



The H-E-B Kosher Store's meat case offers a variety of fresh-cut selections, which were unavailable before the store's opening. The store employs two mashgiachim — one during the day and another at night — who supervise.



# H-E-B Kosher Store

## A decade of service to Austin Jewish community

By Tonya Cone

Special to The Jewish Outlook

Today Austin's Jewish community enjoys the flavors and variety of selections at the H-E-B Kosher Store. But before its opening a decade ago, it was another story.

When Tracy Cross, the “store within a store’s” founder and manager, moved to Austin from Los Angeles and started a deli and catering business here, he noticed some things about the city’s kosher community, like the fact that they got their meat through co-ops that periodically ordered pallets of frozen chicken.

### H-E-B Kosher Store

**Address:** 7025 Village Center Drive,

**Telephone:** 502-8459

**Hours:** 8 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Friday

After Cross and his wife’s first child was born seven months after moving here, his mother relocated to the city, and the challenges that came with following kashrut here became obvious to him.

Cross’ mother follows the Jewish food laws closely, and it was difficult for her to find kosher foods in Austin.

Andres Guariguata, a psychologist with Austin-Travis County Mental Health Mental Retardation who today shops at the Kosher Store, recalled that before its opening he belonged to a kosher club that ordered steaks from Los Angeles. “It was not the color of meat,” he said. “There were no options; everything was frozen.”

Before the H-E-B Kosher Store opened, one of the store’s two kosher supervisors, or mashgiachim, was vegetarian so he could adhere to kashrut laws. “For every celebration, the meal has to have bread, wine, fish and meat, Ephraim “Frank” Brock said. “We had missed a very important part of Shabbos.”

Later, Cross lost the lease on his deli and began working for Central Market, which is owned by H-E-B. Within two months, he made an impression on management with a sandwich program he developed there. Also, he had



Tracy Cross (photo above), the founder and manager of the H-E-B Kosher Store, a uniquely conceived ‘store within a store’ that opened a decade ago, in November 1997.

The deli of the H-E-B Kosher Store serves New York-style sandwiches, piled high with meat and vegetables, made to order.

connections with rabbis and the Jewish community, and, based on their input and his own observations, knew there was a demand for kosher food in Austin.

In 1997, Cross transferred to the H-E-B grocery store at 7015 Village Center Drive, off Far West Boulevard. He explained to the store’s management that no one was serving the kosher population, telling of the lengths to which the community had to go to eat meat according to kashrut. He also demonstrated, through use of massive Passover food displays, that demand exists for kosher food in Austin.

H-E-B management became enthusiastic about pursuing Cross’ design for a kosher store.

Cross underwent intense training and research with

Rabbi Yosef Levertov of the Chabad Center for Jewish Learning and the Chabad House to learn how to operate a kosher kitchen. The team visited Rubashkin’s kosher meat plant in Postville, Iowa, and negotiated a unique agreement between H-E-B and the meat company to keep the kosher meat prices as low as possible. Finally, Cross found a mashgiach, or kashrut supervisor, so that the store could offer fresh-cut meat.

With key managers Roxanne Orsak and Bobby Callison and an open-minded board of directors immediately backing the idea, the H-E-B Kosher Store opened only months later, in November 1997.

“When you get support, it makes your job much easier.”

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## Keeping kosher, Randalls bakery serves up bread, sweet treats

By **Tonyia Cone**

Special to The Jewish Outlook

For those who keep kosher and have a sweet tooth, Randalls grocery store at Balcones and Ranch Road 2222 is the place to go.

The store's Kosher Bakery makes all its pareve and dairy goods from scratch, featuring a range of products from crême cakes, breads, strudels and mouthwatering chewy chocolate cookies to specialty items such as birthday cakes and bakery trays.

Randalls is continually expanding the baked goods it offers and simplifying its kosher labeling system, and corporate accounts are offered. Also, the kosher bakery will be "torched" to provide goods that are kosher for Passover.

