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Giuliani leaves honest grocers holding the bag

LUIS SALCEDO, the proprietor of a Bravo supermarket in the heart of Harlem, will spend his Thanksgiving steamed hotter than the turkey in his oven.

I mean, he's boiling, mad, resentful. Most of all, he's hurt.

"How could Mayor Giuliani do this to us — the mayor we voted for and support?" he cried out.

Salcedo and others like him in minority neighborhoods have been trashed all over town this week as unscrupulous gougers who steal money from the poor by charging them inflated prices for inferior goods.

"It is not true," Salcedo said.

And he is right, as we shall prove in a moment with indisputable evidence from the administration's own comparison food-shopping guide.

What got Luis riled up was when he picked up the New York Post Monday — and saw Giuliani holding a Thanksgiving turkey at the Lower East Side Pathmark and an assertion that the poor will pay 30 percent more for today's dinner than suburban residents.

With that, Salcedo headed straight downtown with the Department of Consumer Affairs' Thanksgiving basket list and shopped at Pathmark. Then he returned uptown to his supermarket and duplicated it.

"Here are the cashier's receipts," he said. Pathmark: \$22.43, Bravo: \$17.76.

Being an impartial observer in this dispute, I could not accept at face value either the mayor's accounting or Salcedo's.

Instead, I checked the Human



RAY KERRISON

Resources Administration Shopper's Guide, which checks supermarkets all over the city every month to advise welfare and food-stamp recipients of the best and worst market prices.

The guide says, "Small savings on your grocery bill add up over time. By shopping at less expensive stores, you can make your food budget go further."

In July, HRA tested the Lower East Side, checking prices for a basket of 24 items at nine supermarkets.

The least expensive? Two Fine Fare stores and a C-Town, all small independent supermarkets like Luis Salcedo's Bravo, the so-called gougers.

Now, hang on to your hats. Which were the most expensive? None other than Pathmark (where Rudy did his Thanksgiving show), Associated and Sloan's.

In similar comparisons in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Long Island City, Pathmark again was not the least expensive.

Does this mean Pathmark is ripping off its customers? No way.

Supermarket prices vary according to season, supply, demand, need. But it does mean that in HRA assessments, independent supermarkets in poor neighborhoods are exceedingly competitive in pricing with the big supermarkets. Or even better.

Like all Bravo market owners, Salcedo receives a monthly catalog quoting suggested prices.

"Our net profit is 4 percent," he said.

No customer gets ripped off at so thin a profit margin.

Salcedo is distressed that the city and state are giving millions of dollars in cheap loans and tax breaks to Pathmark to build a supermarket in East Harlem. But being labeled as an exploiter of the poor was the last straw.

Salcedo, 42, is the model American immigrant. He came here from the Dominican Republic in 1974, with no money but a lot of hope.

"My grandfather insisted I come to America," he said. "And when I left, he said he wanted only one gift when I returned home: that I speak fluent English."

Luis learned English studying subway ads. He scrounged and scrimped to save \$5,000, and then, borrowing \$15,000 from friends and others, he opened a coffee shop in Brooklyn. He still has it.

Then, nearly five years ago, he

bought the Bravo supermarket at 126th Street and Fifth Avenue.

"I get up every morning at 6 o'clock and get to the coffee shop by 5," he said. "I don't get home to my family till 9 p.m."

He and his wife and two children live in Rockland County.

They made it the hard way.

"We had to get our money from private lenders at high interest rates," he said. "We never had access to bank capital or cheap loans or tax abatements. It's no right that the big stores like Pathmark be given special incentives and nothing for us."

"But I always say: We made it from the ground up, from scratch and that's why we're unstop-

table."

Big chain supermarkets once dotted Harlem, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, The Bronx. Now they have virtually all disappeared, driven out by drugs and crime.

"We came in to service the community, and now that it's being revitalized, the big chains want back in," Salcedo said.

"I don't object to that. This is America. Free enterprise. But we should all play by the same rules. Why give Pathmark a 20-year free ride on taxes and none for us?"

Luis recalls the night Mayor Giuliani was elected: "I was his greatest supporter. I went to sleep on the couch waiting for the result. I woke up at 5 in the morning, turned on the TV, and when they said Giuliani had won, I jumped in the air for joy."

"But now, I'm very disappointed."

The mayor has some fences to mend.