



THE PRESS

OFF TO MARKET

SATURDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2006

KATE FRASER

After a stuttering start, farmers' markets are popping up throughout the south. Kate Fraser goes shopping to investigate.

Market stalls in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Central and South America still sell the fruit, vegetables, herbs, spices, meat, poultry, fish, birds, snakes, frogs and snails that their forefathers sold centuries ago, and ``fresh'' is still the key to success. If customers want fresh-picked, just harvested, still warm or in some countries still alive, street markets sell it.

Until recently New Zealand did not have such markets. Roadside vegetable sheds and corner stores yes, but stalls with homemade, homegrown goods were for once-a-year fetes and school fairs.

In the United States, the shift from neighborhood shops began after World War 2. Refrigerated trucks ferried fruit and vegetables, beef and bacon from side to side and opposite ends of the country in such quantities that small suppliers were squeezed out. To provide cost efficiencies, farming changed from small parcels of land to mega-farms with giant irrigators rolling across intensively fertilised crops. "Fresh", "local" and "seasonal" came to be irrelevant, and farmers sticking to the old ways lost the battle.

In the 1960s, New Zealand experienced a similar shift in food production and shopping, and now we are also experiencing the reaction. Farmers' markets have emerged as a counter to the distancing between us (consumers) and them (producers). Proponents want to provide a food system that gives consumers place-based fresh food and gives growers the opportunity to capture a greater share of the price paid for it.

The movement began in the United States in 1976, when Congress passed the Farmer to Consumer Direct Marketing Act. Farmers' markets are now a worldwide phenomenon and although not all participants are singing from the same songbook, "fresh, regional and seasonal" is the psalm.

In New Zealand the trend is at bud stage but growth is evident. Last year, 12 markets signed up as members of the NZ Food Markets Association (NZFMA); this year the number is between 20 and 25. The association has had its first conference, and there is a strong push for all participants to stick to its rules. Namely:

A farmers' market is a food market where local growers, farmers and artisan food producers sell their wares direct to consumers. Vendors may sell only what they grow, farm, pickle, preserve, bake, smoke or catch from within a defined local area.

Sceptics say farmers' markets appeal to the same slice of the customer base as those who travel many kilometres to buy organic vegetables and meat. "Only for those who can afford it" is sometimes the response, but whether that is true or false, there is no doubting the movement's popularity.

Christchurch's first version of a farmers' market was the short-lived World Famous Canterbury Produce Market, in Tuam Street. It opened with loud publicity in January 2003 and for a time promised much, but it closed 11 months later. Products sold ranged from herbs to handcreams, fresh fish to fresh fruit, but not every seller grew, farmed, pickled etc their wares. Occasionally it was more hype than substance, but it was probably before its time.

There were tentative steps to establish similar markets, but it wasn't until Duncan Wilcox, formerly of the US, now resident of Lyttelton, got behind the idea of setting up a farmers' market in his new town that the concept took off.

Lyttelton Farmers' Market is an undoubted success. It opened the first week in September 2005, and has opened every Saturday since. It defied local weather "experts" and stayed open through winter, surprising toughing-it-out stallholders with little or no drop in profits. There are now 20 to 25 stalls each Saturday, and the variety continues to increase.

There has been comment on Tuahiwi Gardens' presence at Lyttelton Farmers' Market, given this stallholder also sells imported produce, albeit organic. Bananas from Ecuador are neither local nor seasonal, but Wilcox points out that "plenty of shoppers do a weekly fruit and veg shop here, and they want to buy bananas and oranges".

Indeed. Tuahiwi Gardens' stall attracts long queues of shoppers waiting to buy not only his bananas but his vegetables, fresh from the farm at Tuahiwi. Depending on the season they can include kohlrabi, white turnips, french radishes, salsify, artichokes, courgette flowers and heirloom tomatoes. There are also three other fruit and vegetable stalls, as well as baking, jams, preserves, salads, pies, Murellen pork and, down on the wharf, fish.

Wilcox organised a gatecount last Saturday. The tally 1500 customers. "A few Lyttelton residents complain about too many people coming here on Saturdays, but mostly the comments are positive," he says. "Some businesses have doubled and tripled their takings, and I think the market might have changed a few lives here."

Jamie Bennett and Sam Marchant relaunched their one-season-old Canterbury Farmers' Market (held on the back lawns of Riccarton House) this spring with a greater mix of stalls. Bennett's philosophy is similar to Wilcox's on the inclusion of produce from other regions. "People tell us they want to buy oranges and kiwifruit with their beans and lettuces, so some of the rules have to be bent slightly to make it a viable market. We do plan to bend them back into place as growers start coming through."

Bennett and Marchant own the cafe Taste at Riccarton House, and Bennett says taking on the market as well is like taking on 20 to 30 small businesses. "I feel responsible if they haven't had a good day."

He is pleased with the response thus far to the new-look market and puts it down to "the atmosphere and the mix of produce, which includes goatmilk cheeses, vegetables, berries, organic and gluten-free breads, wine, saffron, oils, even a grower selling tulip bulbs".

In Britain, some enlightened supermarkets rent space in their carparks to farmers' markets, figuring those shopping for free-range eggs and organic bread also need supermarket toilet paper and soap powder. In Canterbury, two enlightened wineries have farmers' markets in their grounds.

Lolly Fairweather has established a small farmers' market in the sheds and grounds of her property, The Wineshed, at Tai Tapu, and Pegasus Bay Winery in Waipara is home to the new Waipara Valley Farmers' Market.

The latter has been driven by the enthusiasm and energy of Angela Clifford. Originally from Christchurch, Clifford and her partner, Nick

Gill, are living in Waipara after a few years in South Australia's Barossa Valley, where they were prime movers in the establishment of the famous Barossa Farmers' Market.

Waipara is only a few weeks into its first season and the market is still small. It is, however, diverse: olives, Molesworth honey, fresh fish from Kaikoura, herbs, baby vegetables, flowers, ice cream, German breads, olive oils and dressings, mint syrups and new potatoes were on sale last Saturday. For \$15 shoppers can become a ``friend of the market'' and receive a weekly email with produce updates and recipes.

WHERE TO FIND THEM:

Blenheim: A&P Showgrounds, Maxwell St. Sundays, November-April; 9am-noon. **Central Otago:** Cromwell Old Town. 1st and 3rd Sunday, September-Easter; every Sunday in January; 9am-1pm. **Christchurch:** Canterbury Farmers' Market, Riccarton House, 16 Kahu Rd. Saturdays, October-April; 9am-noon. **Kaiapoi:** Produce Market, Charles St. Saturdays, October-May; 9am-noon. **Lincoln:** Opening Nov. 25, Selwyn Farmers' Market, Edward St. Saturdays till March; 9am-noon. **Lyttelton:** Lyttelton Main School, Oxford St. Saturdays, 10am-1pm. **Nelson:** Founders Heritage Park, Atawhai Drive. Sundays, 9am-noon. **Oxford:** Main St by Oxford Service Centre. Sundays, September-May; 8.30am-noon. **Tai Tapu:** The Wineshed Vineyard, 29 Cossars Rd. Saturdays, 10am-2pm. **Waipara Valley:** Pegasus Bay Winery, Stockgrove Rd. Saturdays, 9am-noon.