

Finding the Farmers

Donita Anderson

My connectedness to markets began at an early age. My immigrant mother and aunts would go down to Eastern Market in Detroit in an entourage every Saturday. We purchased in abundance from the local farm section and went home to cook it up. I always had an eye for the best and every purchase was first given the once over by Donita. I was picky. I think these early critical skills allowed me to find some of the best farms in Northeast Ohio to participate in the North Union Farmers Market.

We moved to Northeast Ohio over 17 years ago, we were raising small children. My earlier pickiness concerning produce had grown stronger. I searched out the best dairy, meat and produce for our family to eat. We traveled in a 2 hour radius to find these products and even literally shipped in organic meat from Michigan (one of my husband's engineers at Interlake Steamship is also a cattle farmer). My ears were always open to leads of good food. Good food meaning fresh, local, low spray or organic, food I could trust. I grew close to the source of this good produce—small farm owners throughout Northeast Ohio. And I had kept up with the growth of big agriculture in our country, and the analytical side of me said their products weren't good enough for my family.

In 1992 I started asking my farm friends what their thoughts would be on starting to come into the city once a week. I got an almost unanimous and surprising reaction of "NO!" "We were burned by farmers markets, our products don't sell, it's a waste of time and energy, and people won't pay what their worth. We'll stick with our CSA (community supported agriculture), our roadside stands or selling wholesale to any broker that comes up our driveway." Well I had my work cut out for me and I don't know what started this fire in my belly, because it has not been lucrative, just a lot of plain hard work. And that is what farming is—a lot of hard work. If you are planning on starting a farmers market, you have to understand the farmers point of view. To come to market is at least an 18 hour work day before market day, with picking, cleaning, sorting, packing and driving to be done before you get to market, then stand in the wind, rain, heat for 5 or more hours trying to keep up a pleasant countenance and your table full, drive the hour and a half home, unload, water plants and feed animals.

So I can't say it's really finding farms that is the issue; it's convincing farms. If you don't plan on creating the best venue for them to sell their products direct, if you haven't done your marketing, or picked out the most advantageous market site, and created the right structure, don't ask them out to your market. What's the right structure? You have to assure them they will be surrounded by their peers, "producers" not cheap competition brokered from Mexico or California, or product purchased at a local farm auction house on the cheap, but real NE Ohio farmers selling their own products. You build the correct structure with signed agreements outlining your requirements. Now this isn't any easy thing to do when you are trying to get together 10 farms to start a market. It had not been the course de rigueur for Ohio farm markets, of course not. I was being guided by Tony Mannetta of the Greenmarket in New York City and Mary Carpenter of Dane County Market in Madison, Wisconsin. Both having operated for years successful markets with the same values I had. They were the people encouraging me when farms were saying no, telling me to keep moving ahead and they were right. So I moved ahead contacting hundreds of farms with our new North Union Farmers Market application and rules and regulations.

The first day after convincing the board we had to open in July, 1995, 10 farms showed up with very little product and about 500 customers overwhelmed them. By 8:30 am, everything was sold out and one farm came up to me and told me they sold dirt that Saturday morning. Some farms I had contacted had come to watch, which I thought was really funny. They were checking us out. They showed up for the rest of the season and many have been with us the full eight years.

Nowadays I receive 5-10 calls a week in high farm production season from farms wanting to come to market, and here is where my pickiness comes in; I screen heavily. What I've created at Shaker Square is something very selfish; these are the farmers I want there. I want a vineyard there. I want the state's only artisan goat cheese producer there. The best white peaches. Fresh bass filets. Wonderful protein rich farm eggs. Organic meat. Tender lettuce mix. Ramps in the spring. Leeks in the fall. These are all my dreams come true. I don't have to drive an hour and half with grumpy children anymore. I just go down my street and create my feasts weekly. Now I didn't do this without purpose, I have often followed mentors who created what they love and offered it to the public, one being Parker Bosley, another Tom Hawkens (of Smith and Hawkens), I always read about successful businesses who are the best in their field and use their ideas to make the market better. I've studied under the best and worked at the best markets. I also listen closely to our customers, although they don't always know it.

To wind this up I go back to finding farms by using ingenuity or drive for the best products and going after and finding who produces them, then convincing them that you have the best structure to support their farm products. It also helps to be picky about what you eat!