
INCREDIBLE EDIBLES

Real Food Finds a Home in Fairfield

BY BRIAN MORELLI

People in Fairfield are excited about their local food, and it is pretty hard for it not to rub off when you get a personal tour from Fairfield resident and food activist Mary Carter.

Carter leads the Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign in Fairfield, and seems to know everyone and anyone that has an interest in creating a sustainable local food system in town and makes sure all those people know each other too.

I had never been to Fairfield, but there is a certain mystery about the 10,000 person community in Jefferson County. After all Greg Brown wrote a song about them. The Maharishi spiritual movement, practitioners of transcendental meditation, chose the town in the 1970s as a place to start the Maharishi University of Management.

Now, driving into town, ornate worldly-styled structures and Golden Domes for mass meditation replace the farmhouses of the rolling Iowa prairies. But, in town, there is a familiar old-timey city center with brick buildings and a green town square with a familiar Saturday morning tradition in Iowa: a farmers' market.

That is where I first connected with Carter and start to explore Fairfield.

On a typical Saturday, at least 40 vendors are at the square.

Customers and growers come from all over. Vendors described their clients as interested in "unique" produce and meat cuts, and it shows in the range of produce: bok choy, garlic scapes, rare heirloom strains and herbs of all types.

"The thing we find about this market is people looking to try unique types of produce, as opposed to other markets where people just want the basics," said grower Doug Webster of Rolling Prairie Acres, who has been coming to the Fairfield market with his wife Tanya and boys Dalton, Drayce and Dawson for five seasons.

"People here are less willing to see food as a commodity," said Jocelyn Engman, of Pickle Creek Herbal, who sells primarily organic herb varieties. "Here they start to understand that different foods have value. I can get lettuce at Hy-Vee for \$1, but I never really tasted lettuce until I was 19, and I had it out of the garden."

After about an hour at the market, capped off with a bite of a rose gooseberry tartlet from the Canary Café's baked goods stand, we headed off to check out the Maharishi K-12 school's four season teaching greenhouse.

Diana Krystofiak, who leads a sustainability course, walked us through the garden irrigated by a solar powered rainwater pump. Younger children learn more basic lessons of planting, while older students dive into concepts of water conservation, comparison planting in different types of soil and calculating how far commercial produce travels from ground to retailer.

"We want them to know where their plants come from. We want them to love vegetables. We really talk about buying fresh, buying local," Krystofiak said. "They love it. I don't have one child that doesn't like coming into the greenhouse. They get to plant it; they get to see it grow; and they get to eat it."

"Those kids are the future," Carter mused. "We need to get them thinking about where their food comes from."

Next stop: Radiance Dairy, a local favorite for organic milk, yogurt and cheese, which sells only in Fairfield. Carter used to work there. She pulled open a yogurt contain, puts it in front of my face and squirts a thick spoonful of the cream that had risen to the top into my mouth. "Have you ever tasted anything like that?" Carter exclaimed, knowing I hadn't.

"People stop us in the street and thank us for making the milk," owner Francis Thicke said.

Thicke has owned the dairy since 1992, and he expanded and moved it to its current 236-acre location on the northwest part of town in 1996. We hop on a supped-up golf cart and cruise through his picturesque acreage.

"I guess I never thought you needed chemicals to farm," he says as we roll into one of the cow pastures.

Photo by Kurt Michael Friese



Francis Thicke



Diana Krystofiak teaches sustainability at the Maharishi School in Fairfield

It's anyone's guess when projecting human emotions onto animals, but I've never seen cows quite as happy as his herd of Jerseys, a breed Thicke prefers because he says they produce richer, higher quality milk. When we stop, they surround the cart.

Thicke drove us to another section with a mama and her four-hour-old calf. They were sheltering from the sun in a stand of oaks and maples near a small stream. Flies swarmed around them. Thicke pulled out a bottle of organic soybean oil and sprayed them liberally.

"It is good for bug control," he explained

Back in town, Carter had lined up a lunch date at Revelations, a business that started 10 years earlier as a bookstore, expanded to a coffee shop and then into a café. One of the founders, Julie Stephens, who started Revelations with her two sisters and mother, had a private dining room reserved and joined us for lunch. The main course was a brick oven pizza with mozzarella cheese from

Farmers' All Natural Creamery in Kalona and locally grown zucchini. For dessert, ice cream made with milk from Radiance.

Stephens appears won over in the push for local and organic products, and is trying to push it further. "I think it is a better quality, and the food is always fresh," Stephens says.

Each table displays a Buy Fresh Buy Local card and the bookstore has Buy Fresh Buy Local shirt for sale.

"She is integrating throughout the community and really making an impact," Carter said of Stephens, who is also the head of the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce and the first restaurateur to join the Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign in Jefferson County.

The day ended at the expansive Maharishi Vedic City Organic Farms, a wind energy powered enterprise that grows mass quantities of produce ranging from peppers, eggplant, flowers and tomatoes to bitter melon and strawberries, among others. This farm sells directly to customers and restaurants in Iowa and is also a major supplier of organics in the Chicago area.

But before we left town we had to stop at Everybody's. The local co-op grocery holds the pulse of a community, plus I hear they have mango ice cream made by Radiance Dairy.

Most markets have signs that identify the organic section but Everybody's is a little different. It has a small section labeled "not organic." The organics case clears out three times a week, says manager Paul Praither.

"Again, it's community living. They want organics," he said.

Carter and all of Fairfield would agree, and they are lucky to have such abundance.

Photo by Kurt Michael Friese

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www.FairfieldBuyFreshBuyLocal.com

Radiance Dairy

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641.472.8554

Everybody's Whole Foods Store

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