

Here Are the Cleanest Grocery Stores in America

Is your local supermarket one of them?

By Tobie Stanger
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Nothing is as big a turn-off as a dingy grocery with stained floors, free-floating crumbs, and sticky puddles underfoot. It's enough to make you abandon your cart and run.

So it's no surprise that if there's one feature that the best supermarkets and groceries in the U.S. share, it's cleanliness: bright lighting, shiny floors, gleaming glass and counters, and well-tended displays.

Cleanliness, in fact, is a common element among all of the top-rated groceries in Consumer Reports' recent nationwide member survey of grocery stores, supermarkets, and warehouse clubs.

The six grocers that landed in our top rating tier for overall satisfaction got high marks for cleanliness. They include regional brands Texas-based Central Market; the mid-Atlantic's Wegmans; Heinen's, in Ohio and the Chicago area; Southern California-based Gelson's Markets; and the Northeast's Market Basket—as well as Trader Joe's, our highest-rated national chain.

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Supermarkets That Gleam

"Cleanliness has a large impact on your overall opinion of your grocery store, our results show," says Jane Manweiler, a CR survey research associate.

In addition to those top six stores, 17 markets that placed high—but not tops—in our ratings nonetheless excelled for cleanliness. In ratings order, they are:

- New Seasons Market
- Publix
- Military Commissary
- The Fresh Market
- Festival Foods (Wi.)

- Dierbergs
- Lunds & Bylerlys
- Fresh Thyme Farmers Market
- Natural Grocers
- Reasor's
- Raley's
- Lowes Foods (NC, SC, VA)
- Hy-Vee
- Haggen Northwest Fresh
- Lidl
- Roche Bros.
- Brookshire's

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Stores placing among the lowest overall in our ratings—including the national brand Walmart Supercenter and Eastern retailers Tops and Key Food—had disappointing orange chevrons for cleanliness, suggesting that CR members found them lacking on that count.

Ohio-based Marc's, a discount drugstore and grocery chain, also got an orange chevron for cleanliness—the second-to-lowest score. But it rated middling overall, perhaps due to its superior pricing. (In that category, the store received a dark green chevron, the highest available score.)

To arrive at these results (and more), CR researchers collected survey responses from more than 75,000 Consumer Reports members, who rated the one or two supermarkets they go to most often. In all, our members reported on more than 140,000 visits to grocers, which enabled CR to rate 96 groceries nationwide.

How to Make a Sparkling Impression

What does it take to make a grocery seem—and be—spotless? Executives for the Cleaning Services Group (CSG), a janitorial and building services contractor in Danvers, Mass., for hospitals, supermarkets, and other retailers, recently gave Consumer Reports its take on what qualities convince consumers that a supermarket is clean. They include:

- **Spotless entries.** Stores that value cleanliness put effort into keeping the sidewalks outside their venues free of coffee stains, cigarette butts, gum residue, and other signs of grit. "They regularly power wash their sidewalks, and once a week remove all the carts in front and clean there, too," says Rick Sturgis, CSG's chief marketing officer. "When you see papers everywhere in the vestibule, that makes a bad impression."
- **Hand sanitizers.** In the vestibule, in the poultry section, and in other germ-prone areas, the presence of these dispensers reflects concern for cleanliness, says Lauren Grant, CSG's vice president of business development. "You want those wipes for your cart handles," she notes. "I look for that when I walk in."

(Consumer Reports says hand sanitizers that are at least 60 percent alcohol are appropriate when soap and water isn't available.)

- **Gleaming floors.** Polished concrete in its natural, light gray color is replacing floors colored tan and brown to look like distressed leather, says Dennis O'Brien, CSG's chief executive officer. "That was popular about 10 years ago," he says. "Eventually, the coloring started to come out, and it looked messy."

Good retailers wash and buff their floors daily, O'Brien adds.

- **Restrooms.** Walking through a smelly stockroom to reach a scary, dark, one-stall room is increasingly rare. In newer stores, you'll find restrooms by the entrance and also near the fresh-prepared food dining area. Newer designs have bright lighting, multiple stalls, air fresheners, and better accessibility –and never run out of toilet paper, Sturgis says. "They should be inspected several times an hour."

- **Quick spill cleanup.** Porters responsible for spotting and mopping up messes should be roaming the store regularly, O'Brien says. Ideally, he adds, they'll have equipment with an extractor on it that sucks everything up right away and prevents stains from penetrating the floor finish.

"The ones at the top of your list, they have porters all day long," O'Brien notes. "That makes all the difference."