

REACHING THE HEIGHTS

New Farmers' Market Encouraging Healthy Eating In Diverse Neighborhood

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARON GOLDEN



Amina Hassan serves up savory East African sambussas at City Heights Farmers' Market

By the time the City Heights farmers' market opened at 9 am on an overcast Saturday morning in July, there was a long line of people patiently waiting on Wrightman Street near Fairmount Avenue for their turn at the registration tables. That morning, the Senior Nutrition Farmers' Market program was being launched for seniors receiving Social Security income (SSI). Thanks to the county's Department of Aging and Independent Services, those qualified by income would receive a \$20 voucher to buy produce at any San Diego County farmers' market through November. In the first hour, 150 seniors were registered by volunteers and headed off to the nearby stalls to begin spending their money on items like organic oranges, collard greens, avocados and peaches. By the close of the market at 1 pm, 416 seniors had been enrolled.

"We chose to kick off the seniors program at the City Heights farmers' market because of the community it serves and the fact that it accepts food stamps," says Wendy Shigenaga, a nutritionist with the department.

This program is only one of several for the farmers' market that community organizations have been feverishly launching to benefit a largely immigrant neighborhood where over 40 languages are spoken and incomes are low. The market is the first in San Diego County to accept food stamps. It accepts WIC (Women, Infants and Children) coupons and, through a \$10,000 grant from the Wholesome Wave Foundation in Connecticut, is providing dollar-for-dollar matching up to \$10 apiece to WIC voucher recipients and food stamp users to stretch their dollars



at the market. The program has been dubbed the Fresh Fund and if the fund can be increased, it will include seniors and SSI recipients.

The new market itself is a marvel of dedication to a philosophy articulated by Blanca Melendrez, San Diego-Imperial Regional director of the Network for a Healthy California. “We want to provide access to fresh, culturally appropriate and locally grown foods at affordable prices. We want to offer a culturally diverse open-air market and educate the community about nutrition. And, we want to increase dollars entering and staying in City Heights.”

These are ambitious goals and for over a year Melendrez has been working with Tia Anzellotti, executive director of the San Diego Hunger Coalition; Ellee Igoe, in charge of Food Security and Community Health at the International Rescue Committee, San Diego; and an even larger coalition of more than 20 local organizations eager to achieve them. The coalition surveyed the community to make sure it even wanted a farmers’ market and, if so, to learn what foods were wanted. Lots of community meetings provided feedback for the look of the market. But without expertise in farmers’ markets, the coalition members realized they needed a market manager responsible for programming and operations. Acting on their behalf, last spring the three women approached the San Diego County Farm Bureau, which oversees local farmers’ markets, to take on the management role. The International Rescue Committee, San Diego, has taken on the fiscal agency responsibilities.

“The three came to me to set it up,” recalls Casey Anderson, the Farm Bureau’s membership and marketing manager. “They had a vision but had never put one together, so they asked if we could help put it on and manage it.”

Anderson took on the project—the first market the Farm Bureau has actually managed—and in one month, on June 7, to the sound of mariachis and numerous speeches by local supportive politicians like Tony Atkins and Ron Roberts, the farmers’ market opened. There were young women dressed in colorful Somali garb, older women from Vietnam in broad, conical straw hats and lots and lots of kids eagerly waiting for a balloon sculpture or to get their faces painted by a clown in a pink wig. By 11 am, the vendors were almost all sold out of their wares.

Of course, in the weeks that have followed, the challenge for the organizers has been to draw more customers and more vendors. They have about 20 regular vendors now, from farmers and nurseries to Fresca Fish—which sells fresh cod, mahi mahi and tilapia—and several prepared-foods vendors like Amina Hassan, who makes savory East African pastries called sambussas, filled with chicken, beef, spinach, potato and other ingredients, as well as rich eggplant and okra stews. Just a couple of stalls away is Josefina Trzos of Desde Sinaloa Foods. Originally from the Mexican state of Sinaloa, she makes thick grilled gorditas on site, stuffed with black beans, jack cheese, diced nopales and salsa, as well as colorful wraps of homemade flour tortillas filled with chicken

and vegetables. There are, in fact, strict health guidelines for food vendors; you won’t find kettle corn or crepes here.

Additionally, the organizers are bringing in resources to promote healthy eating and cooking. There have been booths that address diabetes and obesity issues, others that promote exercise and do health screenings. And, there is talk of upcoming cooking demonstrations.

“Ultimately, we’d like to engage different ethnic communities for food demonstrations to expose residents to other types of cooking,” says Anzellotti.

Every effort is being made to encourage vendors to join the market as regulars, including discounted fees. The produce vendors pay 8 percent of their take; food vendors are charged \$20 for a stall; community groups can participate for free.

“We want to be as attractive as possible to small farmers so they’ll join us,” says Brian Lewis-Beevers, the City Heights resident hired by the Farm Bureau to be site manager. He adds that Price Charities is providing storage facilities and free parking for the market.

For immigrant residents, the appeal is that they finally have a local market reminiscent of their shopping experience in their former country. “When we first started, people told us that it wouldn’t be successful, but community members here are used to shopping in open-air markets,” says Melendrez.

