

Our farmers' market

Every Saturday morning from May through October, just two blocks from Galesburg's train depot, people of all ages descend on a parking lot for a taste of something special. Some are carrying crumpled bags and know exactly what they came for. Some just browse to see what there is to see in any given week. Others, the farmers, rain or shine, arrive extra early in order to set up shop and meet expectations. What appears to be a weekly ritual attended by a few actually represents one of the more important activities keeping our land and people together.

The Farmers' Markets around the country (of which there are over 5,000) represent the few remaining places where farmers provide food directly to the consumer. Not too long ago (circa 1930), one in four of us were farmers. Yet despite these roots, many of us don't know where our food comes from nor do we pay much attention to what's in the food we eat (as evidenced by corn syrup that is now added to so many processed foods). A lot has changed in the past few generations and these changes make it necessary to reconnect with farmers and their ways in order that we make thoughtful and meaningful decisions as eaters and consumers of our environment. Since food is something that we partake in multiple times a day, the way food is handled (i.e., grown, harvested, processed, shipped & commodified) has tremendous implications for how healthy we and our environment are/become.

Galesburg's Farmers Market (GFM) goes back at least to the 1980's when it was located on Main Street. It has moved to several other downtown locations since then and now finds itself in a parking lot on the south side of Simmons Street, just west of Seminary Street. This past Saturday, I took the opportunity to go to the GFM and talk to many of its vendors. And though I have been going to the market for many years, this "excuse" to speak with the farmers opened my eyes to many things.

Altogether I counted fourteen different vendors with items ranging from vegetables/fruits to flowers and plants to baked mini-pies. To nine farmers I asked the following question: "Why is the Farmers' Market important to you?" Here is what they had to say:

Cordy, of Cordy's Country Kitchen, who has been a vendor at the GFM for nine years, responded, "People get to know their food, their growers, and learn to eat only what is in season." She stressed the importance of consumers asking questions about their food, something one can do at a market (and not so easily elsewhere). Among the important questions for Cordy are: "Is your food sprayed?"; "Is it GMO or hybrid?"; "Are natural fertilizers used on the fields?" All of these are summarized in her central question, "How do they [the farmers] grow your food?"

Nan and Sandi, who run Toohey Achers (gotta love their humor) in Viola and have been farming for twenty-five years, commented that they love to provide "fresh and nutritious" food to their customers. They also welcome the opportunity to "help [customers] with how to cook" various foods as well as providing advice on other matters. I can attest that they do a tremendous job with this. Not only have they instructed me how to cook rhubarb and sour cherries (for a pie—my first in over ten years) as well as beets, they have also offered my wife insights about how to remedy a case of poison ivy using other plants.

Jean, who runs Nyman's Harvest Corner just north of Hermon, really "enjoys the camaraderie of the vendors and customers." And despite being decimated by a tornado in the mid-1990's, and suffering a rash of other misfortunes in the process of rebuilding her farm, Jean was resolute in her desire to reestablish it.

diana Mackin relishes the Market's "local foods connection" and its "capacity to build community." She stressed that the GFM allows people to "shop locally" and keep their money in the community which will allow it to prosper.

Ed Robinson, owner of Robinson Beef in Cameron and a third-generation cattle farmer, is relatively new to the GFM and likes to bring a "higher end product" to the local people.

Mary Lou, representing her family-run M&M farms, gets a great deal of satisfaction from growing food and sharing it with her customers.

Mary Jo, who runs Good Hope Gardens, sees the market as a way to bring stability to her farm and she really "likes the people in Galesburg." She provides lots of vegetables and fruits to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as well as to Kathy's Kitchen but the GFM allows her to "spread marketability" even further.

Donie, who dons a cap reading "Darnell's Apiary, Honey & Veggies," exhibited a great deal of pleasure talking about his being part of the GFM for nearly thirty years.

With all these reasons motivating them, these small local farmers definitely have a lot to offer us. Cordy appears to be the most popular vendor as she makes all kinds of delightful breads and cookies (from wheat that she grows); her challah is to "die for," my wife says. She also always has a selection of vegetables and even sold heirloom seeds at the May markets. Nan & Sandi had wonderful beets, zucchini, cauliflower, and blueberries this week as well as a host of herb and insect-repelling plants. Soon, they say, look out for the "best sweet corn in Western Illinois." Donie, sharing almost a continuous booth with these two grinning farmers, offered his famous honey (he tends to at least six beeyards in several neighboring counties), some rhubarb, kohlrabi, as well as homemade pepper. Mouthwatering kids are always found hovering near his booth



awaiting a taste of a honey stick. Jean had her staples on display—honey, blueberries, and popcorn. My children have come to savor blueberries thanks to Jean. diana, heavily involved in Galesburg's community garden movement, offered her painted pots, gorgeous GFM's T-shirts, and visors all at "half-price." Ed made available nearly every cut of beef you could ask for. He said that all his meat is "dry aged for three weeks," a process one can't find employed except in the top steak houses. According to the informational card he gave me (and the company's website), their "cattle are with [them] from birth to harvest." And, they "do not use any antibiotics or synthetic growth hormones." Mary Jo carries the "Kathy's Kitchen" bottled products which include an array of zesty salsas (including peach and pineapple) and jellies. While I was talking to her, one customer visiting from California said, as he was buying two jars of salsa, "This is for [the upcoming] football [season]." When asked why he didn't just get it at the supermarket, he replied, this is "fresh and homemade." Mary Jo also had a great variety of fresh vegetables and fruits available Saturday, including, potatoes, cauliflower, cabbage, herbs, zucchini, plums, green tomatoes, white onions, and little

green onions. Mary Lou also had an array of vegetables as well as beautiful flowers, and several start up plants including melons and cucumbers.

So as you can see, there is so much to find at the Galesburg Farmers' Market. And while there is plenty here to think about, three other ideas came out of my visit with the local farmers. One, the two aviarists among them informed me that their bee populations have been showing declines although not as grave as seen in some parts of the country. This is something we should all be watching very carefully, especially when one considers that approximately one-third of all our food comes from plants that are pollinated by honeybees. Two, most of the farmers at the GFM are growing their fruits and vegetables without the use of synthetic pesticides or herbicides. Though they aren't "certified organic" due to the burdensome bureaucracy associated with obtaining the rights to use that term (one that greatly works against small farmers, not that they didn't have enough disadvantage already), they are doing what is next best—growing their food "naturally." So, as Cordy reminds us, just get to know where your food comes from and you'll be happier, healthier, and more engaged with your neighbors—the small farmers that are keeping the land secure for current and future generations. And lastly, the GFM isn't just a place for the "well-to-do" to shop for their food; it has something for everyone. Also, you would be surprised how affordable most of the items are. To their surprise, several students of mine, who did a price comparison last semester, found that GFM's items are very competitively priced with produce found at the local supermarkets. Vendors also accept LINK cards, although the manager of this wasn't available this past Saturday; I am definitely going to inquire.

All in all, the Galesburg Farmers' Market is a great place to be. Check it out, if you haven't already. I bet you'll be very pleased when you do. For those from other communities, here is a great Internet resource that can assist you in finding your local farmers and their nourishing food: <www.localharvest.org>.

FREE
to sing to assemble to rock to pray

Thanks to the First Amendment,
you can be whoever and
whatever you want to be.