

The Omnivore's Delight

The Saratoga Farmers Market has been ahead-of-the-curve for more than 30 years, providing the area with an increasingly diverse range of local and artisanal foods

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“Can we put it here?” a woman asks a vendor at the Saratoga Farmers Market on a Saturday in July. The vendor is Jeff Bowers of Sweet Spring Farm in Argyle. He keeps 35 goats on his farmstead, where he makes cheeses for market. The customer is Susan Daniels, and her question relates to a treat she’s made from Bowers’ chevre. She’s rolled the cheese’s sides in little leaves of lemon thyme, pressed chopped walnuts into the top, and now she’s drizzling honey on top. She empties crackers into a basket and hands the smiling cheesemaker the recipe so people can try her creation and she can gush to this reporter about how she loves this cheese and this market.

“We get his cheese shipped to us in Dallas,” says Daniels, who was born in Gloversville and has a summer place nearby that she enjoys five weeks a year. People sample the cheese and take pictures of it and the recipe with their iPhones.

“We love the market,” she says. “We bring food home in our suitcases: Kirby cucumbers, sweet cherry tomatoes, squash blossoms. I get fresh flowers here because we don’t have wildflowers in Dallas.” Daniels works for a school district and haunts the market on Wednesdays and Saturdays when she’s in town. Daniels and her husband rent out their place during track season, like so many other Saratogians. Jeff Bowers is president of the Saratoga Farmers Market Association, which has 65 vendors. These members specialize in everything edible, from vegetables and berries to jams, bread, cheese, meats and eggs. A few big vendors focus on the more visual elements of the plant realm—flowers, annuals and perennials—and there are also craftspeople in the mix. Any given summer Saturday might find 50 vendors under and sprawling beyond the U-shaped pavilion, which was built in 1998 with money from donations and a New York state Agriculture and Markets grant. By then the market was 20 years old, which is ancient in terms of the evolution of mainstream awareness in local foods.

The Association also sponsors a market in Clifton Park Thursday afternoons. The Saratoga Farmers Market runs 3-6 on Wednesdays and 9-1 on Saturdays. Once a month on Wednesdays, the market features Market Manner Dogs, a training and testing program that helps manage the market’s policy of allowing dogs at market. Other markets in and around the area only allow service dogs.

Devotion to vendors, such as Susan Daniels’ salute to Sweet Spring Farm, is pretty common at farmers markets that are strict about their local production rules. The Saratoga market draws from the four surrounding counties, and vendors must grow or make what they sell. This seems to act as a quality assurance guarantee, and fosters said devotion. When you can talk to the person who planted the seeds, cultivated the seedlings, raised the animals and made the croissants, the personal connection strengthens the farmer-customer and producer-customer bonds.

Michael Kilpatrick loves interacting with customers, talking about how the season’s going at the farm.

“I get excited to see people get excited about the food,” says Kilpatrick, who runs a vegetable farm and also raises meat birds, one of which recently landed on Martha Stewart’s table. Enthusiasm for Kilpatrick Family Farm, which began eight years ago as a homeschooling project when Michael was 16, is rampant. Chefs from Saratoga restaurants like Tim Meaney of Beekman Street Bistro shop the stall’s piles of beautiful vegetables twice weekly. Home cooks frequent the tables, too, many of them picking up their weekly CSA allotment from specially marked coolers at the back of the stand, where they can also flip through cookbooks to get ideas for dinner.

Members of the Denison Farm CSA also pick up at the Saratoga Market, and lines often loop through the stall as people wait for their turn. Other favorite vegetable growers are New Minglewood and Pleasant Valley Farm.

A unique aspect of the Saratoga Farmers Market is the population change that happens each August. “Everything in Saratoga is affected by the track. Locals leave because they don’t want to be around. The minute schools start, they’re back,” says Suzanne Carreker-Voight, market coordinator. “People buy whole racks of meat. They’re buying to entertain.”

The locals who stay in town, she says, spend what they always spend, coming early to the market and leaving before the tourists. Vendors report different experiences with August. Potter Doug Klein loses some locals but gains others.

“I have some out-of-town clients who own horses and come and add to their collection every year,” says Klein, noting that tourists come to market to see farmers in their natural habitat, but tend to eat in restaurants.

Vegetable growers bring more of certain items to suit the restaurants that stock at market: Beekman Street Bistro, Mouzon House, Max London’s and the Gideon Putnam. Plenty of people buy cheese from Sweet Spring Farm because it is small and is an obvious grab for a picnic. Same with cherry tomatoes, say the vegetable growers.

“They’re looking for something they can bring back to the inn, take to the track or their room,” says Justine Denison, from Denison Farm, which has been selling in Saratoga for 6 years. In that time, she’s noted changes in vendors and shoppers. “Customers tend to use the whole market the whole year round.” Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* was published in 2006, informing a legion of curious eaters about many of the intimate and dangerous details of our food system. Prior to that book, awareness of local foods was certainly developing, as were the farmers who now feed the aware more than lovely mesclun mixes—truly free-range eggs and locally raised meats.

By the time Pollan’s book became a bestseller, this market was approaching its 30th anniversary and already ahead-of-the-curve in terms of building a legion of vendors to feed the need for all things local. Recently, the Saratoga Farmers Market expanded its offerings to add Pura-Vida Fish—the only exception to its four-county range limit.

“The more diversity you have, the better it is. Farmers are hurting and they need to get the retail price,” says Anne Mae Clark, who is famous for her jams and a notable straw hat she wears. She’s been with the market for ages making jam. “At first the city wasn’t very keen. They thought the market was competition for businesses, but people wanted the market to get the local food with no middleman.”