

POSTED: Wednesday, Jun. 01, 2011

Why we love the Bellingham Farmers Market

TASHA JOHNSON - FOR WHATCOM MAGAZINE

Saturday is market day.

Beginning in April, the Market Depot Square on Railroad Avenue and a neighboring parking lot are transformed into a veritable smorgasbord of farmers, crafters, bakers and chefs, all luring the public with their booty - heady cheeses, artisan breads, chicken masala, gyros, caramel corn and the freshest fruits, veggies and honey.

The Bellingham Farmers Market will celebrate its 20th season next year. The years since its inception have brought many changes - the covered pavilion, a tripling in vendor numbers, even its own Facebook and Twitter pages. But one thing remains the same - we love our market.

"LIVELY STREET LIFE"

Gene Myers and Mardi Solomon have been attending the market since the early 1990s and are regulars in the summer months. They love bringing their daughters, Eva, 12, and Mimi, 9.

"They have the greatest food and you see tons of people that you know," says Eva, who says she especially likes meeting new people when she visits the market.

Mimi likes the Indian food and - especially in the heat of summer - the shave-ice treats.

"We've been coming here all their lives," says Gene Myers. Eva still has memories from her first visits, hunting down the face-painting lady.



Myers sees the broader value in the market as being an important civic space that draws together a wide range of people.

"There's this lively street life like you might find in Europe or back east, but we have our own unique twist on it," he says. "For instance, we're a little more laid back and also more talkative."

The Myers-Solomon family also supports the Whatcom Farm-to-School program and community-supported agriculture.

"I feel like the market is a great hub for celebrating local agriculture, says Solomon. "For people involved in the CSA shares, this is a place where they get to meet their farmers and the farmers get to meet their customers."

MUSIC FILLS THE AIR

Most visitors agree the market just wouldn't be the same without its musicians.

Each week brings different flavors of artistry. If you catch an earful of jazz greats Dave Brubeck or Charlie Parker, you might find Sehome High School's Conner Helms, 18, on saxophone and Kaeli Earle, 18, on bass.

The duo actually plays all types of jazz, a grab-bag of pieces that Earle calls "box of candies" jazz.

"We love to come here to play our music," says Helms, who has been playing the sax for seven years.

He says the farmers market provides an ideal atmosphere for young musicians - lively and bursting with willing audience members. The gig also helps them save up money for repairs and new instruments.

Earle has been coming to the market for about five years. She toted a cello until just about a year ago when she adopted the bass. Now she plays at the market to save for a newer bass, one that isn't quite so worn.

"It's really rewarding playing here," she says. "It's so nice to hear people say they like the music."

Conner agrees. "It's much better than playing in just a park somewhere. That is nothing like the market!"

"GET YOUR GRUB ON"

The market atmosphere is punctuated by the continual meeting and parting of friends. Folks congregate and divide as friends and neighbors share a story or two over hand-woven clothing, organic soaps, fresh flowers or locally grown fruits and veggies.

"We love the fresh, local produce," says market regular Jennifer Gibson of Bellingham. "You've got to get your grub on when you come to the market! And you've got to get stuff to bring home with you too. You know it is all fresh and you know it is done right here."

"The food stands are definitely a big hit," says Gibson's friend Stacy Reynolds, who was shopping with her brother Collin Reynolds. "The whole ambiance here is just great. We especially love the musicians."

A mutual friend of the group, Chance Newman of Oklahoma, says he comes to the market every time he is in the area.

"It just wouldn't be Bellingham without the market. We always make the market a destination when we are in town - come rain or shine, though it's mostly rain here."

BIRTH OF A BUSINESS

"I pretty much started my whole business at the market," says Alex Winstead of Cascadia Mushrooms. "This was a low-cost way to get exposure to customers without a whole lot of risk."

Six years later Winstead's business has grown. He now markets himself to restaurants and food co-ops and has another stand at a farmers' market in Seattle.

"This venue is the most fun, though," says Winstead of his home operation. "I get to see everyone I know. It's a great place to do business. This is such a great community."

