

The Oregonian

January 29, 2008

Markets may be chilly, but there's still lots to love

The soul of the winter market Markets may be chilly,
but there's still lots to love Shoppers look for fresh local produce

KATHLEEN BAUER

If a look out the window on a winter morning makes you want to snuggle back under the covers, welcome to the club. Especially on a weekend morning, padding through the kitchen for another cup of tea is infinitely more appealing than schlepping through an outdoor farmers market.

But when I think ahead to dinner, the idea of roasted chicken or a warm bowl of soup chock-full of winter greens is mighty powerful --powerful enough to get me out of the house and headed to one of Portland's winter markets.

Now I know the phrase "winter farmers market" sounds like an oxymoron, like "open secret" or "original copies," but all you have to do is bundle up a bit, grab your market bag and discover, as I did, that a whole bunch of people think this is actually fun, not to mention a way to eat fresher and more seasonally. Plus you can find great snacking on wonderful artisan cheeses and prepared foods, and warm drinks to minimize the chill factor.

The People's Year-Round Farmer's Market is a tiny collection of five to 15 vendors, depending on the week, gathered in the square in front of People's Food Co-op just north of Powell Boulevard on Southeast 21st from 2 to 7 p.m. every Wednesday. The co-op has had a winter market off and on since its inception in 1993, and market manager Sarah Cline says that it's growing bigger and increasing in sales every year. Like the co-op, this market has a dedicated and ferociously loyal following among co-op members and residents of this densely populated inner-eastside neighborhood. While vendors sell the expected root vegetables --turnips, parsnips, Jerusalem artichokes --there are also plenty of mixed winter greens along with bok choy, mushrooms, wildflower honey, garlic, squash, kiwis and shallots.

The market's clientele are often young and committed to eating fresh, seasonal, organic products. Vendor Lyle Stanley of Gee Creek Farm says that, for his customers, "It's like a religion here." Customers flock to his stand to buy organic winter greens like kale and chard in colors from green to deep purple that he grows on his farm near Ridgefield, Wash. The power of the market isn't just emotional, it's economic. Melissa De Young, baker at Fressen Artisan Bakery, says the bakery recently decided to discontinue its wholesale business and sell its breads exclusively at Portland's farmers markets, making the winter markets an important part of their year-round sales strategy. At the People's market, she says, her customers love her granola, pretzels and spelt bread. Though Fressen also has a booth at the Hillsdale Farmers Market during the winter, it makes spelt bread "specifically for this market because there's not a market for it anywhere else." She says that at the Hillsdale market, customers "seem to go more for pastries and dessert items."

The Hillsdale Farmers' Market experimented with a winter market in 2003, opening one Sunday a month from November through March and taking a break in April before opening for the spring season, according to market manager Eamon Molloy. It was so successful that the next year it expanded to two Sundays a month (still closing in April), and then in 2007 organizers decided to operate year-round. As for the weather, which can get downright miserable some winter days, Molloy says she can count on a core group of around 1,000 shoppers no matter what. Although inclement weather does reduce the number of people somewhat, they tend to be more serious buyers.

Chrissie Zaerpoor of Kookoolan Farms agreed. "It doesn't matter what the weather is, sales are the same." Kookoolan tried selling its meats and eggs at the People's market but found it wasn't profitable enough to make it worth the time and energy required. "At People's, they look around but aren't there to buy food as much as at Hillsdale," she says.

The 30 to 35 stalls that fill this market between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Sundays don't look that different from the rest of the year, with tables and bins overflowing with produce, cheeses, dried beans and all manner of preserves and canned items. Gathering Together Farm has its own line of pickled jalapenos, fruit spreads and tomato sauces along with greens such as kale, collards and mustard greens and, you guessed it, root vegetables such as potatoes, parsley roots, cipollini onions, Jerusalem artichokes, parsnips and turnips.

The public's misconceptions about winter markets hang on, though, according to Carol Boutard of Ayers Creek Farm. "They automatically assume there's nothing green," she says. She and husband Anthony grow a mix of field greens they

sell as "misticanza," a mix of radish greens, borage shoots, arugula and buck's-horn plantain. To that they add smaller amounts of aromatic, bitter and pungent greens, including sow's thistles and blessed thistles, dandelion, fenugreek, parsley, chervil, cresses, rapes and mustards. These can be blanched and left whole or chopped for soup or as a vegetable side dish.

As for the produce found in mainstream stores this time of year, Carol says only half-jokingly, "People go to the supermarket and the prices are phenomenal because they've been dragged up from . . . the Central Valley of California." In contrast, at the farmers market, she says, "You've got meat, you've got so much organic produce. There's honey, cheese. . . . This is so wonderful because it's so seasonal."

"It's a nice market for us," says Amy Benson of Square Peg Farm, also new to the Hillsdale market but a well-known regular at the Portland Farmers Market. "A lot of our customers from Portland knew that we were going to be here. They've been rationing their eggs for three weeks so they had to get here and get their eggs." She adds that for farmers and customers alike, "winter markets are only going to get more popular."

Molloy echoes that sentiment. "Eighty percent of our customers live within five miles of the market. There should be another winter market in another part of the city." Kathleen Bauer is a Portland food writer and graphic designer. Visit her blog at <http://goodstuffnw.blogspot.com>.

-- Kathleen Bauer is a Portland food writer and graphic designer. Visit her blog at <http://goodstuffnw.blogspot.com>.