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Illustration: Photo

Mitchell Jeffrey Finn

FRIDGE CONTENTS IMPLICATE SUSPECT//UNEATEN DELI TREATS ENTERED IN EVIDENCE

Kowalski's signature seafood pinwheel helped put Mitchell Jeffrey Finn in jail.

And the alleged use of a household knife during holdups -- while wearing the same brown winter coat and no mask -- probably didn't hurt, either.

Finn, of Stillwater, is accused of trying to rob an Oakdale Kmart in November, a Kowalski's Market in Oak Park Heights in February and an Old Navy clothing store in Edina the day after the grocery store holdup. He is set to appear in Washington County District Court on Wednesday, his 59th birthday.

If convicted, he faces up to 20 years in prison on two of the charges and 15 years on the third -- a tough tradeoff for about \$380 in cash and some deli tidbits.

"He got caught doing three robberies," said Hennepin County prosecutor Charles Salter. "That kind of speaks for itself."

Finn's public defenders did not immediately return calls for comment. He has pleaded not guilty in the Old Navy case.

Here's what authorities think happened, according to court records and police statements:

On Feb. 1, a man described as short, heavyset and in his late 40s or early 50s entered Kowalski's and shopped. As a cashier was ringing up his groceries, the man pulled a black-handled, kitchen-style knife and told the clerk to hand over everything in the register. Once he had the money, the suspect ordered the clerk to the back of the store.

Police say the robber made off with less than \$150 in cash. But he also took some groceries -- a salmon pinwheel, a turkey-and-brie-on-ciabatta sandwich, a roast-beef-on-focaccia sandwich, a rib eye steak, Roma tomatoes, organic lettuce and Gatorade.

The next afternoon, a man walked into the Old Navy in Edina and shopped. When he got to the checkout counter, he pulled a knife on the clerk, demanded money and made off with about \$230 in an Old Navy bag.

When people followed him out of the store, the suspect ordered them back inside, jumped into a maroon car and sped off -- only to be pulled over and arrested.

A day or so later, an Edina police officer who had seen a television account of the Oak Park Heights robbery contacted police there to point out similarities to the Edina crime -- and to the suspect Edina already had in custody.

Oak Park Heights Police Officer Joe Croft went to Finn's residence and, in the refrigerator, found evidence from the Kowalski's holdup: a USDA Choice rib eye steak in a Kowalski's package, a Kowalski's seafood pinwheel and a roast-beef-on-focaccia

sandwich in Kowalski's packaging, according to court papers.

Inside the vegetable crisper door, Croft found a Kowalski's produce bag containing lettuce and four tomatoes.

In the kitchen garbage, he found a Kowalski's wrapper for a turkey-and-brie-on-ciabatta sandwich.

On the counter was some Gatorade.

All of the price tags matched the items on the Feb. 1 receipt from the theft, according to court papers.

The cases are similar to a Nov. 20 attempted robbery in Oakdale. A Kmart employee said she offered to help a man who had a number of items in his shopping cart.

The man put his hand in his jacket pocket, pointed it at her, and told her to give him all the money in her register.

After she twice insisted she couldn't give him any money, the suspect walked out and, soon after, a Kmart employee saw a maroon Nissan speed out of the parking lot.

On Thursday, Finn remained in Washington County Jail on \$100,000 bail, charged with first-degree aggravated robbery and attempted aggravated robbery.

He will be transferred to the jail in Hennepin County after those cases are finished to face the first-degree aggravated robbery charge there, prosecutor Salter said.

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