

Farmers Markets

Contributed by Nanny

An idyllic account of the plus points of typical farmers market written from the heart by Nanny.

Only 10 years ago, Farmers Markets in the UK were almost non-existent, now there are over 200 weekly nationwide opportunities for local growers and producers to tempt us with their wares.

And don't they just?

Locally produced meat, fruit, vegetables and other products are at every market.

The great thing about a Farmers Market is that as well as the temptation of quality produce, you get the opportunity to talk to the man who grew or made it. So apart from buying that piece of Suffolk Red Poll brisket, you leave the market knowing just how to get the most out of it. In these days of supermarket shopping, where all the meat is presented to you in en block in rows of chiller cabinets, vegetables all beautifully washed, tastefully arranged out of season, personal service is virtually non-existent. At Farmers Markets the producers are more than happy to advise you on how to use the wonderful product they are selling you. You go away happy and are likely to return to the next market to buy another excellent piece of brisket and while you're at it, that ox tail looks good and "a piece of beef skirt goes well if you make Cornish pasties madam."

What you certainly won't find at the local Farmers Market is asparagus in October or tomatoes in March. It's all based on seasonal produce. If it can't be grown at the time of the year you are in now, then it won't be sold fresh at the market. What you are assured of instead is that the asparagus you buy today will not have travelled 2000 miles to get to you and more than likely will have been cut within the last 24 hours. It will taste as fresh as in fact it is. The strawberries will taste as though you wandered out to the fruit cage to get them yourself. An increasing number of growers supply fresh vegetables that you only have to taste to understand why, despite the prefix "fresh", supermarket produce can only really be described as "tired".

The market has become a family day out, a social occasion. You meet the same people at each market and you feel you can take time to stop and chat, find out how the week has gone, what the best choice of product is this time round. You have the opportunity to order ahead to collect next time assuring yourself of top quality without hassle. Not so in the supermarket where every one looks as though they are laying in for a siege with faces like thunder. You can't pop in to a supermarket for a few items without having to queue for 10 minutes. During the run up to a holiday, you can queue down the aisles. Supermarket shopping just before Christmas is most people's idea of hell. At a Farmers Market just before Christmas, the air is cold, crisp and full of the anticipation of the holiday. Not only are there stalls selling the normal top quality items, there are extra stalls selling handmade Christmas gift ideas, hand raised pork pies, Christmas puddings, flavoured oils, and all the little extras that make a holiday special.

It has to be stated that the Farmers Market "revolution" is very much a two-sided affair. You, the customer, are getting the best produce that the area can supply to you. But what is the producer gaining from this apart from your cash? What about the local economy? What are they getting out of it?

Here in the U.K. it has been proven that Farmers Markets are very good for the local economy. As a result of a local market, money stays with the area businesses instead of disappearing into the coffers of the huge national supermarkets. When the customer pops to the Farmers Market he is also likely to get a few other things from local shops and businesses without taking his money out of town. So it creates a knock-on effect to local shops. More local money circulating round the area strengthens the local economy. There has been shown to be a substantial increase in local business profits wherever a Farmers Market is a regular occurrence.

A monthly Farmers Market can be instrumental in revitalising some of our beautiful old market towns. Markets highlight the local sights, sounds and smells of the area by focussing on the breweries, vineyards, farmhouse cheese producers, organic farmers and gardeners who live within the area.

Tourism also benefits. Publicise the local Farmers Market and chances are that the publicity will draw people from outside the area. Not only will they take in the market but visit some of the local attractions as well.

Farmers and growers have discovered a major alternative source of revenue. It has also shown them that they can be businessmen as well as producers. There is no middleman involved now, they get on and market their goods themselves, remarkably well in most cases. They are able to foster good solid links with local businesses. For example, the farmer who produces a good pig will use a local butcher to produce the hams and sausages that he will then sell on his stall. He pays the butcher for that service and has produced a local high quality product to sell to you. Everybody wins.

Since the advent of Farmers Markets, more of our traditional fruit and vegetable varieties are making a comeback. Most supermarkets only stock five or six varieties of apples, most of which are tasteless foreign imports but at Farmers Markets you will find more unusual locally grown varieties like Jona Gold as well as the Discovery, Russet and Bramleys varieties that we all are familiar with. The customer is demanding a greater variety of high quality produce and what is more he wants it to be something special.

One of the urban myths regarding Farmers Markets is that they only cater for the middle class or higher paid portion of society and that low- income families cannot afford to eat healthy, fresh produce.

This simply isn't so.

Farmers Market organic produce can be up to on third cheaper than the comparable supermarket produce added to which is the assurance of freshness and quality. Inner cities are also benefiting from the Farmers Market revolution. Merseyside run a Local Food for Local People scheme that helps local farmers market their produce to people within the inner city area, focusing particularly on basic commodities for low- income families. This gives local families the opportunity to buy produce at low prices, proving that good, wholesome food need not cost the earth and come from a supermarket. Many of the inner city markets focus on city farmers and allotment growers enabling them to market their goods. This has paved the way for the introduction of more exotic fruit and vegetables commonly used in, for instance, Indian and Caribbean cooking. Again, all available cheaply and as fresh as possible.

Here in Suffolk, there is a market every weekend in some town or village; the signs go up at the beginning of the week for each one.

Our local market is hosted by Easton Farm Park on the fourth Saturday of each month and it is rare that there isn't a good crowd by midmorning. The smell of hog roast and bacon rolls mingles with the odours of fresh vegetables, cheeses and fresh fish and by 11.30 you are already thinking about lunch.

Fiona Kerr, manager of the Park and organiser of the market regards Farmers Markets as an integral part of the modern farming industry.

"The Farmers Market movement seems to be increasingly popular as customers become more conscious of what they eat and where their food comes from. A Farmers Market offers a unique shopping experience where the customer buys directly from the producer. All the questions regarding animal welfare, how the fruit grows etc. can be asked and answered, here on site by the producer. Our own market has been running for 6 years and offers local farmers the chance to showcase their produce and develop alternative sales outlets within their own community. We have approximately 30 stalls at the Easton Farm Park Farmers Market selling all types of delicious local food- meat, fish, eggs, cheese, ice cream, cakes, bread, puddings, preserves, fudge, fruit, vegetables and much more. Farmers Market have become a high-profile shop window for the modern British farming industry."

If you haven't visited a Farmers Market yet, then you have a treat in store for you. There will be one near you soon.

When you do, you may rest assured that you will purchase the highest quality goods that the British Farming industry can produce for you.

I think that sentence speaks volumes.

Visit Easton Park Farm's website:
<http://www.eastonfarmpark.co.uk/>