



From sea to shining sea, farmers markets foster relationships between families and producers and allow growers to expand their customer bases.

# TO MARKET, TO MARKET

BY BECKY SERNETT

**Farmers markets are a life force of modern sustainable agriculture,** connecting families to high-quality fresh food while supporting local farmers and producers. And they are a tradition that, in the United States, dates back to 1634, when the nation's earliest farmers market was established in Boston, Massachusetts.

The claim for longest continuously running farmers market goes to the Lancaster Central Market, which began in Pennsylvania in 1730. And we've come a long way: At the end of April, the USDA's online directory listed more than 8,769 markets. While quality food is certainly the main draw, the relationships forged between farmers and their customers are what keep these events alive and thriving. Read on to get acquainted with four markets and the producers who make them shine.





**MAKING CONNECTIONS**

**Shelburne Farms & Burlington Farmers Market**



Veggies may be the heart of farmers markets, but increasingly, folks also seek value-added products like Shelburne Farms' raw milk cheddar, made by head cheesemaker Andi Wandt.

**S**helburne Farms in Vermont has been selling its raw milk farmstead cheddar cheeses at farmers markets for a long time. (When the region's first market opened in '71, it was there.) The dairy is a nonprofit educational organization that aims to help families understand the links between food and agriculture, and its 1,400-acre working farm is a National Historic Landmark that welcomes visitors year-round.

Shelburne's head cheesemaker, Andi Wandt, oversees daily cheese production as well as a market stand at the present-day Burlington Farmers Market. And while selling cheese is certainly a part of her role,

her larger responsibility is to act as an ambassador, helping visitors learn where their food comes from. Andi says she loves seeing people from the market show up to see the cheesemaking process at the farm.

The Burlington Farmers Market began in 1980 with 32 vendors. Now there are more than 90, and Executive Director Christopher Wagner estimates that around 10,000 visitors could be strolling through on any given Saturday, late spring through fall. While area grocery stores do source locally, Wagner says people come to the market for the chance to meet and build relationships with growers and producers.

PREVIOUS PAGE: MARKET: ©MATTHEW GILSON; ALL RIGHTS RESERVED; FLOWERS: CHRIS WAGNER; LEFT, MARKET STAND: CHRIS WAGNER; ANDI WANDT: SARAH WEBB; RIGHT, COURTESY OF DELCAMBRE SEAFOOD & FARMERS MARKET (2); ALL WOOD SLATS: SCOTTCHAU/SHUTTERSTOCK

**REVITALIZING A REGION**

**Jessica Gail Seafood & Delcambre Seafood and Farmers Market**

**L**ouisiana is the nation's second-largest seafood supplier, and its fishing industry was already in decline because of competition with imports when Hurricane Rita hit the coast in 2005. In 2008, it was Hurricane Ike. The storms were devastating, but they also gave the region a chance to rebuild. In 2013, the Seafood and Farmers Market in Delcambre became part of that effort.

Wendell Verret, port director and farmers market manager, says the port authority took advantage of a USDA farmers market development grant to create an outlet for local commercial fishermen. Held the first Saturday of the month from April through December, the Delcambre market offers seafood lovers the

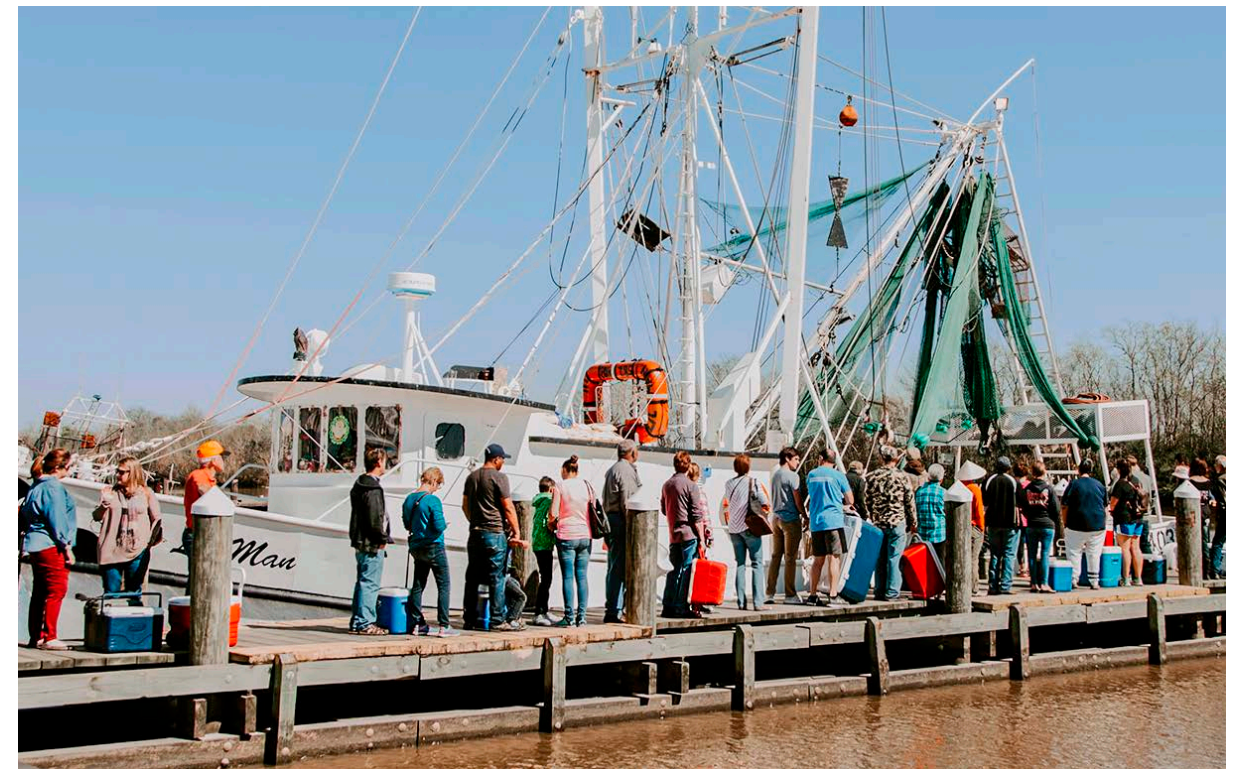
chance to buy fresh off the boat. Shoppers come equipped with coolers and line up on the docks to purchase shrimp, crab, flounder, sheepshead and lots more.