Some may even be able to participate as vendors if the new Backyard Farmers program takes shape. The International Rescue Committee is working on establishing a community garden in the neighborhood with 80, 600-square-foot plots as well as three larger spots for people interested in moving into a farm incubator project that would encourage growers to produce crops for the market, according to Igoe. “I’d love to see a partnership between the farmers at the market and community members who are interested in getting into farming but who don’t have land,” she says. “We have an aging farming population. We need to move people into farming or we won’t have a local food movement.”

With the help of the San Diego Food Not Lawns group, the permitting process with the City of San Diego is in the last phases. An open house on site last April drew over 100 people, who signed up for a plot or a waiting list for a plot. Already, says Igoe, they’ve started trainings with different ethnic groups, including Cambodian and Somali Bantu residents. There’s even the possibility that some residents who have gardens at their homes might be certified to grow produce that community members would want and form a co-op to sell it at a stall at the farmers’ market, but that, Igoe and Lewis-Beevers acknowledge, has been harder to work through.

“It’s a challenge to get the right permits and an inspection to get certified by the Department of Agriculture,” says Lewis-Beevers. But, he says, that it’s something the market would like to do because he gets a lot of requests for unusual vegetables.

In the meantime, vendors are being encouraged to look at their own crops a bit differently. “Somalis, Vietnamese and Hispanic residents are finding staples but we’re doing a survey to find out what other crops they need so we can tell farmers there’s a market for it,” says Anzellotti. “For instance, Vietnamese like to cook soups with turnip greens but they’re hard to find and expensive. Ironically, farmers who grow turnips cut off the greens and compost them. But, here’s a market for something they’d otherwise toss. It works for everybody.”

What has been noteworthy in particular at this market is, of course, the acceptance of food stamps. The organizers hope that this will be a model for other markets, which have yet to initiate the program. According to Melendrez, San Diego County is one of the few in California that doesn’t automatically include food stamps in its farmers’ market program. “There was some misinformation about how the process works and how cumbersome it would be for vendors and market managers,” she says. “But, the process is easy.”

At the City Heights farmers’ market every week are tables staffed by volunteers where residents can be screened to find out if they’re qualified and then can enroll. Once enrolled and issued an EBT card, they can use the card to get 10, \$1 tokens for use at the market to buy produce. When they get to the market, they take the card to be swiped by an EBT machine, provided to the market for free by the state. When customers are done shopping they can return unused tokens and get credit put back in their account or save the tokens for another week. At the end of the market vendors can go to the market



Bernardino and Veronica Loera of Loera Farms

manager to cash in the tokens they received. “It’s very simple, but farmers were concerned they wouldn’t be paid in a timely fashion,” says Anzellotti. “This addresses the issue.”

With 25,000 residents who qualify for food stamps but aren’t enrolled, the organizers hope that more people who need help paying for

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food will come to sign up. In fact, according to Melendrez, San Diego County has the lowest participation in food stamps in the nation. "In City Heights, almost \$16 million goes back to the government unused," she says. "That's money that doesn't flow in the local economy. We want to increase food security with healthy food and we don't have an environment here in which people can do these things. So this farmers' market is not just a place to sell food, it's a place to promote food stamps and WIC so people who need it can participate."

Indeed, the organizers are thrilled that WIC recipients now have a place close by where they can use farmers' market vouchers. This is a new program, explains Igoe. "WIC changed its rules for the first time in 25 years as to what moms can buy with vouchers at the grocery store to include fresh fruit and vegetables. We think that WIC vouchers should be used at farmers' markets throughout the year, not just at grocery stores. But the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program is only a summer program and participants only get one voucher for up to \$10."

Currently, the WIC FMNP has had only a 30 percent redemption rate in San Diego's mid-city area. "We're trying to increase that with the farmers' market so the funding isn't reduced," says Igoe.

Over the next six months, the State of California will be deciding whether to make the FMNP viable year round. "To help convince them, we launched the Fresh Fund. We want them to see how many moms are buying fresh produce for their kids," Igoe says. In fact, a study published earlier this year by researchers at UCLA found that participants who received \$10 in weekly vouchers to purchase produce from a nearby farmers' market or supermarket increased their fruit and vegetable consumption and kept that up even six months after the coupons were

suspended. The researchers pointed out that the findings demonstrate that WIC participants value fresh fruits and vegetables, suggesting that increasing their accessibility would increase their consumption.

At the Loera Farms stall, Fallbrook farmers Bernardino and Veronica Loera say that more than half of their sales are paid for with food stamp tokens. And Chris Johnson, co-owner of Fresca Fish, says he's happy to participate in the market and introduce customers to products they might not be familiar with. "We're selling our fish at very reasonable prices," he says. "We make a shrimp ceviche and snow crab dip. Kids will come up and taste it and say, 'That's fish?' But, it's so expensive they don't know what it is."

With affordable fish and greens and fruit and healthfully prepared ethnic foods, the organizers of the City Heights farmers' market are trying to improve the community as a whole. "We want to use the market to educate the community about nutrition and to increase the dollars entering and staying in City Heights," says Melendrez. "Our goal is to develop a replicable model that can assist other communities in San Diego, particularly low-income areas. By providing a healthy environment, our goal is to have a healthy community." ▶

City Heights Farmers' Market

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