
CELEBRATE THE FARM IN YOUR BACKYARD

Twenty Years of the Berkeley Farmers' Market

BY KIMBER SIMPKINS

A clear, brisk Tuesday in early spring, at half past noon—a few nondescript trucks and vans rumble up and slowly begin to unload along Derby Street in south Berkeley. The sun stretches over umbrellas and tents rising up in the middle of the asphalt. Colorful piles of kale, winter squash, spinach, beets, carrots, rutabagas, and broccoli tumble forth as the trucks turn themselves inside out at the curb. A farmer's firm hand hangs an old-fashioned scale, while just a few feet away a more modern digital scale is set upon an improvised counter of plywood and boxes.

When the bell rings at two, the street will fill with musicians, bicycles, strollers, and hungry locals browsing for their evening dinner or weekly supply of organic vegetables. For a few visitors, this might be the first time seeing the bountiful display of produce offered directly by the Central and Northern California farmers that grew it. But many more attend the market every week, and they will greet the farmers as old friends, with a smile, a handshake, or a hug. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the scene's weekly unfolding. Thanks to the ongoing efforts of the Ecology Center (Berkeley), the market has grown from one weekly event to three, and from a small, neighborhood attraction to an expanding food community—all evidence that people are changing the way they shop and how they think about what they eat.

TABLES IN A FIELD

As you stroll, look for the Ecology Center booth. There you can pick up reusable shopping bags, flyers on composting or recycling, and organic cotton tie-dye socks, but also, you might have the pleasure of running into Kirk Lumpkin, the Berkeley Farmers' Markets Special Events and Promotions Coordinator. Lumpkin remembers when the market was nothing more than a collection of tables and trucks in a field behind the Berkeley



The photographs in this article are from the Ecology Center archives. These kids from Malcolm X school are all grown-ups now.

Adult School off University Avenue. Starting out as the brainchild of local activists who wanted to “unplug” from the industrial food system, the market struggled along for several years after its inception in 1981. “The market got moved around a lot until it ended up in a place that no one could see it,” Lumpkin remembers, recalling how it petered out in 1985. However, two years later some community activists enlisted the Ecology Center to revive the market in its Derby Street location, where it has since flourished. Lumpkin himself started out as a seller for his college roommate, whose family grew tree fruits and raisin grapes. Later he joined the Farmers' Market Committee and eventually was recruited to be the Ecology Center's farmers' market manager. He's been willingly caught in the “vortex” of the farmers' market ever since. “There's a synergy of food and people here.

You can spend hours shopping, talking, and hanging out. It's easy to get caught up in it.” As he says, “it doesn't just feed my face. I've never found any place happier to be.”

The community atmosphere may indeed be the underlying secret behind the success of the Berkeley Farmers' Market. “The supermarket is monolithic. There's something people long for besides convenience,” Lumpkin says. “There is a long tradition, beyond written history, of people coming together to buy and sell food. People can enter into that, whether they know the history or not.”

Indeed, all you need do is look up at the sky to remind yourself that you are far from the sterile, fluorescent-lit aisles of the supermarket. You are outside. Your kids can run around. You can get some shopping done without being bombarded by advertising. You support local farmers who are taking care of the soil and water. You run into people you know, you share news, you enjoy a song, you head back home feeling fed in more ways than one. The attraction of the farmers' market is experiential. At the

market you get to hold and touch and bring home and prepare and savor what is no longer theoretical, but rather, is dinner.

MARKET AS CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY

From the inception of the Berkeley Farmers' Market, the Ecology Center has maintained a commitment to educating customers and providing a community-based marketplace for farmers who use organic and sustainable farming practices, with the idea that the health of the food we eat depends on the health of the environment it comes from. More than half of the vendors are certified organic, with many others using no pesticides and only natural fertilizers. The emphasis has always been on creating a market for local, seasonal, and organic foods, establishing relationships with farmers, and building community.

Susan McCallister, a book editor who lives near the farmers' market and shops there weekly, says that unlike at the grocery store where people seem hassled, the farmers' market elicits a free exchange of ideas, recipes, and general inspiration. "The community is engaged in food, and the growers and vendors make it their business to explain things," she says. "I've made things I probably never would have otherwise, with different varieties of mushrooms, broccoli romanesco, asian greens."

So you picked up a couple bunches of arugula, a bag of walnuts, and some lemons; what now? Hang out beside the bin of vegetables you're curious about and inquire of the next interested shopper how to prepare it. You might end up talking to a local chef or someone who just happens to know how to get the maximum enjoyment out of your parsnips' sweet and nutty flavor.

GROWING WITH THE GROWERS

If you approach the market from Milvia Street, one of the first stands you'll see is that of Full Belly Farm, which is located in Guinda, California, in the organic farming stronghold known as the Capay Valley. Judith Redmond, the Full Belly Farm partner who runs the stand, has sold at the Berkeley Farmers' Market almost since its inception in 1987. Redmond remembers 20 years ago driving to the market in a rickety pickup truck and setting up the stand all on her own. Then they had only a couple dozen different varieties of organic vegetables to display. Today

Judith Redmond in the early years of tending her market stand



Kirk Lumpkin minding the information center at the Derby market

Full Belly brings a full-sized delivery truck, has a crew of four to six to work the market, and often sells 40 to 60 different types of fruits and vegetables, depending on the season.

