Photo: Liss Flint/Coventry Regional Farmers' Market

From the FIELD to the FORK

by PATTI VERBANAS

Invite good health and a sense of adventure to dinner by shopping at your local farmers' market.

The earthy scent of carrots dusted with soil. Tomatoes ripened red and still clinging to the vine. Sunny squash, lined up in formation and ready for slicing. Enthusiastic chatter and peals of laughter rising from a jovial crowd as arms gather fresh-picked produce straight from the growers' stalls.

Have you been to your local farmers' market lately? If so, you're part of the rising trend of consumers showing more interest in healthy eating and awareness in the origins of their food. Farmers' markets are experiencing dramatic growth throughout the United States: Last year, the USDA reported 1,000 new markets were established, bringing the total to around 7,000.

We know that eating fruits and vegetables is the recipe for optimal health, but not all vegetables we buy are equal in their health benefits. Nothing trumps eating local. ("Local" means foods sourced no more than 100 miles away and, ideally, closer.) "Foods that are purchased when they are picked ripe are always at their flavor and nutritional peak," says Sharon Palmer, a Registered Dietitian in Duarte, California, and the author of *The Plant-Powered Diet*. She notes that when you survey robustly colored rows of foods that were hand-picked just hours prior and bring them to your nose to breathe in the fresh scents (when was the last time you did *that* at a supermarket?), it tempts you to buy more health-protective produce, upping your intake of vitamins, minerals, fiber and phytochemicals. Buying directly from farmers also helps hone your understanding of when food is actually in season—and the difference in taste that eating fresh, seasonal fare makes. With our global food supply, people who are accustomed to eating produce out of season can lose their palate for the real deal. "You can't compare the taste of ripe food with that picked green and shipped around the country for a week, as is the case with much of what you find in supermarkets," Palmer says. "Nothing is more beautiful than a ripe peach: Bite in and let the juice run down your chin." ▷

Photo: Liss Flint/Coventry Regional Farmers' Market

Photo: Courtesy Carrboro Farmers' Market

The very nature of farmers' markets is a sense of discovery.

When you have a direct relationship with the grower, it empowers you to learn more about the origins of the food you're buying. Want to know if something is certified organic or learn about the fertility management system? Just ask. "At our market, we know that the vendor who raises animals goes to one place where the slaughter is done as humanely as possible," says Cheryl Olsten, owner of the Stockton Farmers' Market in New Jersey. "When you get involved with the vendors, you understand how conscious they are about how they grow their food and feed their animals and how it impacts the land. It makes you feel better, mentally and physically, knowing where your food is coming from."

Talking with farmers gives you practical insights as well. Ask them about their favorite varieties and what they like to do with what they grow. "Many farmers are good cooks, and since they don't have a lot of time, their recipes tend to be very straightforward, simple and bring out the best of the product," says Erin Barnett, director of Local Harvest, a website that promotes organic and local food (localharvest.org). "When people shop at farmers' markets, they are inspired by the beautiful produce, buy it, take it home and cook it. Not only do they know exactly where supper came from, but by cooking at home rather than eating out, they spend less and eat healthier."

The arrays of varieties and unique offerings entice you to expand your culinary horizons and spark your creativity. "Supermarkets usually provide common hybrid forms of vegetables," says Palmer, "but farmers often sell heirloom vegetables. You'll find purple carrots, rainbow chard, golden beets and yellow tomatoes. All of these varieties offer so much flavor, texture and nutrition. For example, purple tomatoes and potatoes are high in anthocyanins, which are antioxidants linked with brain health."

And if you think farmers' markets only sell fruits and vegetables, guess again. "One of the fantastic things is that they provide a fairly low barrier to entry for entrepreneurs, a place where they can be excited about innovating," says Stacy ▷

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"People make it a ritual: get a cup of coffee, go to the market, do shopping, meet up with friends."

– Erin Barnett
Director of Local Harvest

Photo: Courtesy Carrboro Farmers' Market

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Miller, executive director of the Farmers' Market Coalition, who notes that you can find vendors such as bakers, prepared-food chefs, chocolatiers and craftspeople who source locally. And new laws in New York allow farmers to sell craft brews with locally grown hops at markets. Many markets offer educational programs for adults and children, such as the Discover You Can program sponsored by the Farmers' Market Coalition that teaches the art of canning, or have exciting additions like portable pizza ovens onsite for patrons who want fresh brick-oven pizza. "Because the markets are so nimble, they can arrange things quickly," Miller says. "For example, one market in Virginia that was doing an educational program on how to make and can salsa enlisted salsa dancers to entertain."

When you're visiting a farmers' market billing itself as such, it's important to make sure it's truly a market where you are buying directly from the growers. Some states, such as California, have laws that mandate what markets can call themselves "certified farmers' markets," but for the most part, the onus is on the buyer to investigate. "True farmers' markets have rules that require people who are selling the food to be the ones who grew it," Barnett says. "If they are buying it elsewhere and selling it, that's not a farmers' market. They should have their own bylaws, which often are posted on the website. They indicate what the rules are for selling at that market." If a market bills itself as "producer only," that's a good sign. Also, most markets have a manager who can tell you if the market is producer-only. Barring that, you can ask the individual vendor. "Trust in the product is about trust in the person," Miller says. "Eventually, you develop an ability to identify a fresh product. But there's a growing recognition of the need to have strong policies in place." For example, she cites Green City Market in Chicago, which recently mandated that all its producers be third party-certified in some kind of sustainable practice like organic certification, food-alliance certification or certified humane. "This gives the customer some assurance that the growers are doing due diligence with air, land and water resources," Miller says. ▷

"When you go to a farmers' market, it's great to be brave. Try some things you might not have in the grocery store. See it as an adventure—a very nice one."

