
TO MARKET, TWO MARKETS

A Conversation with the Market Masters of the Washington and Des Moines Farmers' Markets

BY EUGENIA E. GRATTO

This month, Iowa's farmers markets reappear across the region, displaying locally grown produce, baked goods, plants and flowers, and crafts. Some markets consist of a few tables; others feature dozens or hundreds of vendors, entertainment, or education programs for kids and adults. Visitors can stop in for a quick shopping excursion, or can extend the outing by meeting friends for a cup of coffee and conversation while they examine the seasonal wares.

Although market goers might think of farmers markets as a seasonal tribute to controlled chaos, it is a dedicated Market Master that manages all the market logistics, from selecting and recruiting vendors to working with the local municipality to secure space. They're responsible for creating a market's vibrant atmosphere.

Kelly Foss, Director of Special Events for the Des Moines Downtown Community Alliance, serves as Market Master for the Des Moines market. This market is the biggest and oldest in the state, featuring approximately 200 vendors each Saturday morning during the market season and covering approximately 12 blocks on and around Court Avenue. This year marks her eighth season in her role with the market.

Bob Shepherd has served as Market Master for the Washington Farmers Market since 1987. Washington has a Thursday evening market that operates from mid-May until just after the first hard freeze in October, and a Sunday afternoon market that begins after July 4. The Washington Market, held in the downtown park square, features 45 to 65 vendors on its busiest days. Shepherd has also served as president of the Iowa Farmers Market Association for the past two years.

EIRV: How would you describe the market master role?



KELLY: I'm the balancer of all the great things a market can be. I'm balancing the quality of the product accepted into the market, the amount of space we consume on Court Avenue, the entertainment, and the variety of product at the market in a given week. I also write policies and work with my board to make sure we're constantly looking to the future. I'm always striving to move the market in a direction to grow and be great.

BOB: I'm the market master year-round, and I chew off a little bit at a time so it doesn't become overwhelming. I manage the market by walking—I get around and talk to everybody at every single market. The integrity of the market and what it stands for is always in the back of my mind. As part of that, I've delved deeply into food safety. If I could make every market in the state reach their potential, I would.

EIRV: How have your customers changed over the years?

BOB: It used to be a tomato was a tomato—now customers ask for certain varieties. They ask if the farmer has any of the pink ones because they're lower acid. The people are much more supportive of the local growers.

KELLY: When I started, our demographic fit with the state average for market visitors—people in their 50s and 60s. We've geared toward educating a variety of audiences so we're attracting more people from the community. There's definitely a bigger age range now, including young families, singles and college students. We want this to be a community event where everyone feels a part of it and feels welcome.

EIRV: What kinds of community partnerships does the market have?

KELLY: We team up with different non-profits throughout the community for promotions and marketing opportunities. We work very closely with the Court Avenue Association, which is made of merchants and retailers. The *Des Moines Register* and the Des Moines Radio Group help us promote the market, also.

I have about 200 local non-profits on the Saturday Salute roster, and they can come twice a year. We offer them free space.

Photos by Carole Topalian

One that really stands out is when the Master Gardeners come down and educate people about everything from problems with landscaping to how to grow tomatoes on your deck if you don't have a yard.

We do have vendor fees, but the majority of our support comes from our corporate sponsors, like Pioneer Hybrid. With their support, we've been able to add Pioneer Court, which is a seating area with tables and chairs and market umbrellas where patrons can sit, take a break, put down all their shopping bags and relax. We've also been able to create a kids' activity to teach them about the benefits of agriculture in their life.

BOB: We partner as much as we can—that helps everybody. For example, we have our Guest Program, where we invite one or two guest organizations per market to have a sale or give out information. It encourages all the organizations to be a part of the market.

I also write a news/market report column, which has been an immeasurable asset to the advancement of the market. The *Washington Evening Journal* has been a great partner by running that, and now KCII, a local radio station, takes the column and uses sections for their area news reports.

The city has been extremely supportive. The Parks Director even makes sure the grass is mowed on the morning of the market. On Thursday nights, the market begins at 5 p.m. and runs until 7:30. At 6:30 p.m., we partner with the Chamber of Commerce for entertainment at Thursday Night Live. At 8 p.m., the community band plays. You can come down at 5 p.m., stay until 9 p.m. and be entertained the whole time. And of course, the business people have been supportive from day one.

EIRV: Did you grow up going to farmer's markets, or did you start shopping at them when you were an adult?

KELLY: I grew up in Des Moines, and I used to go with my grandmother and mother. When we used to shop at the market growing up, it was mainly for produce. Maybe I just don't remember the meat producers. But part of my favorite part here is

people can shop at the market now and really fill their table with their purchases—the bread they serve, the meat they serve, even down to the glass of wine. I'm a city girl, but I love markets.

EIRV: What changes would you still like to see at the market?

BOB: I'd like to get to the point where our good growers and bakers could take swipe cards. Right now, it's almost impossible. I struggled a long time to get wireless Internet access so we could take food stamps, because they've changed to the debit cards. We have a couple vendors who can take cards, but it's unbelievably expensive for someone to get started. But this is excellent produce—it's homegrown and so fresh because they rush to get it to market—that's the kind of thing we'd like to see everybody have a chance to get.

EIRV: Is there something you wish more people knew about farmer's markets?

BOB: I don't think people understand the social strength of farmer's markets. There's a lot of interaction between the growers and the people that come in. Our market has turned the downtown into the social hub of the town. We're up to four or five special events, from a smoker/barbeque contest, to a salsa contest, to a planting demonstration.

KELLY: People who don't shop at markets should know that by getting to know a farmer and shopping and purchasing the food they're growing, they're supporting the economy locally. I wish they knew we had fabulous fresh-baked bread and entertainment every Saturday. The social benefits are tremendous—I encourage people who are already attending markets to bring a friend along each time they go.

EIRV: What is one of your favorite moments at the market?

BOB: One of the shop owners downtown took a young lady under her wing and set her up to sell snow cones. The young lady wasn't even in her teens. She came down one day during a cold snap to sell her snow cones. She was freezing, and so she packed up her little bitty trailer that she pulls with her bike. She went home, came back, set up and sold hot cocoa instead. How do you teach that?

The grandson of another one of our vendors came to visit the market. The next week, he started selling cookies. He said, "I can bring apples, but if I make them into cookies or pies, I'll make a whole lot more." This kid totally understood "value-added." Here we are trying to teach these things to adults all around the state, and this kid was nine years old and he got it.

KELLY: Every week, there's the sense that we're making a difference when I talk to customers who come down and say, "Wow, this is outstanding! We've lived in Des Moines our whole life and had no idea this was going on in our community." That's my passion about this.

