"The American Farmers Market"
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Brattleboro, Vermont, is a town perched on the sometimes hostile border between genuine ruralness—actual farmers—and the new age, manifested in such tell-tale signs as multiple yoga centers and a well-worn vegetarian restaurant. My grandmother transplanted there in the early '60s, making her a similar combination of old and new. She might look like an old-timer in her hunting jacket and boots, yet when the roads aren't too icy you'll find her rattling pick-up parked outside the co-op.

She tells a story of the local farmers market, a fair representation of the traditional institution's modern incarnation. By the time she discovered the market, it had matured into a weekly affair with a strong personality, a loyal following, and a stable of young growers purveying chioggia beets and willowy leeks. During one of her first trips there, the old-timers were discovering the market for themselves. A few were selling their products, but most were lurking around the edges of the grassy lot in suspenders and flannel pants, deciding whether they were witnessing a bastardization of something that rightfully belonged to them, or a concept they might just condone, even though it was not quite what it ought to be.

Then, from between the stalls selling dense bouquets and rosy apples, came a tie-dye-clad hippie, his gray hair spilling out from under a beret. Though his eyes were closed and he walked slowly, his presence was commanding. Both of his hands were stretched around a thick, pointed piece of quartz: he was demonstrating how to divine water by using a crystal. If the old-timers had been feeling alright about the market until then, their minds suddenly changed. A few stayed to gawk, but most made for their trucks, heads shaking.

By definition, the modern American farmers market is not much different from its ancestor: a place where farmers sell the food they've grown and consumers buy it. Today, though, markets exist for more than just commerce. That they ride the social fence with my grandmother—somewhere between pure, raw agriculture and something earnest, intentional—seems contrary to their nature.

Markets are places where food is exchanged for money, goods, or other food. Our nation's earliest interpretations were informal gatherings, simple in structure. Supply consisted of farmers' surplus or wild food scavenged by women and Native Americans; demand was simply the needs of soldiers and others who weren't full-time growers.

As with any lucrative arrangement, enterprising citizens recognized the value of these gatherings and sought to institutionalize them. In the late 1600s and early 1700s, the trading sites were designated as market squares, and a town hall was often erected on an adjacent plot. From the halls were issued basic regulations, designating times when selling might take place or ensuring that measurements conformed to standards.

Despite advances, the governing technology and transportation were still fairly crude. Because goods were brought mostly by wagon, vendors were exclusively local. The threat of rotting meat meant that only small game was sold during summer. Winter markets were better, and not only because beef was available. Gliding across ice on their sleighs, northern traders could carry more, and heavier, goods, such as grains and livestock. Winter also meant less fieldwork, leaving more time throughout the colonies for the often arduous journey to market and the social life awaiting there. Even though the gatherings had become planned events at fixed locations, the commerce continued to be defined by the supply side's ebb and flow.

Then, in the mid-1700s, came a critical shift. As urban areas flourished, consumer power grew exponentially, tipping the delicate balance of interdependence between customers and suppliers. Growth did cause an increased demand for food, creating more selling opportunities, but in these changing versions of the old markets, the customer became top priority. As was proclaimed by the Common Council of the City of New York on August 23, 1763: "The markets are Intended for the Benefitt of House Keeper's who buy for their own use."

Although the markets themselves prospered from this kind of official consideration, individual growers suffered. Developing cities moved their markets to newly built sheds, where selling took place only at certain times on certain days. The resulting concentration of sellers was less profitable for the itinerant farmer than for the growing ranks of middlemen, who seized the opportunity to set up semi-permanent businesses within the new buildings. Those who still sold on the street (because cost or space excluded them from the sheds or because they couldn't make a profit in the glutted market there) faced smear campaigns that represented their food as unclean. Initially, cities issued regulations intended to protect individual farmers, but as the ranks of "House Keeper's" grew, these regulations were eased in order to attract to the city a sufficient supply of food, regardless of its origin.

