

Choices shows healthy growth as it opens its seventh market



MALCOLM PARRY
VANCOUVER SUN
TRADE TALK

MARK VICKARS, the Choices Markets CEO, will crank the hoopla handle this weekend when he opens the Delta-based chain's seventh store. It'll be in Cariboo Heights on the Burnaby-New Westminster boundary.

There'll be pancake breakfasts, barbecue lunches and deals on the organic and natural foods the chain's founding brothers, **Lloyd and Wayne Lockhart**, began selling in 1990. Partner **Salim Ahmed** joined soon after. Vickars, who managed the original 16th Avenue-off-Trafalgar Choices in 1993, parlayed "sweat equity" into a 10-per-cent partnership.

Given the chain's ethos, funds will also be solicited this weekend for Choices employees to enhance wildlife habitat on the nearby Brunette River.

At 12,000 square feet, the latest outlet isn't big. Nor is it new. Members of the Digos family have operated the store since soon after its 1975 opening, and will continue to work there under Choices ownership.

Still, the Choices store near the Edmonds SkyTrain station is a mere 5,000 square feet. Even the 300-employee chain's largest, in Surrey-White Rock, scales out at 20,000 square feet — and handles 15 per cent of the chain's \$35-million yearly sales.

Choices' seven-to-10-per-cent yearly growth may look out of whack with overall natural-food gains of twice that. But Vickars suggests a grain of salt — natural sea salt, no doubt — be taken. "The pipeline isn't full yet," he said, meaning large supermarkets haven't fully met public demand for natural foods. As for outfits like his that opened that market niche, "We do feel a bit like the canary in the mine shaft," Vickars said.

A healthy canary, apparently. A wholesale division serves the seven outlets, and sends 20 per cent of its output to other stores and produce departments. A commercial kitchen is solely in-house. But a physically separated, 1,200-square-foot rice bakery for non-gluten products "has an opportunity to grow," Vickars said.

A hot growth segment, though, isn't food at all. It's body washes, shampoos and cosmetics, sales of which are increasing by up to 15 per cent annually. The buyers? "Baby boomers, who are getting older and want to look after themselves," said Vickars, 47.

Even in the organic-natural foods game, though, it's dog eat dog. Witness Whole Foods Market acquiring Wild Oats Markets (Capers, etc.) for \$700 million US last month. Far from such big-time doings, Vickars said he's "impressed" by Stongs president **Cori Bonina** having steered that 76-year-old operation "back to being truly a neighbourhood store."

And modern enough, let's note, for a one-outlet operation to generate close to \$20,000 worth of its weekly sales from online customers.

VERN BETHEL'S False Creek Automotive firm keeps hundreds of classic cars looking and running like new. But you can't say the same for his First Avenue-off-Wylie Street shop, which became a cloud of brick dust recently to make way for Olympic Village development.

The last vehicle out — by the skin of its brilliant-red paint job — was former city mayor **Philip Owen's** 1939 Chrysler New Yorker sedan, which cost \$1,500 new when Owen was six and may be worth \$60,000 today.

It should run like new, too. **Bill Lavigne's** Kingsway shop remanufactured the straight-eight engine with parts sourced from all over North America. Owen said it'll easily maintain highway speeds en route to the Okanagan. He'll motor there after 500 miles of "run-



Live On Arrival band members Matt, Len, Robb, Kyle and Sonny with spike-haired RockSTAR Music VP Adam Hurstfield who has them hit-bound.



Philip Owen drove his 1939 Chrysler New Yorker out of Vern Bethel's False Creek Automotive shop just as bulldozers drove in.



Choices Markets CEO Mark Vickars will open the chain's seventh outlet in Cariboo Heights Saturday.

ning in" a reborn baby that hitherto belonged to auto dealer **Joe Mitchell**. Bethel's recent trip was shorter. He's in the Apollo Muffler shop across the alley.

BUSINESS LUNCH: Michael Hektoen and Adam Hurstfield, the RockSTAR Music Corp principals, had the \$13 beefburger and \$12 Marinade Benny (with seared tuna, ginger-lime hollandaise and sticky rice cake) at the Marinaside-off-Davie Bardot bar and grille.

That's the joint that used to hold raffish parties when it was called The Quay and was owned by Bodog internet-gaming mogul **Calvin Ayrs**.

Hektoen and Hurstfield reprised that era last weekend, when they spent well into six figures flying in radio-station program directors to meet and hear their newest act, the Winnipeg-based Live On Arrival band, while partying and staying at top hotels.

