

This month we take a seasonal look at food starting with local Farmers' Markets. Opposite you can see opportunities for buying and enjoying good food and drink locally enter the good food zone!

FARMERS ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES!

In some ways the idea of a farmers market is nothing new, many MADNews readers will remember going to the charter market and buying their produce from local farms – a tradition spanning centuries. In the years following the Second World War so many aspects of our way of life changed beyond recognition, including farming. The growth of supermarkets meant that farmers dealt with purchasing managers rather than the direct (and vital) link to customers. Convenience shopping was the name of the game, and with the increasing pressure of our busy working lives – what a boon! For many small farmers access to this market became increasingly difficult, especially trying to secure a fair price for the produce, so selling direct to the public was the only option to ensure survival. Some were able to do this with the birth of Pick Your Own farms in the 70s. Farmers' Markets in the United States started some 25 years ago, and in Bath in 1999 the first farmers' market was held here in the UK.

Supermarkets are here to stay, this is not about knocking their existence, but in turn, consumers want to exercise choice, and after the many food scares of the last 20 years, are increasingly aware of "you are what you eat". Equally, there is growing concern about the miles that our food travels to reach our homes - Transporting food long distances is energy inefficient. We put in more energy (in the form of non-renewable fossil fuels) than we get out (in the form of food calories). For every calorie of iceberg lettuce flown in from Los Angeles, we use 127 calories of fuel.

A Farmers' Market must operate to very strict criteria – the stallholders must come from a defined "local area" – usually some 30-50 miles - and be directly involved in the production of the goods they are selling or, in the case of cakes, pies, and jams and preserves be using a minimum of 10% of local product in the products they sell.



The public can be confident of the origins of the foods, ask questions and get closer to the sources of local foods. In turn the producers get valuable feed-back from customers. One of the main differences consumers will notice is the seasonal availability of food - you will find the fruit and vegetables which are in season - when they taste their best!

The first farmers' market in Oxfordshire was Thame, which also started in June 1999. Under Agenda 21, many local councils were encouraged to establish farmers' markets in their area. In late 2000 a group of producers from the Thames Valley area met to combine forces and continue to ensure the survival of the markets. Thames Valley Farmers' Market Association was born, with the aims of promoting farmers' markets and providing quality local food to local communities, ensuring integrity and choice.

Voluntary donations of £3 were collected by members of the association from stallholders attending markets. These paid for a card A6 calendar to be produced with the dates of farmers markets for consumers to keep handy, as well as our (hopefully!) familiar yellow corex boards advertising a town's particular market.

In 2001 Foot & Mouth disease (FMD) hit the headlines and farming community. Whilst the Thames Valley was spared to a greater degree, there were nevertheless isolated outbreaks which meant that a number of members were unable to attend markets for some three months, and certain markets were cancelled altogether. The association had just placed a substantial order for branded carrier bags just as the FMD outbreak started, and was indeed fortunate to receive funding support from Oxford City Council to cover this bill, otherwise the Association would have ended before it had even started!

The remainder of 2001 saw efforts to rebuild the customer base of farmers' markets and the £3 collections continued. It was clear to members that the long term future of farmers' markets lay not just in their constant and active promotion, but in running and managing Markets directly. In 2002, the association founded 2 markets in Berkshire – Ascot and Beaconsfield, and co-founded Princes Risborough with Wycombe District Council. Additionally, West Berkshire Council had the foresight to ask the association to take over the running of Newbury Farmers' Market.

During 2003, the association took over markets from councils and independent organisations: Abingdon, Banbury, Charlbury, Chipping Norton, Reading, Witney and Woodstock, as well as starting new markets in Didcot and Eton.

The association had now grown considerably in membership with some 85 members at the end of 2003. The management committee had presented to the membership the concept of incorporating as a co-operative limited company, which was approved, and in October 2003, the association became Thames Valley Farmers' Market Co-operative Ltd, with a projected income this year of some £45,000!

All this has been achieved thanks to the hard work of committee members on an entirely voluntary basis, and with only part-time admin and bookkeeping support. The management committee is drawn from the membership, thus ensuring that the members' benefits are at the heart of the Co-operative. All co-operatives are based around the concepts of self-help, self-responsibility and self-organisation.

Growth continues apace, and whilst the early part of 2004 concentrated on consolidation, we are now looking at taking on further markets to ensure the growth and survival of this vital local service. The national body for farmers' markets and farm retail commissioned a survey in June which showed that over 50% of the UK's population had bought directly from either a farmers' market or farm shop during 2003.

As with any business, continuous promotion and awareness raising is necessary, and although we are generating a considerable turnover, all surpluses are ploughed back into the co-operative to continue to grow our markets. Farmers' markets are the embodiment of the availability of home grown foods. They are the British farming industry's most high-profile shop-window.

This year we are producing an A4 calendar which will be sold at our markets from October 2004. The proceeds will be used to fund our future promotional activities – you can also ring our phone line to place an order – 0870 241 4762. Equally, if you have any questions or feedback arising from this article, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Website: www.tvfm.org.uk