



To Market, To Market

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Do you question where your food comes from? Are you interested in how your food is grown and handled? Would you like to support more local family farms vs. corporate farms, say, 1500 miles away? Do you ponder the environmental impacts of your food choices?

Given our world of brightly lit supermarket aisles proudly displaying picture-perfect fruits and vegetables, massive distribution warehouses where foods sit in waiting, questionable post-harvest handling practices (i.e. the recent E. coli outbreaks from spinach), inhumane and toxic feedlots, and less-than-flavorful produce harvested before its time in a faraway land, now is the time of year to visit your local organic farmers' market and experience the difference.

Some farms have been in the farmers' families for generations; other farmers are just starting out. For the most part, farmers who sell directly to consumers care for their land and incorporate sustainable growing practices to keep their soil healthy. They also treat their animals a humane fashion, creating high-quality meats and dairy and reducing the cultivation of disease. Growing practices that are good for the health of the land and livestock are certainly better for our health.

Each farmers' market has different rules for what may be sold, but generally a product must be grown, raised, or produced (baked, canned, etc.) by the farm selling it. Definitions of "local" and "regional" vary, but are often defined as being from within a town, county, state, or within a specific radius. It is always understood that food at a farmers' market comes from smaller, independent farmers and producers, rather than large, agricultural corporations. These smaller farms are also able to produce unique varieties that won't be found in your local supermarket.

The changing seasons determine what produce is available at farmers' markets, which is a delicious and healthful way to eat. Local, organic produce isn't harvested prematurely, meaning that you get optimal nutrients from the soil and juicy, savory fruits and vegetables. Eating seasonally also keeps us in touch with the rhythms of the climate and our natural environment, which we city dwellers can sometimes get out of tune with.

Building Relationships

Visiting your local organic farmers' market is also a great way to build community, both with your fellow shoppers and the growers. And it's a great way to deepen your relationship with food, familiar and not so familiar. It's so fun and rewarding to incorporate those once-obscure kohlrabies or heirloom tomatoes into your meals and be left anxiously awaiting more from next week's market.

HEALTHFUL ELEMENTS



If you don't see what you're looking for, ask the farmer when your favorite fruit or vegetable will be available, how long its growing season is, and what they would recommend in the meantime. Instead of showing up recipe-in-hand and scouring for the ingredients at the market, choose what looks best to you and then discover new and exciting ways to feature the bounty. Most farmers are eager to share their favorite ways to prepare your new treasures. My guess is that they'll have some recipes off the top of their heads that you'll enjoy for years to come.

Go Organic

Many farmers' market farmers use organic methods but are not USDA certified, as the certification process is cumbersome and expensive. Many of these farmers identify themselves as "sustainable producers."

If you ever have questions about how something was grown, ask your farmer. Here is a list of questions you can come armed with, as taken from the Kansas City Food Circle's website:

Questions to Ask a Grower at a Farmers' Market:

- Do you grow all of the produce you sell or do you distribute produce from other growers?
- Is your produce organically-grown?
- Are your chickens (cattle, pigs, lamb, etc.) given access to the outdoors? How are they confined?
- Do you use antibiotics or hormones to promote the growth of the animals on your farm?
- Are there any domestic animal byproducts in your animal feed?
- Are you here every week?
- Do you welcome visitors to your farm?

The benefits of eating local, organic foods are vast:

- Flavorful, savory vegetables and delicious fruits often harvested 24 hours before arriving at the market
- Unique varieties made available
- No chemical fertilizers, pesticides, hormones, or antibiotics
- Healthier soil and livestock = more nutritious foods
- Plants & animals are bred for nutritional value, not highest possible yields and profits
- Decentralized production = less vulnerability to large-scale contamination
- Toxic waste reduction
- Less fossil fuel consumption by decreasing distance that your food travels from field to plate
- Your food passes through less hands

You can visit your local, organic farmers' market for any one of these important reasons and know that you are doing right by yourself, your family, your community, and the environment. If anything, the unsurpassed quality and taste will really help keep an organic farmers' market visit an anticipated and adventurous part of your weekly routine.