Unlike Ayrs' crowd, though, the RockSTAR principals weren't gam-

bling. That's because they've developed a system the radio folk like. They write and record hit songs, they keep everybody in the loop informed weekly, and they do everything at double speed.

Before visitors were back at their stations, RockSTAR president-CEO Hektoen had circulated over 5,000 global e-mails detailing the weekend's doings. He reminded recipients that the band's *Ready Set Go* is the number-nine Canadian-content single on the Top 40 chart, and that its June-releasing album was produced by RockSTAR and the city-based Bananatons and SA Transworks firms.

"Everybody sends stuff to the record companies, saying they have the next hit," Hurstfield said. "But we prove it." Referring to charted artists like Marika, Bianca and Sy'rai, he said: "We develop them."

Now the two are redeveloping **Mike Reno** and the **Loverboy** band. Those generational rockers, still tour at least 100 cities annually, "and make more money than they ever did," Hurstfield said.

Loverboy was also the surprise closing act when it sang the April-releasing single, *The One That Got Away*, at Live On Arrival's concert Saturday. (The latter group was named after its lead singer Robb "flat-lined" after a highway accident and then regained his vital signs.)

But Hektoen and Hurstfield aren't flogging a dead band with Loverboy. Reno's red-leather pants are history, true. Ditto the old arrangements. But five songs are already waxed for a new album, 15 more are vying for inclusion, and others are being written to challenge those.

Still, "the difference between a good song and a hit song is marketing," said Hurstfield, who had Hektoen manage his own mid-1990s performing career — as Adam H — in Central America.

Not that they've completely deep-sixed Loverboy's old hits. They'll re-arrange and re-record them, pre-market a tour with interactive programming, issue a limited edition of autographed CDs, and hold VIP receptions, etc.

Why re-record? From the old hits, "[Loverboy] gets only five to eight cents a download," Hektoen said. "They'll make 35 to 40 cents per song per download with the new ones."

As for bigger coin, RockSTAR, like major record companies, has been named a direct digital download partner of Apple Inc's iTunes division, meaning it can carry product for any other companies. Hektoen said the firm is also readying to spin off its own digital division, with plans for a \$10-million US public offering via the NASDAQ or AIM exchange.

But the firm's style of producing records in record time won't change, Hurstfield said. "We're one-stop shopping. We don't have to have board meetings for nine months. We can do it all on the phone."

"At three in the morning," Hektoen added.

CONSULTITIS: Swedish consul **Anders Neumuller** officiated when Design S, a continuing exhibition of works by his nation's industrial and other designers, opened at the Pendulum gallery in the HSBC Bank building's atrium at Georgia and Hornby Street recently. . . . China's **Yang Qiang** was one of many diplomatic-corp members at a 50-year commemoration of the Treaties of Rome signing hosted by German consul-general **Hans-Michael Schwandt**. He pooh-poohed notions that the resultant European Union's Brussels-based administration — with 20,000 bureaucrats serving a population of a half-billion — is top heavy. . . . Britain's rugby-playing consul-general, **Martin Cronin**, aided his nation's export drive by providing plenty of Boddington's Pub Ale and Old Speckled Hen beer for scrumming EU celebrants. . . . Also providing pints this week, U.S. consul-general **Lewis Lukens** and a dozen staffers donated their American blood to the Canadian Blood Services agency.

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Film school spotlights surge in scholarships

Recruiters are busy touring Western Canada to find the right stuff

BY MARKE ANDREWS
VANCOUVER SUN

Vancouver Film School has \$200,000 in scholarships — twice the amount it had last year — available for students from Western Canada.

School recruiters are currently on the B.C. leg of their search for eager, talented students. They saw 23 potential students in Prince George Tuesday, 45 in Kelowna Wednesday, and will visit Victoria today and Vancouver Friday. They then travel to Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary and Edmonton for sessions in early April.

Scholarships range from \$1,000 to \$10,000, based on three criteria.

"We have a points system that's based on talent, need and passion," says Benjamin Colling, VFS's director of admissions. "The talent portion is what they can show us in their portfolio. Need is their own personal financial condition. Passion is what they write in their application, what their references say, how they convey their desire to come here."

Last year, the school offered Western Canadian students \$100,000 in scholarships, with another \$100,000 going to students east of Manitoba. The scholarship money comes from the school's owners as well as from corporations.

Electronic Arts, for instance, usually donates \$25,000 toward the school's scholarship program.

