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## The proliferation of Bay Area farmers markets allows people to buy food direct from producers

Locavores navigate the area's farmers markets

By Laurel Miller  
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ONCE UPON a time, about 15 years ago, Bay Area farmers markets were a novelty item worthy of national press. Here in the Bay Area, there were the big three: San Francisco, Marin, and Berkeley. Today, there are an estimated 100 markets throughout the greater Bay Area, making buying direct from growers easier than ever.

With a devastated global economy and so much media focus on carbon footprints, GMOs, food labeling, and a seemingly never-ending series of food-borne illness outbreaks, it seems natural that a backlash would occur, and that Americans would demand more control over their food supply.

Locavore eating, urban farming, homesteading, Community Supported Agriculture and market

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shares of whole animal carcasses are "in," and small scale farmers, ranchers, and food artisans are reaping the benefits of this wave of mindful consumerism. The question is, are farmers markets becoming less sustainable as they increase in

popularity?

While the proliferation of markets over the last few years has been positive on many levels — providing small family farms with much-needed income, as well as promoting the local foodshed, raising awareness about food security issues, and fostering a growing sense of community — there can be too much of a good thing.

### Approaching saturation

Some farmers feel that having so many markets spreads them — or their crops and market

crews — too thin, adding that more farmers in more markets means increased competition and lower sales. Add to that the reality that today's consumers are more wallet-conscious than ever. While many of us would like to be able to only buy grower-direct, it's often just not financially feasible.

Even with the organic and sustainable food industries booming, small farms still struggle to survive against conventional and corporate organic farms. Achieving organic certification is time-consuming and costly, federally regulated (which not all growers agree with, as it has led to a loosening of standards since the USDA first enacted the National Organic Rule in 2000), and not always sustainable on a large-scale level.

Every market organization has different policies in regard to a vendors' farming or food production practices. Flea markets allow vendors to sell fruit that has been purchased from an outside source (i.e.: which is not permitted at a Certified California Farmers Market), and typically permit growers who do not practice sustainable growing methods.

### Markets not the same

Even farmers markets vary widely. Some markets only allow certified organic growers, while others allow various permutations of sustainable farming, such as IPM (Integrated Pest Management), transitional (working on organic certification), or what some independent-minded farmers like to refer to as "beyond organic," because they can't afford or

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People line up to buy fresh vegetables at the new Diablo Produce farmers market Saturday, June...

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don't agree with the USDA rules for organic certification.

It needs to be noted that some markets are, for lack of a better description, little more than craft fairs, with substandard produce — some of it imported — and prepared foods slipped in as an afterthought.

According to Kirk Lumpkin, special events and promotions coordinator and former manager of the Berkeley Farmers Market, supporting locally grown, sustainably produced food "still seems to be important to people, despite the economy."

Lumpkin explains that while some consumers feel they can pay less by shopping for food elsewhere, that appears to be balanced by those who prefer to spend their money buying grower-direct and then cooking at home. That said, he questions whether there are too many farmers markets.

### The thin green line

"Whether or not we've reached a saturation point in our area would never be totally clear until one or more of our markets actually failed, but it's gotten to the point where it feels uncomfortable when we see new farmers markets opening near to us," he says.

"To make the trip worthwhile for farmers coming from rural areas, they need to sell a lot in a short amount of time. Each trip to market needs to add up financially, and with so many markets for consumers to choose from, it can dilute how much they can sell on a given day," he says. "That said, there are certainly urban areas that are not located conveniently close to a farmers market, and it remains an open question as to whether these areas would or could support one."

John Silveira, director of the Pacific Coast Farmers Market Association (PCFMA), has also pondered the issue.

"I think it's important to ask what a farmers market is and what it does. We have reached a saturation point for larger markets," but there's a growing demand for smaller markets, he says.

"We've opened a lot of smaller, neighborhood markets with less than 20 growers, the community supports it, and they do well," he said. "I think we've empowered small growers to find other outlets for direct sales (such as CSAs). It all comes down to the quality of the product, and the value of that product to each specific community, depending upon the demographic and financial means."

