

Farmer's Markets

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by Sarah Parkin

All over the world, in all different cultures, people gather at street markets to buy food for their families. In the last decade, more Americans participated in the practice by visiting their local Farmer's Market on a weekly basis. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Services, there were 1,755 active farmer's markets in 1994. That number sprouted to 4,385 in 2006. Farmer's Markets usually feature locally grown products. In addition to fruits and vegetables, many markets sell cheese, eggs, grass-fed beef, and free-range poultry. Farmers also sell products manufactured on the farm, such as jams and jellies, or honey. Some markets feel more like a fair with live entertainment and sales of arts and crafts.

Finding a Market

We all enjoy the taste of tomatoes full of flavor or tender, luscious peaches. However, we bypass rock-hard tomatoes and peaches offered at the supermarket. Both the farmer and the consumer benefit from the sales at the Farmer's Market. The farmer gets a fair price for their product, and the shopper gets fresh, ripe food. Depending on where you live, your farmer's market may be seasonal, or hours may change with the seasons. To find a Farmer's market near you, check your local paper, or check online at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/map.htm>.

Different communities have different rules for their markets. Some require the food to be grown locally. Some markets have strict rules for pricing, quality, and vendor selection. Some allow farmers to purchase items to resell at the market. Product quality varies by stall, so it is always worth looking around and chatting with the individual vendors.

Talk to the Vendor

Farmers generally love to share their knowledge. Go ahead and ask questions. When was the food picked? Where was it grown? How should it be prepared? What was the growing method? Does it qualify for USDA organic status? Obtaining organic status often takes a great deal of time, effort, paperwork, and money on the part of the farmer, so some farmers are practicing organic methods but may not have USDA organic status.

In recent years, our awareness of the vulnerability of our food supply increased. We hear news reports about E. Coli, salmonella, and mad cow disease on a regular basis. Organic brands appear on grocery shelves next to the foods we have always purchased. Medical studies continue to show that the foods we eat affect our health. In addition, buying locally appeals to the environmentally conscious consumer attempting to reduce the use of fossil fuels when products ship across the country. We have become discriminating consumers.

Look for "The Dirty Dozen"

If you are concerned about organic foods, the Environmental Working Group (EWG) <http://www.ewg.org/>, a non-profit food-safety organization, compiled lists based on tests run by the USDA and the FDA (Food and Drug Administration). The first list is the high-pesticide fruits and vegetables, starting with the most contaminated. These are nicknamed "the dirty dozen."

1. peaches
2. apples

3. bell peppers
4. celery
5. nectarines
6. strawberries
7. cherries
8. pears
9. imported grapes
10. spinach
11. lettuce
12. potatoes

At the other end of the spectrum are foods less contaminated by pesticides, starting with the least contaminated.

1. onions
2. avocado
3. sweet corn
4. pineapples
5. mango
6. asparagus
7. sweet peas
8. kiwifruit
9. bananas
10. cabbage
11. broccoli
12. papaya

Take the power of your knowledge about food to the market and start asking questions. Join the increasing number of Americans who are attending Farmer's Markets. Enjoy the outing, and then enjoy the food.

Sarah Parkin began her freelance writing career in 1999, primarily focusing on business and community issues. In 2001, she began writing biographies for Gale Group publications. She is a contributing writer for View Magazine. Red Coyote Press will publish her fiction short story, "Quick Draw", in the anthology *Medium of Murder* in March of 2008. She founded Sparkin Productions, LLC in 2007 to expand her freelance journalism business. <http://www.sparkinproductions.com/>.