

Los Angeles Times

FRONT PAGE

Can Brentwood Country Mart re-create its success?

The kitschy, barn-themed landmark has been around since 1948. Now landlord and developer James Rosenfield plans to take its down-home yet upscale sensibility to Malibu, Montecito and Marin County



"I like old things," says developer James Rosenfield, who frequented the Brentwood Country Mart as a teenager. Owning the center became his "ultimate dream"; he acquired it in a \$30-million deal in 2003. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

BY ROGER VINCENT

With its picnic tables, overfed pigeons and fast-food stands, the kitschy barn-themed shopping center looks like a throwback from an era before air-conditioned malls took over the retail world. There are no department stores and no glittering retail names like Tiffany or Chanel.

Built to woo shoppers in a more rural Brentwood neighborhood after World War II, the red wooden structures evoke a country marketplace with stores and stalls that ramble around a courtyard. Along narrow walkways, doors open horse-stall style, offering views inside the smudged shoe repair stand, tiny post office and other shops.

But make no mistake, the Brentwood Country Mart is filet mignon masquerading as meatloaf. A posh Beverly Hills restaurant runs the humble-looking taco stand. Wealthy locals and a sprinkling of celebrities come here to hang out, maybe

get a haircut or shop at 20-odd stores that sell merchandise such as mouth-blown Italian vases and hand-painted furniture.

Gregory Peck sometimes rode his horse to the mart. Joan Crawford and Robert Mitchum shopped there. Nowadays, Reese Witherspoon, Tom Hanks and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger have been known to drop by.

The Country Mart has been around since 1948, but its latest owner has obsessively tinkered with the small center, traveling across the U.S. and to other countries searching for shopkeepers and restaurateurs that he thinks would hit just the right note in Brentwood.

Now landlord and developer James S. Rosenfield is getting ready to take his country mart concept on the road and see whether he can duplicate his success in other cities. He has agreed to open centers in Malibu, Montecito and Marin County.

The Brentwood Country Mart's appeal lies in its intimate scale and outward lack of pretension. For much of the day it is a haven for stylish moms who visit with friends while their children nosh and squirm. Families cluster around a fire pit eating chicken, burritos and hamburgers. Office workers drop by to lunch at Reddi Chick, the oldest tenant by far, whose roasting birds scent the air. As evening approaches, teens wearing private school uniforms meet up with their parents.

Tracey Brody and her preschool daughter, Sunny, are here almost every day.

"My daughter has been saying 'country mart' since she could speak," Brody said as she sat at a picnic table, keeping an eye on Sunny. Brody has been coming to the mart to shop, dine and relax since high school, and her husband once worked there selling juice.

"I like doing everything here," she said. "Everybody is really kid-friendly. It's not like going to the mall."

Another part of the Brentwood center's appeal is its authenticity as a 60-year-old landmark that has served generations. Whether Rosenfield can re-create the mart's ambience elsewhere remains to be seen. An expensive new country mart runs the danger of appearing slick and contrived.

"What works at Brentwood Country Mart is that it feels organic," said developer Rick Caruso, who built the Grove shopping center, which, though criticized by some as slick and contrived, is undeniably popular. "It's eclectic and has a sense of community."

Both centers take inspiration from the historic Farmers Market at 3rd Street and Fairfax Avenue next to the Grove. Rosenfield said he was instantly fond of the Farmers Market as a child and fell for the Country Mart a little later.

As a teenager in Sherman Oaks, Rosenfield took the bus with friends to the beach in the summer. If the weather was overcast, they would ride to the Country Mart to buy baskets of chicken at Reddi Chick and hang out. He met his first girlfriend at the mart.

"I thought it was a magical place filled with joy," Rosenfield said, "like this was the right side of the tracks."

Owning the Country Mart became his "ultimate dream," he said. After earning a political science degree at UC Berkeley and working briefly for the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), Rosenfield decided he wanted to learn the real estate business. He ended up working for retail developer Steve Soboroff, helping Sears, Roebuck & Co. find store locations.

Later, Rosenfield developed retail centers for a large shopping center company and eventually became a landlord, buying a storefront on Montana Avenue in Santa Monica. He also bought and restored the Aero Theatre, a Depression-era movie house in Santa Monica now operated by American Cinematheque.

At 47, Rosenfield is without the swagger that some developers display. He dresses casually and drives a 1971 Mercedes-Benz coupe that's showing its age. "I like old things," he said.

In early 2003, Rosenfield put together a \$30-million deal to acquire the Brentwood Country Mart. The 30,000-square-foot center was nearly half-empty, having lost its food market, post office and candy store, among other businesses.

Rosenfield set out to refill the mart with a combination of neighborhood services, including another post office, and rare upper-tier retailers that he thought had the right vibe for Brentwood. There's a homey eclecticism to the place. You can buy a tiny parka for a child, a high-design toothbrush, wrapping paper, a man's valise, books, towels, chocolate or a motor scooter.

By keeping conveniences such as a barbershop, Rosenfield gave up the rental income he could have demanded from more elite tenants.

"It takes a lot of discipline to keep that mix," said Rosenfield, who subsidizes the contract post office. "I have to resist greed."

The mart is compact; modern zoning codes probably wouldn't permit such tight quarters to be built again. Most of the stores are small by current retail standards and configured in odd sizes. But Rosenfield asks for some of the top rents on the Westside, at up to \$5 a square foot a month compared with the \$2 range retail landlords get in the Wilshire-Bundy district, said real estate broker Orbell Ovaness of National Equity Advisors Inc.

"It's Brentwood Park," Ovaness said of the mart's neighborhood. "The elite of the elite."

Not all of Rosenfield's moves at the Mart were successful. A New York-based bakery and restaurant failed to take off, and a children's clothing store from Seattle declined to renew its lease.

Rosenfield, however, is in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose stores -- he says he has dozens of businesses waiting for empty spaces. Backed by investors such as billionaire Charles T. Munger and John Bucksbaum, the chairman of massive mall chain owner General Growth Properties Inc., Rosenfield is able to wait years to land someone he really wants.

"Jim knows how to merchandise a property," said Herb Simon, former chairman of Simon Property Group Inc., one of the world's largest mall operators. "He finds unique tenants that are one of a kind or very small chains that most developers don't have the time to do."

Rosenfield pitched the merits of the Country Mart to the nanny of a businesswoman in the Bahamas whom he was hoping to lure to Southern California. He eventually succeeded in bringing her Calypso clothing store to the mart.

His latest coup is an ice cream parlor to be operated by Zoe Nathan and Josh Loeb, who opened the popular Huckleberry bakery this year in Santa Monica. The pair plan to make small batches of ice cream daily starting in January. Both restaurateurs grew up on the Westside, said Loeb, who has a nostalgic connection to the Brentwood center. "I must've gone to Reddi Chick 5,000 times," he said.

It will take all of Rosenfield's persistence to re-create country marts in other prosperous communities, where competition is well entrenched. But it can be done, he insists. After all, the beloved Brentwood center was just another calculated commercial venture in the late 1940s.

What made it work and can be duplicated is its human scale, Rosenfield said. Keep it cozy, with a fire pit and picnic tables that invite strangers to sit together under umbrellas. Awnings and planter boxes were used to soften the edges when the Country Mart was new, and they still have that effect today.

"People have a strong preference for independently owned and operated shops, exceptionally good food and services like shoe repair," Rosenfield said. "Those are things in my mind that define a country mart."