Even during the colder and theoretically less-productive winter and early spring months, it can be amazing how many different kinds of vegetables are piled on the Full Belly tables. The enthusiasm of Berkeley customers, Redmond explains, has encouraged the farm to grow a wider array of produce, more different kinds of greens, melon, and squash, and tastier varieties of carrots and corn, grown not for their appearance or ease of harvesting or shipping, but purely for flavor. Most customers aren't as concerned about their produce looking picture perfect, Redmond says, instead they "want funny-looking, crisp and tasty carrots. They appreciate and notice the really good varieties." When the farmers at Full Belly are planning what to plant for the year, they think about what their customers have said over the course of the previous year.

Feedback from customers is vital, but more than that, Redmond says, the farmers' market adds to her identity as a farmer. "For lots of people at the Berkeley market, I am their connection to the farm, and that gives me a strong sense of responsibility for keeping up our quality and variety." Over the years Redmond has noticed that Berkeley customers ask many questions about what they're buying and are very willing to try new things. "One of our counter folks, Isobel, started giving out samples of raw cauliflower and people were really excited about it. 'Mmm, this is delicious.'" Lots of farmers give out samples of their wares, from strawberries to peaches, tomatoes to oranges. Redmond likes to remind her customers, "Every time you try something new, you live a day longer." Green garlic, lambsquarter, purslane, and fresh dates are just some of the treats you can find at the farmers' market, and hardly anywhere else.

Cruise a little further down, buy some avocados from Brokaw, admire the extensive variety of mushrooms, inquire how the strawberry plants are doing at Swanton, and take a few moments to select some lovely oranges and lemons from Didar Singh Khalsa of Guru Ram Das Orchards. If he's not too busy helping other customers, he might tell you what a huge



Didar Singh Khalsa of Guru Ram Das Orchards.

difference the farmers' market has made to him and his small farm. Khalsa, who has sold Valencia oranges at the market since 1989, says that successfully starting and running his small 12-acre farm "would have been much harder if not for the market. Everything I grew was valuable, even if I made a few mistakes here and there. The oranges, peaches, apricots, everything sells." Khalsa had been told that in order to be economically viable an aspiring orchardist had to have a minimum of 30 acres. It turned out the Berkeley Farmers' Market was the perfect place to grow a small farming business. "I could retail my own stuff, you know, cutting out the middleman. You can get better prices at the farmers' market and sell a higher quality product for less than what people can get it for at the natural food store. It makes it viable for a small-scale farmer."

The Berkeley Farmers' Markets have always been an important resource for restaurants, whose buyers wander the market searching for the freshest and tastiest produce. Khalsa recalls Chez Panisse pastry chef Lindsey Shere and her husband inviting him and his daughter to the restaurant for dinner. "It was so great to see where the food goes and how much it's appreciated," Khalsa recalls. Like most farmers, Khalsa delights in chatting with customers and meeting specific requests. "Someone comes and says, I need these apricots to be ripe in seven days or four days or two, and I can give them just what they need. Then it's always gratifying to find out I was right!"

MAKING THE MOST OF THE MARKET

If you happen to stop by the market some Tuesday afternoon, prepare to experience some sensory overload . . . oranges overflowing from crates, egg cartons stacked perilously high, bouquets of 10 different kinds of greens in hues from deep purple to shiny green, piles of beets in colors you've never imagined (stripes!) peeking out from baskets, and even fresh crabs awaiting butter and tiny forks. Jessica Prentice, local author of *Full Moon Feast*, and co-owner of Three Stone Hearth, a community supported kitchen, has a few useful suggestions on how to approach the farmers' market. "First, walk through the market, look, and take in the season. What's new this week? What's here for the last week? Find something you're excited about, maybe

greens, chionga beets, or broccoli. Then start planning a meal around it. If I think stir-fry, I get mushrooms, carrots, broccoli, then I start buying other things with the intention of making that dish. . . . I usually plan two to three meals while I'm there, plus I get some staples." The beauty of the farmers' market is that it can be inspiring and manageable whether you come once in a while or once a week.

As you start to relax, breathe the open air, and become more comfortable looking around at the abundance of the farmers' market, you will undoubtedly find yourself more aware of what vegetables are in season. No peaches in April, but lots of delicious asparagus; no tomatoes in February, but wonderful arugula and broccoli rabe. Regular shoppers often go through a learning process to undo the habit of wanting red peppers and cucumbers in the wintertime. Shopping at the market "inspires me to work with the seasons," says Naushon Kabat-Zinn, a local yoga instructor. "I had an obsession with green beans over the summer that I was sad to let go of when they disappeared in the fall. Then I moved on to cool season greens, and now I'm looking forward to whatever comes next." Kabat-Zinn agrees that shopping at the farmers' market cultivates a sense of being part of a community supporting the local economy, and tries to shop at all three markets each week. "It's cheaper to buy organic here, plus it's being politically active in a very simple way," she muses, as she thoughtfully crunches on a just-purchased carrot. "And it benefits my own health!"

SPREADING THE KARMA

Your bags full, your appetite whetted, as you head back out of the market, don't forget to stop by Flaco's or one of the other small-scale vendors who sell prepared foods at the market. For these sellers, the farmers' market makes a small business venture viable, providing an enthusiastic and hungry audience. As he moves delicious-smelling vegan taquitos from the oil to the warming tray, Antonio Magaña, Berkeley resident and owner of Flaco's, affirms that between all three Berkeley farmers' markets, "I can live off my work and have my work here sustain me. I feel so grateful, so connected to the community. Look around," he indicates with his tongs, "I get to meet great people and see the diversity of Berkeley all the time." ☞

To learn more of the Berkeley Farmers' Market 20-Year celebration, go to www.ecologycenter.org



Tim Mueller of Campbell Mueller (now Riverdog) Farm