

## Charismatic Haight Street Market Family Expanding to the Mission



by [Lauren Sloss](#)

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You can't miss it walking down Haight Street. There, amid the smoke shops, vintage stores, and dreadlocked suburban kids sit cases of festively hued, amply stacked produce — the cases of vegetables that beckon you to come inside the Haight Street Market.

The market, which has held court on Haight Street since 1981, is the kind of family-run business that feels increasingly rare in a city flush with artisan boutiques and shiny, new real estate. But rather than crumple and downsize in the face of new competition, the Vardakastanis family has managed to grow.

Now the Vardakastanises are doubling down and opening their first new store in almost 30 years in the Mission at the corner of 17th and Harrison Streets in the 400 Alabama building late this summer, as [SocketSite first reported](#). In addition to taking on a brand-new market — in one of the hottest neighborhoods in town, no less — they'll be fully rebranding. Haight Street Market and Noriega Produce (which the family opened in 1985) will soon be called Gus's Community Market, named for the founding father, Gus Vardakastanis.

"It's always been about the families and the community in these neighborhoods," says Bobby Vardakastanis, one of Gus's sons, who, in addition to running the existing markets with his brother Dmitri, is spearheading the new project in the Mission. "That's what we want to bring to this new store as well."

The large-scale name change is part of that: he wants anyone who's been to the Haight Street Market and been psyched about the good-looking produce, the organic grocery products, and the delicious deli sandwiches to know that they can expect more of the same at the Vardakastanises' other markets.

"This is something that my brother and I have always wanted to do: build something from scratch," Bobby says. "We want the store to feel like it's a part of the neighborhood right off the bat." Being "a part of the neighborhood" has been one of the distinguishing factors of the Haight Street Market's presence on a street that's seen lots of change over the last three and a half decades.

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The market was opened in 1981 by Gus Vardakastanis and his father Dimitri after the family had immigrated to the US from Greece in the late ’70s.

“They had been farmers back in Greece and came here for a better life,” says Bobby of the family’s move. “They all lived together in one little apartment and worked in groceries and produce stores to save money.”

The Vardakastanises wanted to run their own business, though. And after saving for a few years, they found a space that was available for purchase — 1530 Haight Street.

“Back then, the Haight wasn’t the greatest neighborhood,” Bobby says. “Of course, it’s evolved. And the store had to evolve with it.”

Part of that evolution centered around the kinds of food and produce they were selling.

“Our customers, a lot of whom live in the neighborhood, started paying more attention to the products that were in the store. They were interested in whether or not they were non-GMO and whether or not they were local,” Bobby says. “People started really caring about where their food came from. We’d always had the ‘natural products,’ but we were never educated on it.”

So, he says, they got educated. Gus began purchasing more and more organic produce.

“It was so expensive!” says Bobby. “But people were responding to it.”

Gus took over the business in the mid-’90s when his father passed away. Bobby and Dimitri got increasingly involved in the business too.

“We also liked the stores and had always worked there as kids. We’d mop floors and stock shelves, and we worked our way up. When I was 21 or 22, I started working here full-time.”

Their focus on organic products grew, and their customer base remained steady. Then, in 2009, the market faced its biggest competition yet — the arrival of a massive Whole Foods Market just blocks away at Haight and Stanyan Streets. Instead of preparing for a major hit, the brothers decided to expand. They acquired the building next door and doubled the market in size, adding a full-service deli counter, prepared foods, and a butcher counter.

“Sure, it was competition. But competition makes you a better businessperson. So Whole Foods was coming. We thought, ‘What are we gonna do to counter this?’”

Same as they did with the influx of organic products: give the people what they wanted. Bobby believed that the neighborhood was in need of a full-service meat counter and deli, one stocked with similarly high-quality products (they currently have Mary’s Free Range Chicken, Marin Sun Farms meat, and fresh seafood on offer). But most importantly, they wanted to expand while maintaining the feel of a small community place — not a big-box store.

It’s a vibe you can’t miss when you go to the market now. Come lunch time, the deli counter is crowded with regulars greeting employees behind the cashiers by name; Haight Street tourists who have wandered in for a Golden Gate Park picnic lunch; and people like me who come back to the neighborhood to order a Gus’s Special (turkey, avocado, and provolone, and named after the man himself) and enjoy it in the sun while sitting at the well-appointed parklet right across from the produce bins.

The Mission market will be more of the same, Bobby says, but bigger. The additional space will allow them to offer more products and play with additions like a salad bar and a self-service hot-food buffet. They’ll have parking available too.

As they ramp up to open in late August, the family will begin rebranding efforts on Haight Street and at Noriega Produce. The mural reading “Haight Street Market” will remain, Bobby assures me, but the awning, bags, and labeling will all bear the name “Gus’s Community Market.”

“A lot of our regulars are already calling us ‘Gus’s.’ Our best-selling sandwich is the Gus Special!” he says of the switch. “My dad wasn’t happy about it at the beginning, but he likes it now. I was like, ‘Dude. It’s not an option. You built this. You worked your ass off for it. Let us pay tribute.’”

*Got a tip for The Bold Italic? Email [tips@thebolditalic.com](mailto:tips@thebolditalic.com).*

*[h/t/ [Socketsite](#), image courtesy of the Haight Street Market]*