For those who continued to sell at market, the opportunities increased: burgeoning cities meant bustling markets; and improved transportation, especially in the form of railroads, meant greater accessibility. Whereas getting to Philadelphia might once have taken a half-day by wagon, it might now take only an hour. Likewise, those who had lived far from the big markets could now sell their goods there, turning greater profits than they would in the country.

At the same time, railroads and waterways, now navigable from the Atlantic to Duluth, freed cities from their dependence on the immediate countryside—even the surrounding region—for food. In 1830, travel writer Anna Royall described the Charleston Market as selling "all the nuts of the globe" and volumes of "West India fruit," including lemons, bananas, and oranges. By 1870, when a refrigerated railroad car first carried vegetables and fresh salmon from the Pacific to Chicago, supply was no longer limited to food in season and not yet sold or spoiled that day.

The markets, too, were swept up in the national trend toward efficiency and progress. By the 1850s, sheds had been abandoned or demolished and grand halls built, and efforts were made to improve sanitation and fairness in selling. Despite these changes, though, the markets were losing public favor. As urban populations reached a tipping point, vibrancy gave way to overcrowding and filth. Fresh food was blamed for dreaded diseases, including cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis. Although the truth of these claims was not easily proved, food was in fact more likely to spoil before it reached urban tables, as growers were now located increasingly far from the city and middlemen were usually handling their goods.

Thus the climate was perfect for the advent of industrial food preservation and distribution. Starting with elementary designs in the 1830s, canned foods gained popularity throughout the nineteenth century. Selling them were the newly established grocery stores, which could finally be supported by the critical masses of burgeoning city populations. Supplied by food processors, packagers, and wholesalers by way of refrigerated railway cars, grocery stores embodied the modernity for which America yearned.

Farmers markets, on the other hand, were regarded as deadweight from the past. As historian and Philadelphia market manager David O'Neil explains, "Baskets of onions and hanging sides of beef were a filthy reminder of a past that was no longer considered useful." The markets tried to keep up, instituting stricter rules governing food handling and sanitation. And through the next half-century, markets continued to be part of city life, especially in smaller towns and in the West. (Seattle's Pike Place Market reportedly opened in 1907 with eight farmers and ten thousand shoppers—and everyone sold out by eleven a.m.) By the turn of the twentieth century, though, the bond between farmer and consumer had been replaced by the desire for almighty Convenience. The heyday was over.

The twentieth century brought more of the same for market farmers: trucks offered them greater opportunities for distributing food, but tractors enabled them to produce more, and greater production brought prices down. Nascent advertising and marketing propelled prepared foods to new heights in consumer esteem, and chain grocery stores experienced extensive growth—between 1912 and 1915 "the A&P Company reputedly opened a new store every three days." Even farm families were adopting the new American attitude toward food. According to a study done by The Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station in 1920, rural families in the state purchased more than half their fruit and up to a quarter of their vegetables from delivery services.

Farmers markets saw a brief burst of support during the Beautify America campaign of the 1910s, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) went so far as to establish an "Office of Markets" to modernize the institutions. But as investment shifted from retail to wholesale, the markets lost funding quickly, and many of the smaller ones did not withstand the Depression. Shortages during World War II caused other markets to close, and in the West, where growers were predominantly Asian American, Japanese internment dealt them a nearly final blow.

Strangely, a 1946 USDA report lists 724 “farmers’ produce markets”—more than ever. What’s telling, though, is the authors’ definition of the markets. Two of the four categories involve middlemen (farmer to wholesaler and wholesaler to consumer), evidence that somewhere along the line the grower himself had become a non-essential ingredient. In reality, for a population of 141 million there were only 291 farmer-to-consumer markets. Fewer than ten percent of all farmers growing vegetables for sale participated personally in the markets (wholesale or not), or fewer than two percent of the six million farmers nationwide.