– Erin Barnett

"Once you start frequenting farmers' markets, you'll notice a profound shift in how you think about food in your life," says Katherine Gustafson, author of *Change Comes to Dinner*. "It's a place that roots you in your community, where you can engage in conversation with like-minded people." Gustafson, who has studied America's sustainable food systems, sees the increase in farmers' markets to be indicative of how the movement toward healthier eating thrives on the social component.

"It's a mindset, a life-changer," agrees Olsten, who switched from shopping at supermarkets four years ago. "There's nothing like it. At the grocery store, the lighting is horrid, everything is linear and you feel like an ant walking. When you start going to farmers' markets, your buying habits change. It's a whole different way of cooking and thinking. There's such a great energy."

Markets are capitalizing on their ability to be a destination point, offering music, kids' activities and chef-tasting events. "It's where you want to go on a Saturday morning," Barnett says.

The excitement does not end with the chill of the winter months. "Fresh, local and healthful food isn't just a good-weather offering," says David Shipman of the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. "Winter markets are hot despite the cold weather. Even in states where the traditional growing season is short, the market season is long." The USDA reports that winter markets are increasing: last year they were up from 886 to 1,225. "The product mix changes with winter markets," says Miller, who notes that farmers use season-extension techniques, like hoop houses or cloth-draped wire hoops pinned over the length of the field, to protect crops from milder frosts. Expect to see produce that can maintain freshness for a long time, such as apples, beets and carrots. ▷

Photo: Courtesy Hale'iwa Farmers' Market

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Farmers' Markets on the Road

Markets reflect their communities in all their quirkiness, and travelers who seek out the local farmers' markets can discover rare regional treats. Visiting markets is a fascinating way to absorb the local culture and to find produce that only grows in certain areas, from pawpaws in the Eastern United States to star fruit and macadamia nuts in Hawaii. In addition to the ones noted above, here are some markets our experts love. But don't stop here. Explore! To find a farmers' market near you, visit search .ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets.

Carrboro Farmers' Market

Carrboro, North Carolina

Founded in 1979, Carrboro is a model for other markets in the nation.

carrborofarmersmarket.com

City Market

Kansas City, Missouri

For more than 150 years, City Market has been *the* place to shop and be entertained. Check out its calendar, and you'll see why.

thecitymarket.org

Fernandina Farmers' Market

Fernandina Beach, Florida

Select from fresh-baked goods to tropical plants.

fernandinafarmersmarket.com

Ithaca Farmers' Market

Ithaca, New York

Bask in the lovely waterfront setting.

ithacamarket.com

Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market

San Francisco, California

Pick up local cheeses, meats and produce at one of the country's best markets.

ferrybuildingmarketplace.com

Flint Farmers' Market

Flint, Michigan

This beloved year-round market with a beautiful permanent structure is ranked No. 1 in Local Harvest's "Love Your Farmers' Market" contest.

flintfarmersmarket.com

Hale'iwa, Ala Moana and Hawaii Kai Farmers' Markets
Oahu, Hawaii
Mingle with locals, listen to live music and fill your bags with the freshest mangoes, coffee, lilikoi, fresh-caught fish and bean-to-bar chocolate.
haleiwafarmersmarket.com

Madison Farmers' Market
Madison, Wisconsin
"It's simply beautiful," says Local Harvest's Erin Barnett.
madisonfarmersmarket.com

Minneapolis Farmers' Market
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Winner of Second Harvest Heartland's 2012 Hunger Hero award for its charitable endeavors.
mplsfarmersmarket.com

Nashville Farmers' Market
Nashville, Tennessee
The country-music capital really sizzles at night with the return of its popular Night Market (through December). Experience the Market House Restaurant and country music artists like Frank Ortega.
nashvillefarmersmarket.org

Pike Place Market
Seattle, Washington
Exciting, vibrant scene, including good restaurants.
pikeplacemarket.org

Portland Farmers' Market
Portland, Oregon
This well-known market offers 250 vendors in six locations around the city.
portlandfarmersmarket.org

Santa Monica Farmers' Market
Santa Monica, California
Select from sprigs of fragrant herbs to luscious berries to perfectly ripe, juicy peaches.
smgov.net/portals/farmersmarket

Union Square Greenmarket
New York City and the Boroughs, New York
This bustling urban collective of 53 markets is 250 farmers and fishermen strong.
grownyc.org

Yamashiro Farmers' Market
Los Angeles, California
Things get hot when the sun sets in L.A. Bring a date and chill to acoustic jazz as you sip wine and browse fresh produce against sparkling urban views.
lacityfarm.org/yamashiro.cfm ◆