While all Randalls bakeries use only kosher ingredients, all are not overseen by a mashgiach, or kashrut supervisor, which certifies a food provider as kosher. Rabbi Yosef Levertov of the Chabad Center for



**Randalls Kosher Bakery offers a various products, including crême cakes, breads, strudels and chocolate cookies as well as specialty items such as birthday cakes and bakery trays. To ensure Jewish dietary laws are followed, Rabbi Yosef Levertov oversees the bakery.**

Jewish Living and Chabad House, however, oversees the Randalls Kosher Bakery at 5311 Balcones.

Yoel Kluk, specialty food merchandiser for Safeway, the company that owns Randalls, explained that the company has at least one kosher bakery in every city it serves, including Austin, Dallas, Fort

Worth and Houston, and offers some kosher products in every store.

National companies are spending time and effort to certify more of their products as kosher, Kluk said, due to increasing demand for kosher food by health-conscious consumers who perceive kosher food as healthier. Safeway offers more private-

### Randalls Kosher Bakery

**Address:** 5311 Balcones Drive

**Telephone:** 302-2500

**Hours:** Kosher bakery is staffed 6 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. The store is open, and bakery items are available on a self-serve basis, until midnight daily.



label kosher-certified products than other grocery chains, Kluk said.

"Randalls has a strong commitment to serving different communities," Kluk said.

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*Tonyia Cone is an Austin-based freelance journalist. Contact her at tonyia76@gmail.com.*

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er," Cross said. "I have so much respect for H-E-B. They saw a need and wanted to do this because they knew it was the right thing to do for the Jewish people."

Cross chose to work under Rabbi Levertov's oversight because he wanted to adhere to the strictest kosher law requirements.

Levertov said that while others who follow kashrut laws allow exceptions for food such as vegetables, he does not. Kosher laws regarding things like the sharpness and condition of the knife used for meat are so specific, he said, a religious person must supervise every kosher kitchen or restaurant.

To be certified as kosher, the H-E-B Kosher Store employs Brock, the daytime mashgiach, and Lindon Coates, the nighttime mashgiach. For the store to be considered kosher, one of them must be on the premises at all times when the area with the meat is open.

During its first decade, the Kosher Store has been overwhelmingly successful.

Cross increases his inventory by 10-15 percent annu-

ally for Passover alone, and the store sells out its stock every year. People come from up to 800 miles away to visit the store.

Based in San Antonio, H-E-B is known by those in the industry for its unique setup of the "store within a store" and the wide variety of kosher food offered. Cross stocks shelves with brands preferred by those from the East and West coasts and orders more than 500 cases of wine for Passover, the largest variety anywhere in the nation outside New York. Yeshiva students from Brooklyn have told Levertov that the Kosher Store's selection is greater than what they have seen back home. The store also features various kinds of challah and other baked goods, prepared in its pareve oven.

#### BAKED GOODS

"I challenge anyone in baking to do what Elenor Lagunas does with that oven," Cross said.

Last Rosh Hashanah, Lagunas baked more than 1,000 challah. Since January, she said, demand has continued nonstop for the store's baked goods. But she finds joy in providing people with things that are important when

celebrating events such as birthdays, like cookies and cupcakes.

Another major draw to the Kosher Store is its fresh-cut meat and deli. Many non-Jewish people are drawn to the store's organic meat because of its high quality. Also, due to the store's following Jewish food law requirements, the risk of problems like E. coli is eliminated.

The Kosher Store staff is also responsive to individual requests.

"I can't turn away a customer," Cross said. "We're the only ones who can produce a (kosher) deli tray. Here, we're it, so we have to shift and get it done."

Even grilled meat and the New York-style sandwiches, piled high with meat and vegetables, at the deli are made to order with an eye for detail and value, he added.

Guariguata, who enjoys the Kosher Store deli several times a month, said, "He'll do what he can to serve you if it is feasible and affordable."

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*Tonyia Cone is an Austin-based freelance journalist. Contact her at tonyia76@gmail.com or visit the Web site www.tonyiacone.com.*

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