Winstead says the vendors themselves are "tight, like partners in crime." Without the market, Winstead says, he can't imagine his business would have enjoyed such success.

"SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY"

"It's fun and it's funky" at the Farmside Fare stand with Pat Hirschhorn.

"I just kind of recycle everything," says the animated Hirschhorn of her collection of garden art treasures. She has been coming to the market since 2003 with fare ranging from eggs and grinning pumpkins to whimsical rain boots sprouting succulents.

"I realized I couldn't compete with all the organic farmers' pumpkins so I brought all my pumpkins home and painted faces on them, put hats on them," she says. "I brought them back the next day and people just loved them."

Hirschhorn had found her niche and has been at the market for nine years.

"I love the people. There are a lot of really good people here," she says. "We don't know them until they come here, but these are people who love the land and work so hard. I have always felt it was a privilege to be a part of this market."

"SO MANY REASONS TO COME"

Rebecca Krueger of Bellingham has been coming to the market for as long as she has lived in Bellingham, some eight years. Now she also brings her kids Rowan Maden, 4, and Sage Maden, 1.

"I think it's great exposure for the kids. It gives them a sense of community. We always see lots of people we know. And it's a way for us to support our local farmers," Krueger says. "There are so many reasons to come down here."

Among her family's favorites are the organic farms, Heather's Bags and, for the kids, the cookies at Mount Bakery.

Rowan is especially keen to find the balloon man, a favorite summertime entertainer.

"THE SOCIAL ASPECT"

Nicole Connor of Fairhaven is a regular at the market. She is also an occasional stand-in vendor as a close friend of Backyard Bees honey vendor Rob Rienstra.

"I love to shop here. It's so much fun. I love the interactions with people," she says. "Sometimes I'll just walk through, even if I'm not buying anything. I like it for the social aspect as well as the goods."

When Connor does come to shop, she heads for Alm Hill Gardens for veggie starts and the Ethiopian food for lunch.

"A GREAT WAY TO PROMOTE"

This is Sheri Lambert's first year as a vendor at the market. Her stand, Lambert Garden Creations, is a labor of love that began as a way to make a little extra money off of divided perennials but now has a greater goal - raising money for the Blue Skies for Children charity.

Lambert allows people to participate by purchasing perennials, purchasing ready-made perennial baskets or by making an appointment to come to their greenhouse to do their own basket-making with provided plants and soil.

"Half of everything we make goes right to Blue Skies," says Lambert. "It's been so great being at the market. This is just such a great way to promote."

The market is also serving as a great social network for Lambert.

"When I was younger, we'd have get-togethers - Tupperware parties and other social things. But now with everyone so busy, there isn't a lot of that anymore."

FAVORITE DATE SPOT

"We come about 10 times a year, give or take," says Dustin Chellson of Bellingham. He says he and longtime girlfriend Clarissa Salhous use the market as a favorite date spot.

"We've been coming down here together for years," says Chellson. "It's such a nice outing. You don't have to buy much, or anything, most of the time."

Among the couple's favorite vendors are the street performers, including the musicians and the magicians.

"Overall, the food is good, the crafts are unique and it just seems like this is a critical part of our community," says Chellson. "Plus, it helps keep the hippies alive!"

A WELL-EARNED REWARD

It's the fourth season for Rabbit Fields Farm owner Roslyn Nicholl.

"The market is a big part of our business," says Nicholl. "Best of all, we get to meet the people who are going to go home with our food and make dinner with it. My favorite part is being able to make that connection."

Nicholl says she sees the market as a vehicle for small businesses to connect with the people who buy their goods.

"For me, I'm out in the field all day. Then I come here on Saturdays and see people I've been working so hard for. And that is very satisfying."

Nicholl is also appreciative of the networking the market provides.

"It's this great opportunity to meet different people. We have a lot of diversity at our market."

Most of all, Nicholls is attracted to the sense of place the market brings.

"All these goods are local. You have to grow or make everything you bring to the market -- and I think that makes it very special."

Tasha Johnson is a Bellingham freelance writer.

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