What did remain of farmers markets after World War II fell into the deadly path of the American automobile. The Federal-Aid Highway Acts of 1938 and 1944 set in motion the transcontinental highways, the eventual backbone of modern American food distribution. (Today, thanks to that system, beets and beef travel an average of 1,500 miles in their journey to the table.) With the development of the automobile and the construction of massive webs of new roads, food could be grown wherever farming was most economical and then trucked to where it was needed. Further, people who once filled the cities could now spread out into the suburbs. Farmers markets, born out of the needs of concentrated populations, had inspired growth and eventually become integral to the urban way of life. But now that the people themselves were dispersing, the old system simply didn’t work any more.

The Philadelphia farmers market, still housed in the same building it has occupied since 1896, proves that the market tradition never completely died. But for the most part, by the 1960s the dual pressures of suburbia and competition from agribusiness were squeezing small farms out of existence, and very few markets remained. On the other hand, consumers had begun to question corporate control of essentials, such as food. The publication of “Silent Spring” (1962), with its startling news about DDT, jolted shoppers into realizing how disconnected they were from the food supply. If they wanted spray-free apples, they would have to hunt them down; grocery stores simply didn’t have them.

One way to address consumer concerns was to reinvent the concept of the farmers market. As pioneers such as Barry Benepe realized, buying directly from growers would not only help sustain small farms, it would offer something that efficient and low-priced modern food distribution couldn't: consumer control. When Benepe founded New York's Greenmarket in 1976, his goal was not just to provide food to urbanites, as markets had in the past, but to provide fresh, healthy food in great enough variety to offer consumers the power of choice. At the same time, by eliminating middlemen, farmers would get a better price for their crops. And in turn, hopes went, they would be inspired to keep their farms smaller, grow food more carefully, and nurture a more conscious agriculture.

Congress put the sentiment in writing with the Farmer-To-Consumer Direct Marketing Act of 1976, an unprecedented bill that sought to condone and therefore reestablish what had come to be considered an unsophisticated, even unsanitary, institution. Explicit throughout the bill was the intention to benefit not just hungry consumers, but to "[provide] increased financial returns to farmers."

It certainly accomplished the latter. In his 1980 book, "Farmers Markets of America: A Renaissance," Robert Sommers wrote, "One economist estimated that eighty percent of the retail cost of supermarket produce goes to wholesalers, jobbers, packers, and transporters," leaving only twenty percent in the grower's pocket. In contrast, John McPhee wrote in "Giving Good Weight," his story of working in the Greenmarkets, about how the markets were a boon to previously struggling producers:

> If they are something good for the urban milieu—tumbling horns of fresh plenty at the people's feet—they are an even better deal for the farmers, whose disappearance from the metropolitan borders may be slowed a bit by the many thousands of city people who flow through streets and vacant lots and crowd up six deep at the trucks to admire the peppers, fight over the corn, and gratefully fill our money aprons with fresh green city lettuce.

And for years the markets were just as McPhee described: a dynamic exchange of money for food of a quality that America had forgotten existed. Markets grew organically from their communities. They were urban and rural; tucked into parking lots and given their own grand halls; famous as hotbeds for liberal politicking and down-home country music.

Slowly, though, one type of market rose to the top, for it attracted more people than those motivated solely by goodwill and health. This is the type of market that *Gourmet* or *Sunset* magazines like to photograph, where fresh-faced suburban moms collect bright greens and perfect eggplants in wicker baskets; where a street musician or clown is always on call to entertain; where four ounces of organic herb chèvre fetch five green dollars. As towns across America built markets in hopes of revitalizing sagging downtowns, this type of market was deemed most desirable. And suddenly, so many markets had been created in this charming image, that within season, small-town Vermont and downtown San Francisco offered nearly identical produce: baby arugula, young fennel bulbs, heirloom tomatoes.

