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## BUSINESS

### Buyout sows change for Wild Oats

No comment yet, but 2 local stores may be revamped

By **Christie Smythe**

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Organic food aficionados, hold your breath.

On Wednesday, Austin, Texas-based natural-food retailer Whole Foods Market announced plans to acquire Boulder, Colo.-based Wild Oats Markets, which has two stores in the Tucson area. But a spokeswoman for Whole Foods declined to say on Thursday whether the local Wild Oats stores would be converted to the Whole Foods brand.

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In an e-mail, Whole Foods spokeswoman Kate Lowery said it was "too soon to know any details" and would not provide further comment. According to a company news release issued Wednesday, Whole Foods may close or relocate former Wild Oats stores in some markets, but the company eventually plans to change its soon-to-be-acquired stores to Whole Foods after making substantial renovations.

Mark Lilien, a consultant with the Stamford, Conn.-based Retail Technology Group, said it would be "completely insane" for Whole Foods not to convert Wild Oats

stores.

"Whole Foods runs better stores," he said, adding that Whole Foods has "a higher level of quality for the price" than Wild Oats.

"American people vote at the cash register," he said.

Ben Kuzma, general manager of the Food Conspiracy Co-op, an organic-food seller at 412 N. Fourth Ave., said he would look forward to seeing Wild Oats stores changed to Whole Foods — even though he expects that would make the organic-food market in Tucson more competitive. Although he does most of his grocery shopping at the co-op, he likes visiting Whole Foods locations in the Phoenix area.

"It's more of a fun place to shop," he said, comparing it to offbeat California-based grocer Trader Joe's.

Whole Foods has stores in Paradise Valley and Tempe, and it has plans for new locations in Tempe, Chandler and Scottsdale, according to the company's Web site.

Wild Oats operates 110 stores throughout North America under the names Wild Oats Marketplace, Henry's Farmers Market in California, Sun Harvest in Texas and Capers Community Market in British Columbia, according to a company news release. Whole Foods Market has 193 locations in North America and the United Kingdom, according to the company Web site.

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