

GOING TO MARKET

The consumer's desire for freshness and a neighbourly experience have renewed the popularity of farmers' markets

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer



STAFF PHOTOS/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Garlicsniffers vendor Jordan McKav of Willowtree Farms sniffs garlic cloves with customer Thain Haggerty at the Newmarket farmers' market.

Question: What thrives in this high-tech, fast-paced and impersonal world?

Answer: The old-fashioned farmers' market.

Farmers' markets are experiencing a rebirth province-wide. They're popping up everywhere, including York Region. This spring, Markham welcomed its very first farmers' market, while Newmarket applauded the return of its May-to-October farmers' market.

The farmers' market was a mainstay in Newmarket from the 1800s through to 1940 when grocery stores came into vogue, changing the way people sold and bought food, said market spokesperson Marilyn Church.

With 25 vendors, the key word at the Newmarket Farmers' Market is fresh. Fruit and vegetables sold at Main and Timothy streets every Saturday from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. come straight from the local farm fields, Church said.

"Ours is a producer-based market," she said, adding that a typical Saturday at the Newmarket market attracts about 600 visitors.

In the last 10 years, the number of farmers' markets operating across Ontario has more than doubled to 130 full-scale markets, generating \$487.7 million in sales and an additional \$1.5 billion in spinoff benefits for the economy.

And Farmers' Market Ontario executive Robert Chorney said more than 800,000 shoppers visited Ontario's farmers' markets last year.

Watching a parking lot or a street turn into a full-scale trading post overnight is a

sight to behold. Using a "From the field to the table" sales pitch, farmers turn into vendors and haul truck loads of just-picked vegetables and fruit to the market.

In keeping with Ontario tradition, the

August sweet corn and beef steak tomatoes are leading the food parade. Meanwhile, a fine selection of home-baked goods, jams, jellies, pickles, dairy products, meats, fish, eggs and cheese, as well as organic produce, including herbs, are available at the market.

Flowers, plants, leather goods, crafts, wood products, maple products, candy, tea and coffee and even alternative medicine are also for sale at the markets.

Food quality is excellent, the prices are reasonable and the atmosphere at the market is friendly — people smell, touch and sample the produce, while stopping to chat with a neighbour is all part of the experience.

The social aspect is critical to the makeup of the farmers' market. People meet, mingle and smile. It's a feel-good, down-home place to be. A few minutes at the farmers' market and people forget about traffic jams, work-

place stress, cranky sales clerks and the constant demand to rush, rush, rush.

People welcome the chance to buy food that's not been soaked in questionable chemicals.

When people buy at Ontario farmers' market, they know they're getting quality. In fact, in-season Ontario produce is viewed as the best in the world.

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"It's no wonder people flock to farmers' markets," said Egi Natoli, spokesman for the Markham Farmers' Market.

"Shoppers love them, farmers depend on them and, as a whole, the community benefits," said Natoli, a golf pro and a member of the local Rotary Club.

With the help of fellow Rotarians and the support of the community, the market opened in May. Today, Markham's Saturday market, which runs from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., is a going concern.

"Farmers' markets are community-driven, producer-based and they're what shoppers want," Chorney said.

The Markham Farmers' Market is, indeed, a success story. With 30 vendors, Markham's outdoor market has brought vitality to the area, including Robinson Street.



Ashley Bannerman, 4, cuddles with a rabbit for sale at the Newmarket Farmers' Market.

"The residents, especially the seniors love it," Natoli said.

Markham's business community is also reporting an increase in sales. The market draws people to the area. And, when people come, they spend money.

The social aspect of the market place can't be underestimated, stressed Natoli.

"It's a great meeting place. Neighbours chat with neighbours, buy their goods, enjoy a bacon-on-a-bun and stop to hear and see the entertainment," he said.

Entertainment is a special feature at the Markham Farmers' Market. The artists, including musicians, are a hit.

"We've had jazz, folk and, recently, we even had an opera singer," Natoli said.

Farmers' markets were born out of the "consumer's desire for freshness" and "producers desire for a direct market," Chorney said.

A survey shows 93 per cent of people attending farmers' markets come for the freshness; 55 per cent of the shoppers are female, while three quarters come back for a repeat visit, Chorney said.

There's no shortage of vegetables and fruit in this part of Ontario.

In fact, our fruit and vegetable industry is very diverse. York Region has the major concentration of vegetables production in the Greater Toronto Area, due mostly to the Holland Marsh, which produces 95 per cent of Ontario's celery, 66 per cent of Ontario's onions, 80 per cent of Ontario's carrots and 90 per cent of Ontario's Asian vegetables.

A great deal of Holland Marsh produce finds its way to the area's farmers market. It's grown here, bought here and enjoyed here.



Olive Williams and granddaughter Kayleigh Williams inspect vegetables at the Markham Farmers' Market.

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