Yet it was more than their attention to gourmet foods that made these markets the ones to copy. The model capitalized on the experience of the marketplace. Consider the joy we take in visiting such places while touring Oaxaca, Nice, or Bombay. The noise, the colors, the dirt-stained farmers and eccentric customers all contribute to the appeal. But as travelers without kitchens, we can't take home a pile of pungent turmeric or buy more than an afternoon's worth of succulent dates. In a perverse modern metamorphosis, the food in these foreign markets is not a source of sustenance but an erotic treat—explicitly sensual, but rarely consumed.

Robert Sommers was onto something when he insisted that customers respond to pure aesthetics. "The sale of flowers does amazing things to the visual patterning of a market," he wrote. "People walk differently when they carry a bouquet, as if they are showing off something beautiful before an audience." Sell white pumpkins and snow peas, he said, in order to sell more plain orange pumpkins and good old lettuce. Excite the customers with musicians or jugglers, food stands and raffles—that is what they've come for. American markets have appropriated this feel through a loose formula focused on stimulation. In describing how to build a successful farmers market, a 1994 article in *Public Management* magazine emphasized variety (the authors suggest, for instance, having separate beef, poultry, and sausage vendors rather than one big meatropolis).

Thanks to this approach, the farmers market has stormed back into our lives. By 1994, there were 1,755 farmers markets nationwide; by 2000, there were 2,863. But the new institution is more entertainment than commerce. Markets have always been social centers, yet now socializing is not a natural by-product of trade, but rather something that has been deliberately introduced. Small farmers have certainly benefited from the crowds: in 2000, the USDA reported that 19,000 farmers were selling their produce exclusively at farmers markets. However, for the markets actually to reenter the food economy and provide goods on a significant scale, the two levels that govern any commerce—supply and demand—must change.

The supply side is pretty straightforward. Even nearly 3,000 markets can't come close to serving all of the United States. The solution is not larger operations, but a greater number of smaller markets, to supplement existing ones and bring the concept to new areas. More venues and more frequent market days would encourage growers to adopt a method that, for now, remains a niche. A larger number of small, well-dispersed markets would provide an outlet for some small farms that face bankruptcy because they are unable to compete with larger farms for wholesale dollars. Furthermore, greater accessibility could change the consumer image of the farmers market from one of inconvenient indulgence to one of everyday shopping.

The demand side of the equation is trickier, because it requires ever-finicky shoppers to reconsider their role. As it stands, the charm of a genuine farmer's callused hands draws in the customers, but the actual food-buying remains passionless. Although the venue for buying food has changed, the actual act has not. Most consumers still approach shopping at a farmers market as if they were in a supermarket: Whether looking for organic Brussels sprouts on the stalk or ripe tomatoes, consumers arrive knowing what they want and, with the entertainment as backdrop, seek to find it at the lowest price.

Consider, though, what might happen if hungry shoppers considered their dollars as thin paper votes. Perhaps they would cast them more carefully, first evaluating what kind of agriculture they wish to support. One person might choose to buy only from organic farmers; another might want to bolster an operation that grows traditional ethnic crops or whose workers are a tight, nuclear family; still another might be loyal to the seller who is committed to an affordable price. The specific ends are less important than what choosing represents: appreciation of the transaction between producer and consumer. Were food buying seen as the essential act that it is, our current approach would be revealed as ludicrous.

Of course, this is not to say that overhauling the way we shop would return the market to the form it had four hundred years ago, when farmers brought their surplus to a central clearing and hungry urban dwellers bartered at open wagons. We have come too far to return to a purely commercial exchange free from earnest intentions and deliberate determination—the kind of market that the old-timers in Vermont might have wanted. But this is precisely the beauty of the twenty-first-century farmers market: amid the broccoli florets and bunches of fresh thyme, just beyond the guy with the crystal, we are offered the choice to make it all matter, to transform the farmers market from a nostalgic puppet, a shadow of the past, to a meaningful and influential modern institution.