Lumpkin points out that there is definitely a market for what he calls "niche projects" that more closely resemble farm stands. He cites the numerous Kaiser Permanente parking lot markets operated by the PCFMA as an example. Surging in popularity, too, are urban farm projects that provide classes or services on backyard gardening, food preservation, and bee- and poultry-keeping, as well as CSAs, in which members receive weekly boxes of produce from a local farm or cooperative of farms.

### Concept is expanding

While CSAs are nothing new in the Bay Area, the concept is expanding: The Bay Area Meat CSA (<http://bamcsa.ning.com/>) enables members to purchase meat directly from small, sustainable family ranches.

Niche projects, diversification and support of alternative agricultural crops are also finding their way into local farmers markets. Contra Costa Certified Farmers Markets Executive Director Jessie Neu points to the Walnut Creek market's support of the region's micro-wineries. Berkeley's urban Periscope Cellars already has a stall and, says Neu, "we're seeking to bring in Walnut Creek's Shadowbrook Winery and Moraga's tiny Parkmon Vineyards. It's a nice discovery for the people who shop our markets to learn about these wineries in our own backyard."

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To reach Laurel Miller of The Sustainable Kitchen, go to <http://www.sustainablekitchen.com/>.

### Shopping tips

- **Shop early to get your pick of the best product, but be sure to cruise the entire market first, so you can comparison shop.**
  - **Hit the ATM beforehand: While many markets such as Berkeley accept EBT ("food stamp") cards, expect to otherwise go old-school and pay in cash.**
  - **Be sure to taste; don't be afraid to ask for samples or how a specific ingredient should be prepared -- farmers are always happy to tell you their favorite way of eating something they've grown or made.**
  - **Bring a hat, sunblock, water, and your own reusable bags or baskets to reduce waste. Don't forget to bring any reusable materials to give back to vendors from your last market visit, such as berry cages, or clean, undamaged egg or fruit boxes.**
  - **If you plan to buy a lot, or are purchasing perishable or fragile ingredients such as cheese, eggs, or meat, bring a portable cooler or wheeled car to tote purchases in. Try not to leave items "on hold" with vendors.**
  - **Leave your dogs (sorry!) and cigarettes at home; they're forbidden at markets.**
  - **Bring the kids; markets are a great place for them to learn where their food comes from, and interact with the people who produce it. It's also a fun way for them to experiment with new foods, but please be respectful and don't allow them to help themselves to samples or manhandle produce. It's both a health code violation and can damage fragile produce, creating loss of income for growers.**
  - **Limit yourself to only one of each food sample at different stalls; they're for tasting, not lunch. If you don't see a sample of a type of produce you'd like to try, ask. Most vendors are happy to comply. And no double-dipping or eating over the sample tray!**
  - **Don't haggle over prices. While some vendors are willing to bend the rules a bit, it's bad form to bargain or expect a reduced price at say, the end of the market. Family farmers work hard for every dime they make, and by shopping at the market, you are supporting them and protecting the future of our food supply. If they want to cut you a deal, they will, and the best way to get on the inside track is to become a loyal, respectful customer.**
- Laurel Miller

### Market Highlights

Every farmers market is unique, featuring its own lineup of specialty foods. Since we can't possibly list all of the vendors at all of the markets, here are details on what you can find at a few of the Bay Area's rich selection of markets. For a full listing of all markets, go to [www.contracostatimes.com/food-and-wine](http://www.contracostatimes.com/food-and-wine). Click on farmers markets.