Vendors Milton and Christine Naquin, co-founders of Jessica Gail Seafood, have been in the shrimping business for 19 years. Milton recalls that before the market opened, he and his wife relied on word of mouth to sell their catch. The market, he says, has taught them a lot about how to connect with consumers.

"Now you deal with fishermen directly, and you have more control over the product," he says. Milton enjoys customer interaction, and at every market, he and Christine serve up jambalaya or other favorite seafood dishes to hungry visitors.



Fisherman Milton Naquin, above. Below, folks line up for the fresh catch.







Fernando Aguiar shows grandson Max how a chile roaster works, below. In addition to flowers and produce, chiles are a big seller at farmers markets across the Southwest.



### REALIZING A DREAM

## Aguiar Farm & Prescott Farmers Market

Every Saturday morning from mid-May through late October, Fernando Aguiar or a member of his family can be found standing behind the Aguiar Farm produce stand at the Prescott Farmers Market in Arizona. This market is the closest to their family farm, which is in Paulden, 25 miles away. The Aguiar family has been selling its peppers, chiles, cabbage, greens, corn and other produce at markets in the region for six years now; all are grown without pesticides, herbicides or chemicals.

Fernando spent 30 years working as a plumber around Phoenix, but

farming had always been the dream. He grew up on a farm in Mexico, and as he and his wife, Margarita, raised their family in the States, he craved a return to the land. So at the end of his career in the trades, Fernando purchased a 17-acre farm and began growing and selling his crops.

His son, Juan, moved back to Arizona from Oregon with his wife, Keeton, to help out. Juan says that if it weren't for the Prescott Farmers Market and the other two markets where the family sells its produce, the farm wouldn't be a reality.

The Prescott market began in 1997 with the mission of helping

local farmers connect to families and build customer bases in the region. Market Executive Director Kathleen Yetman says Yavapai County's grocery chains don't source from local farmers, mainly "because smaller growers don't have the food safety certifications that most big stores require."

The Prescott Farmers Market features 55 vendors in the summer months, and a winter market hosts about 40. Both are producer-only affairs: Food products must be grown or raised in Arizona, and processed goods and crafts must include a percentage of Arizona-grown ingredients.



## MARKET TIPS FOR VENDORS

Viewing the market as an opportunity to learn, change, adapt and test products gives vendors the flexibility and perspective needed to succeed.

### TELL YOUR STORY

Vendors should take advantage of social media. "Storytelling is a powerful tool," says Kathleen Yetman of the Prescott Farmers Market, which features profiles of its farmers on its website. Storytelling can help build intimacy between producers and their customers, which fuels this connection.

### NETWORK

Tap into the knowledge that fellow market farmers and producers hold. By talking to one another, vendors can learn how to best organize the truck for speedy unloading, how to attract more customers, and even general business management tips. "You never know how other people are going to be able to help you, or how you're going to help them," says Shelburne Farms' Andi Wandt.

### PRESENTATION MATTERS

Stall design is critical, and most markets offer advice. Burlington Farmers Market, for example, hosts workshops explaining the waterfall effect for produce layout and advises that vendors only have about three seconds to catch a potential shopper's eye. Also, if possible, stand (don't sit). If customers see vendors sitting down or on their phones, they are less likely to approach the stall, says Christopher Wagner of the Burlington market.

### SUMMER PROJECT TURNED AG ENTERPRISE

## Driftless Organics & Dane County Farmers Market

In the 1990s, when brothers Josh and Noah Engel were teenagers eager to expand their homegrown potato business, they petitioned the Dane County Farmers Market in Madison, Wisconsin, to become vendors. Beginning as a summer project assigned by their mom, the brothers' business evolved into Driftless Organics, an enterprise that farms more than 100 acres in the southwestern region of the state.

The farmers market served as an incubator for their business, and while Noah and Josh now have additional outlets for selling their produce, they still take advantage of the market and its thousands of visitors to test-market products such as the farm's sunflower oil.

Stretching across eight blocks of Madison's Capitol Square from

mid-April through mid-November, the Dane County Farmers Market attracts between 12,000 and 20,000 visitors to its Saturday market, which features around 150 vendors. A smaller version is offered on Wednesdays.

"Literally the person who is behind the table is the person who grew the product," says Sarah Elliott, market manager. "Vendors get a lot of energy and rejuvenation meeting people who are using their product." Sarah says she enjoys watching the day progress—from the hard-core shoppers who arrive when the market opens at 6:15 a.m. to customers pulling wagons and carrying reusable bags to hold their weekly haul in the mid-morning, to college students and tourists who browse the stands in the afternoon. "The vibrancy is palpable," she says. **R**



Every week between April and November, more than 10,000 potential customers come to the market to buy fresh produce from area farmers.

LEFT: KEETON AGUIAR (2); RIGHT, TEXTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK/NIK MERKULOV; CARROTS: DANE COUNTY FARMERS MARKET