

By: Dees Stribling

Bensidoun brings French style, open-air markets to the U.S.



Bensidoun is bringing a little bit of France to Chicago. Actually, rather a lot of France. So far the Paris-based company has established 11 French-style open-air markets on American soil, most of which are in suburban Chicago, and despite short-term economic disruptions, it has long-term plans to open more markets here.

Currently, Bensidoun's most-ambitious American plans are for a year-round French market at Ogilvie Transportation Center (Northwestern Station) in downtown Chicago. As the retail anchor of the station's MetraMarket redevelopment, the market will occupy about 15,000 square feet, enough room for about 25 vendors selling goods in the market itself, with eight or so more at a kiosk in the station concourse. The ground-breaking was in September, and the market is likely to be up and running this coming summer.

"It's a French market not so much because of specific products, but the style of the market," said Sebastien Bensidoun, president of the Bensidoun U.S. subsidiary. "That's the case with all of our markets in America. There will be some French vendors, such as those selling pastries and bread, but it's the mix of food and nonfood items, sold by individual vendors under canopies unique to markets in France, that will set the tone."

To make sure the tone is right, the company makes all of its own canopies, setting them up wherever they operate a market, whether in France or the U.S.

Not all the vendors at the downtown Chicago market are in place just yet, but the mix will stress meat, fish, cheese and baked goods, as well as prepared meals and probably a few nonfood items.

"There's nothing like it in downtown of Chicago," Bensidoun said. "Which is one reason Mayor Daley, for one, supported it. I believe he was quite intrigued by similar markets he visited in Europe."

Among the other MetraMarket options are CVS, which is opening a 14,000-square-foot drugstore, and Caffe RoM, an Italian coffee bar that will be occupying 2,900 square feet. But Bensidoun's operation promises to be a centerpiece of this 100,000-square-foot redevelopment. At the time of the ground-breaking, Metra Chairwoman Carole Doris said the redevelopment "would provide much-needed shopping and restaurant options for nearby workers and residents, as well as the tens of thousands of Metra commuters that pass through here every day." Indeed, the daily estimate of commuter traffic through Ogilvie is about 105,000.

Back home Bensidoun operates nearly 80 markets, 24 of them in Paris. The varieties include open-air, covered and indoor markets. These markets, municipally owned, typically offer a wider selection than farmers' markets, including crafts and manufactured items. These are not flea markets, however, because the items must be new.

Bensidoun is a family-owned business, headed since 1953 by Sebastien's father, Rolland, whose own father and grandfather in turn ran it before him. "In France you contract with a city to operate a market like ours, sometimes including all the functions associated with it," Sebastien Bensidoun said. "Not only setting up and dealing with vendors, but even in some cases such things as garbage collection. After four generations, we're pretty good at doing everything involved with the markets."

The company also runs a handful of specialized Parisian markets. The products at the 150-vendor Marche de Raspail market on Sundays are EU-certified organic, and the market has been known to attract the likes of French film star Gerard Depardieu and American expatriate Sophia Coppola. "People go to see people there," Sebastien Bensidoun said.

Elsewhere in the French capital, the company operates two antique markets: Les Puces de Vanves (with 350 vendors) and Les Puces de Montreuil (450 vendors), both of which sell furniture, books, objets d'art and the like. The com-

pany has yet to export the organic and antique market concepts to the U.S., but given the time and the right site, it is possible, says Sebastien Bensidoun.

For the moment, these French markets in the U.S. include nine in Illinois — a weekend market and a farmers' market in Wheaton, and weekend markets in suburban Geneva, Glencoe, Lisle, Mokena, Villa Park and Wilmette, plus one weekend market on the North Side of Chicago. The company also has one market each in White Plains, N.Y., and Niles, Mich. The French market in the Chicago suburb of Wheaton is the oldest in the U.S., dating back to 1997.

Sebastien Bensidoun says the original impetus to expand into the U.S. was as much a personal as a business one. "Since I was a small child, I loved America and always told my father I wanted to move here when I grew up," he said. That affinity began during the time he spent undergoing treatment at the Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minn., when he was very young and was fostered by the fact that a great-aunt had emigrated from France and settled in suburban Chicago in the 1950s.

"It was difficult at first, taking two or three selling seasons at Wheaton for the market to really catch on," said Sebastien Bensidoun. "My father suggested that people weren't quite ready for it in those days, and I believe he was right. But in the years since then, Americans' interest in cooking at home with high-quality and fresh ingredients has increased considerably. People also want interesting choices in nonfood items, and we provide that as well."

He says this shift of American tastes will be permanent as the company looks for opportunities outside the Chicago area. "We have our eyes on spots in New York and a few other cities," he said.

For now, on any given weekend day during the warm months, some 3,000 to 4,000 people visit the open-air market in downtown Wheaton to browse a selection of food, clothes, artwork, accessories, makeup, candles, soaps and other items. There are even vendors selling vacuum-cleaner robots and "all-natural holistic pet food." The other Bensidoun USA markets may be smaller than Wheaton's, but they draw respectable crowds too. These customers may be American suburbanites all week long, but they seem not to mind shopping in a French style on the weekend.