- **San Francisco Ferry Building:** Considered to be one of the best -- as well as most ecologically advanced -- in the nation, the Saturday market is a bona-fide tourist destination. Don't let that keep you away; the market, as well as the permanent shops in the Building are a heartfelt tribute to Northern California's most exquisite family farms and food artisans. Stunning produce displays, award-winning cheeses, sustainably caught local seafood, humanely raised meat, unbeatable people-watching, nationally acclaimed educational and sustainability programs, and a bayside location make the Ferry Building San Francisco's greatest culinary triumph. Arrive early to avoid the crowds and to catch the city's best chefs doing their shopping.
- Highlights: Tairwa-Knoll Farms, Marin Roots Organics, Star Route Farms, Tierra Vegetables for peppers and condiments, Swanton Berry Farm, Saint Benoit Yogurt, Andante Dairy, Bodega & Yerba Santa Goat

Cheese, The Apple Farm for condiments (and fall fruit), Marshall's Farm Honey, Marin Sun Farms grass-fed and -finished meats (including goat), Hog Island Oyster Company. <http://www.cuesa.org/>.

- Berkeley: Considered a model for farmers markets across the nation since 1987, the three Berkeley markets are also dedicated toward educating consumers about sustainable farming and supporting family farms. The market boasts workshops, food justice programs designed to provide low-income families with fresh, nutritious food, cooking demos, tastings, festivals, and initiatives such as running the market truck on biodiesel and being the first market in the nation to ban the use of plastic bags and packaging as part of an ongoing "Zero Waste" program -- a concept that was originated by the Boulder, Colorado farmers market.

Highlights: Dirty Girl Produce, Full Belly Farm, Riverdog Farm, Woodleaf Farm peaches, Flying Disc Ranch dates, Redwood Hill Farm goat cheese, Phoenix Pastificio, Brickmaiden Breads, Fatted Calf charcuterie, cultured organic sauerkraut and specialty pickles, Blue Bottle Coffee, Hodo Soy Beanery. <http://www.ecologycenter.org/>.

- Temescal: One of the newest and most interesting markets in what is now considered the East Bay's other "gourmet ghetto," Temescal has quickly garnered a reputation for its lively atmosphere and particularly enticing and eclectic selection of prepared foods.

Highlights: Blossom Bluff Orchards stone fruit, Lagier Ranch almonds, almond butter, almond milk, and fruit spreads, Blue Chair Fruit Company, Little Bug Baby Food, Happy Girl Kitchen Co. organic pickles, Bakesale Betty, Paradise Pot Pies. If it's a wide variety of obscure Asian produce and herbs you're looking for, visit the newly expanded Friday Old Oakland market. <http://www.urbanvillageonline.com/>.

- Walnut Creek: A popular suburban, family-oriented market, Walnut Creek organizers are now bringing local wineries into the fold, making it a trendsetter in the Bay Area market scene. Who knew wine was being made within the city limits?

Highlights: Periscope Cellars, Hamada Farms, Kashiwase Farms, Holding Ranch grass-fed and -finished meat and poultry and pastured eggs, Bariani Olive Oil, Devoto Gardens, Critical Edge knife sharpening, <http://www.cccfm.org/>.

- Danville: This suburb located in what used to be prime agricultural and ranching land is putting residents back in touch with the region's roots, hosting a mid-size market featuring some of Northern California's most prestigious farms, ranches, and artisanal products. Locals also love the market for its vast array of cut flowers.

Highlights: Frog Hollow Farm, Capay Organic, Prather Ranch certified humane meat, Scream Sorbet, Stonehouse Olive Oil.

- San Mateo: Beloved by Peninsula residents for its diverse selection of prepared foods, this market also features many growers from the fertile coastal swath reaching from Half Moon Bay down to Santa Cruz -- one of the Bay Area's oldest and most treasured agricultural regions -- making this market particularly crucial to local food security.

Highlights: Fifth Crow Farm organic produce and pasture-raised eggs, Iacopi Farms, Blue Moon Organics berries, Happy Boy Farms, Twin Girls Farm orchard fruits, Roli-Roti rotisserie chicken and porchetta, El Porteno Empanadas, East & West Gourmet Afghan Food, <http://www.pcfma.org/>.

-- Laurel Miller



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