

THE BOUNTY OF FARMERS MARKETS

Buying Local Boosts Health, the Economy and the Planet

by Sandra Yeyati



Throughout the nation, an estimated 8,000 farmers markets offer some of the freshest food available anywhere. Often open on weekend mornings or select weeknights, these nutritional meccas allow local farmers to sell their fruits, vegetables, eggs, meat and dairy directly to consumers, thereby providing an attractive business channel for them. "If you buy direct from a farmer, 97 cents of every dollar goes home with the farmer, whereas if you buy from a traditional grocery store, only 17 cents makes its way back to that farmer," says Janie Maxwell, executive director of the Illinois Farmers Market Association.

Dollars spent at farmers markets boost local economies. "When farmers make money, they buy seeds at their local co-op or purchase tools from a nearby hardware store, which infuses economic capital into rural communities," says Katie Myhre, technology research manager at the Farmers Market Coalition. "If we can focus on

growing the capacity of our farms within our region and building consumer habits around what we can grow locally, that's going to help our region become more resilient."

This type of localized commerce offers environmental benefits, too. Produce from a local source carries a much smaller carbon footprint than one that travelled halfway across the country. "Farmers markets are uniquely positioned to encourage environmentally responsible farming by providing a solid economic platform to climate-positive farmers that are taking care of land and water quality," Myhre asserts.

According to a study commissioned by the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance, 72 percent of consumers know "nothing" or "very little" about farming or ranching. Farmers markets facilitate ongoing dialogues between growers and consumers, serving as valuable educational sites. "Getting to know your farmer offers you an opportunity to ask questions directly to the person growing the product and make a choice accordingly, whereas when you go into grocery stores, you're fed a lot of advertising and greenwash labeling with terms that you don't understand," Myhre says, adding, "While many small farmers decide not to go through the costly United States Department of Agriculture organic certification process, their farming practices are often just as clean or even more so, and at a farmers' market, consumers are able to look the farmer in the eye and learn about their growing methods."

Maxwell appreciates the opportunity to make an educated choice. "As a consumer, you have to decide what is your highest value. For me, the most compelling reason to shop at a farmers market is the peak, in-season, quality of the food, the incredible taste and nutrition that you get because it was freshly harvested and didn't have to be transported over long distances. The number of people that touch your food is significantly lower at a farmers market, so there's less opportunity for it to be mishandled or cross-contaminated. It carries the name of the producer on it. This



is their life's work, and their reputation is on that label.

I sense that there's a real desire to ensure great quality and safety."

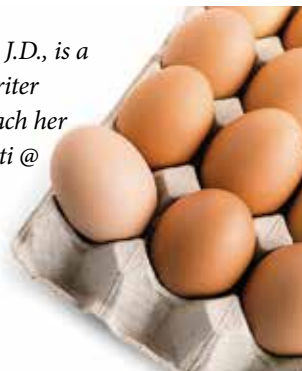
Regularly buying fresh food from a farmers market allows families

to get into the habit of eating in season. "Cooking seasonally allows you the opportunity to capture the incredible flavor profiles of what's fresh. It has just been picked and tastes incredible—very different from the flavors you get from grocery store products that were produced someplace else, maybe even weeks or months ago," Maxwell explains.

Myhre concurs: "If we can build our habits, cooking preferences and skills around those seasonal rhythms, that's a really beautiful benefit. It's awesome for me to know that these herbs were harvested yesterday. There's also a wide diversity of products. You're not going to see 12 varieties of squash at your big box grocery store. I'm always surprised by what I see, and it's a really fun experience as somebody who loves food. Taking home really great-tasting products that were produced with so much care is a central benefit."

For many, the farmers market is a community gathering. In addition to local growers, they often include cottage food vendors offering homemade jams and jellies, baked goods, sauces, preserved and pickled items and other delicious foods, as well as arts and crafts vendors and musical entertainment. "The wonderful thing about the farmers market is that it leads with joy," Myhre says. "It's fun. You don't invite friends to the grocery store, but you might meet your friends for coffee at the farmers market."

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