

Tradition, innovation at farmers market

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Published 11:40 am, Friday, August 16, 2013

The rising sun isn't exactly visible early on an Aptos Saturday morning. It only brightens the fog cloaking the Cabrillo College parking lot, where a fleet of battered trucks and vans is disgorging tons of brilliant fresh produce.

Practiced hands speedily erect a village of tables and awnings, and before long the smells of brewing coffee, roasting corn and warm bread are mingling with the aroma of fresh peaches, basil, strawberries and flowers.

Founded by a handful of Santa Cruz farmers 36 years ago, the Aptos Farmers Market is now a rambling bazaar with 90 farm stands and a years-long waiting list for new vendors.

Shoppers are treated to hundreds of varieties of fresh produce along with fresh fish, meat, bread, cheese, milk, eggs, dates, honey, olive oil, preserves, pasta and other farm delicacies.

The market, which for decades has helped preserve local family farms, keeping them afloat with direct-to-consumer sales and a devoted customer base, is now bucking another industry trend: While U.S. farmers as a group are aging, this crowd sports a lot of fresh young faces.

"A lot of us old-timers have really noticed all of the young people who are choosing to go into farming," says market director Catherine Barr, a 20-year market veteran. "Some of them are second- and third-generation farmers taking over for their parents, and some are kids with no farming background who just love the food and farm scene."

The generational change, in turn, is driving innovation in the market stands, where being the first to supply a trendy product like pasture-raised lamb can provide a financial boost, helping small farms compete against outfits many times their size.

"The younger farmers get it that they can't just grow carrots, lettuce and berries anymore. They're finding niche products like padron peppers, pine berries, or these amazing white strawberries with little red seeds," Barr says. "They're bringing in really interesting things, really great-tasting things."

Beau Schoch, who sells hand-crafted cheese and certified raw milk, is a third-generation dairyman who grew up on a small family farm near Salinas.

Over the decades, competition from enormous dairies in the Central Valley whittled away at the family business, and Schoch and his brothers all took jobs off the farm after college. But then he took a cheese-making course at Cal Poly and envisioned a new future for the farm his grandparents built.

"The trend now is that people want to know where their food comes from, people want to know how crops are grown and the animals raised," Schoch says. "There are lots of opportunities for the younger generation to create value-added products and make a viable business."

Hand-crafted Jack

Schoch used his family's milk supply to create a line of handcrafted cheeses, and Schoch Family Farmstead is now the only remaining dairy in Monterey County producing traditional Monterey Jack cheese.

"I'd like to say that I'm using the same cheese recipes that my Swiss grandmother used," Schoch says. "But it wasn't until 2006 that my brothers and I learned the basics."

Beau and his brothers Seth and Ty recently installed cheese- and yogurt-making equipment, and plan to shrink the family's herd, switch the cows to pasture feeding, and possibly go organic.

He says his parents are thrilled with the changes.

"When you just send your milk off to the creamery, you never get a chance to see the finished product, or put your name on it," Schoch says. "This is new for us, but in a way it's going back to how my grandparents used to farm. It's more sustainable, more personal, more rewarding."

Farmer Jerry Thomas, one of the founders of the Aptos market, was contemplating retirement until his son Josh and daughter-in-law Kari decided to take over the business.

Takeover blossoms

"We were cutting back and sort of thinking about retiring, but Josh and Kari could see an opportunity to ramp things up and do a lot more," Thomas says. "They expanded the farm significantly, and focused more on the organic cut flowers. We've got 15 young people working at the markets now, and even more working out on the farm itself."

Thomas credits Gov. Jerry Brown's foresight for keeping California's small farms alive. Before Brown created the Certified Farmers Market program during his first term, strict packaging rules prohibited farmers from selling directly to consumers. There are now at least 700 certified farmers markets in the state.

"I was on the original board that did the groundwork for this market. I don't think anyone at that time, including myself, thought it would become as big and iconic as it is now," Thomas says.

Niche products

Other young farmers at the Aptos market have introduced niche products such as sheep-milk cheese, pasture-raised meat and eggs, fruit preserves and chutneys, and organic cut flowers arranged into exquisite small bouquets.

"There's always something different," says market shopper and Capitola resident Tracey Brookshier, nibbling a sample of Schoch's raw-milk Edam cheese. "It's very high quality. We are so lucky to live in one of the major produce areas in the whole U.S."

Ken Kimes and Sandra Ward started selling organic sprouts at the Aptos market in the early 1980s, an exotic product for that time that has remained popular over the years.

Strict rules

"This was one of the very first farmers' markets in California, and so much has changed over the years," Kimes says. "The market scene has grown like crazy, and it's much more rigorous. The ag commissioner requires that you actually grow what you sell, and there's strict certification for organic."

Kimes and Ward have contemplated retirement, but enjoy meeting their customers and the camaraderie of market day. Kimes understands why young people are entering farming, despite the long hours and uncertain pay.

"At the heart of most every farmer is this idea that you're feeding people, you're contributing something essential, and it's really satisfying," he says. "I feel that it provides an authentic life, and allows you to participate in the ongoing round of life on this planet."

"It's a feeling you're not going to get working for a corporation."

If you go

Aptos Farmers Market: 8 a.m.-noon Saturdays year round, rain or shine, atop parking structure at Cabrillo College, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. www.montereybayfarmers.org/aptos.html

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