The school has toured the country in what it calls "the roadshow" for the past decade, but this is just the second year VFS has attached scholarship applications to the roadshow.

"There are just so many talented kids in Western Canada, but tuition is expensive for some families, and we want to give the opportunity for every family to be able to come to Vancouver Film School," says Colling. "If we can help them financially, that's what we'll do."

VFS tuition is pricey, ranging from a low of \$8,750 for a four-month acting essentials course to \$49,750 for a one-year course in 3D animation and visual effects.

Last year, four members of a Nanaimo family received \$20,000 in scholarships, and all began attending VFS in August. Marie-Claire Conroy took a writing course, her son Denis studied acting and daughters Angie Lee and Cherie took the visual art and design program.

Colling says decisions on the scholarship winners will be made by April 15.

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Disaster project funds granted

Four B.C. organizations will receive a share of \$600,000 to improve their work in disaster and emergency management.

Vancouver's GEOSYS Technology Solutions, Universal Wing Technologies, the Provincial Emergency Program and B.C. Base Mapping Services will share the funding with partners in Alberta and Manitoba.

Ottawa-based Precarn Incorporated — a not-for-profit group focusing on communications technology — awarded \$300,000 for the project. The partners will match that for a total \$600,000.

The project includes developing an unmanned vehicle that can take images of a disaster site and instantly transmit that information to authorities.

Vancouver Sun

Vancouver world's third-costliest city for executives: study

Only those in London, New York pay more for central-area housing

BY ERIC BEAUCHESNE

OTTAWA — Executive homes near downtown Vancouver are the third-costliest in the world, a survey of 31 cities has found.

Vancouver ranked third in price, behind London and New York, followed by Calgary which ranked seventh, Toronto ninth, Ottawa 13th, Montreal 19th, and Halifax 20th.

The Century 21 survey com-

pared 15 cities in Canada with 16 cities around the world in terms of prices and commuting times to their downtown core.

It found that the 10 most expensive housing markets for executive home buyers working in the downtown business districts are London, at \$5.68 million; New York \$2.5 million; Vancouver \$1.55 million; Sydney \$1.4 million; Paris \$1.39 million; Seoul \$1.25 million; Calgary \$1.2 million; Nicosia in Cyprus \$1 million; Toronto \$890,000; and Victoria \$850,000.

"Whether executive house prices are at the high or low end of the range, in Canada or else-

where in the world, depends on the current state of the local economies — and our survey reflects that Vancouver and Calgary are booming whether you compare them to cities in the rest of Canada or to cities around the world," said Don Lawby, president of Century 21 Canada.

The 10 least expensive markets for executive homes are in Moncton, N.B., \$249,900; Singapore, \$304,135; London, Ont., \$325,000; Bogota, Colombia, \$368,852; St. John's, N.L., \$379,000; Charlotte, N.C., \$379,000; Saskatoon, \$429,000; Winnipeg, \$450,000; Istanbul, \$471,927; and Edmon-

ton, \$489,900.

"Another way to view the survey results and to provide another observation into the lifestyle of executives around the world is to compare the price to the size of the home," Lawby said.

"This shows that markets where homes are traditionally smaller — such as Taipei and Tokyo — move toward the top of the list, while Toronto, Victoria and others fall from the top 10."

Based on the price per square foot, the 10 most expensive housing markets in the world for executive homes are London, England \$3,156; Paris \$1,163; Seoul \$1,097; Calgary \$800; Sydney

\$722; Taipei, \$613; Vancouver \$574; Athens \$491; New York \$480; and Tokyo \$385.

Meanwhile, commuting times from typical executive homes in Canadian cities to the downtown also compare favourably, ranging from a 45-minute drive in Toronto to 15 minutes in Winnipeg. Commuting times for other cities were 40 minutes in Montreal, 30 minutes in Vancouver, 25 minutes in Calgary, and 30 minutes in Halifax.

In New York, a commute from a typical executive home would be 45 minutes, London 30 minutes, Paris 30 minutes, Sydney 15 minutes, Tokyo 45 minutes, and

Seoul, 30 minutes.

Executives working downtown in Canada's regional hub cities, such as Halifax, Winnipeg and Saskatoon, face house prices and daily commute times that rank with the world's least expensive capital cities such as Moscow, Singapore and Istanbul, the study concluded.

In between are Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Quebec City and Victoria, where executives working downtown typically pay house prices and have daily commute times that compare with Tokyo, Taipei and Mexico City, it said.

CanWest News Service