to run our business for longer and create better experiences for our customers and teammates.”

Growing smart, not just growing

As Mollie Stone’s enters its 41st year, Stone is thoughtful about what growth should look like.

“We hope to continue to build on what has been here and continue to do it together,” he said. “We don’t want to grow just to grow. I think maybe that makes us a little different.”

The company’s position – larger than a single-store operator, but far smaller than a national chain – gives it an agility that Stone sees as a genuine competitive advantage.

“We like to think we’re a speedboat,” he said, describing how the company can take on small batches of emerging products, test them in select stores and pivot quickly if needed. “If it doesn’t work, moves can be made right away.”

While the big chains have advantages in scale and systems, Stone believes Mollie Stone’s edge lies in something harder to replicate.

“We have everything in the grocery industry ... food, people, HR, finance, accounting, real estate, technology and much more. We have all the big components that make running a business fun, and then you get to do it with your family – that’s the dream. I enjoy it and want to pass that passion on to our teams.”

With a growing family of his own, Aaron Stone is keenly aware of what he hopes to pass on someday.

“We hope that one day they want to come to work here,” he said. “But we’ll see. Time will tell if they’ll be interested in it.”