

Can Farmers Markets Sustain Local Food Production?

By Sophie Braccini



Year-round Farmers' Market on Sunday morning in Moraga

Photo Sophie Braccini

Fong Tchieng's farm has been a favorite at the Moraga Farmers' Market for more than two years. A family of expert gardeners who came from Laos in the 80's manages the 20-acre Fresno farm. The parents farm while the children study at UC Davis. Every week they bring to markets a wide variety of vegetables from the most classic to some interesting variations such as orange beets, Chinese greens or Jerusalem artichokes.

From the individual artisan, to large farms, to family businesses, merchants at farmers markets come in all shapes and flavors. With the Tchiengs, they share a passion for their trade and are not afraid of hard work. Their diversity may be what makes the year round Moraga market so successful.

The market started operating once a month in the parking lot at the Moraga Center in 2004. It became a weekly summer market the following year, and expanded to year-round operation one winter ago. According to Gayle Griver, of the California Market Association (which manages this market), what makes its success is the blend of fresh and tasty products offered year round. "We are blessed to live in an area with a lot of micro-climates that provides a wide variety of crops," explains Griver.

On the opposite side of the market to the Tchiengs, Happy Boy Farm from Santa Cruz sells only organic vegetables. Greg Beccio's farm is larger, with 230 acres, 110 different produces and up to 70 employees in season. Farmers markets are a big part of his sales, about 50%, the rest being sold to restaurant or stores such as the Monterey Market in Berkeley. People who work the market can have different jobs on the farm; some are part time employees who may live in different cities.

Olivera Egg Farm is a large operation, too. The grandfather of the present owner founded the chicken farm in San Jose in 1948. Now the South Peninsula city doesn't want to harbor 600,000 chickens within its border and the operation has moved to Stockton. Farmers' markets represent just a small percentage of Olivera's sale, "for us this is more about brand recognition."

Steve Gentry, the Orinda beekeeper, has the same marketing objective with a very different type of operation. "I sell only a small percentage of my honey at farmers' markets," says Steve, "I go there so people can put a face on my name. My objective is also educational, and I always display a hive in my stand so kids can learn about bees." Steve confesses that he works with bees out of passion; his primary source of income is his rental properties.

Greg Young, who owns two boats in Monterey, has no other source of income. "Consumers do not realize what a hard life it is," says the fisherman. He fishes all week for salmon, tuna, halibut and cod; cuts, packages and sells at markets during the weekend with wife Edyta. "We do it out of our passion for bringing an exceptional product directly to the people," says Young. "We are a disappearing trade ourselves, within 10 years there won't be any salmon left in Northern California. Water from rivers is diverted for human needs and the fish are just vanishing." He sells to farmers' markets in San Francisco, Morgan Hill and San Jose.

Holding Farm is another example of how a local operation can find a successful outlet in local markets and restaurants. The family raises cows in the hills of Lafayette and the meat that is sold at the market comes only from their herd. For the Holding Farm, farmers' markets and restaurants are the means to keep the middle man out and the only way for a small local farming operation to stay profitable.

Farmers markets can be a great way to start a business. Bay Bread started to sell its specialty breads in the Palo Alto farmers' market 15 years ago. Today Pascal Rigo, the French baker, operates seven bakeries, a restaurant, two manufacturing plants for wholesale of organic bread and is a partner in an organic mill in Utah.

Perhaps this will also be the destiny of Judi Welden of Terra Soap. She just started to sell her soaps at the market. She makes her cold process soaps out of lye in her Walnut Creek home. She creates crafty custom soaps with natural oils and fair trade shea butter and even teaches soap classes.

"Most merchants are farmers who sell what they grow," says Giver, "but we are allowed 20% non-farmers, so we can bring tamales, pop-corn, Chinese dumplings and breads. We hope to get poultry and cheese as well." "Locavors*" of Lamorinda rejoice!

* a Locavor is someone who strives to eat only locally produced food