

# fresh directions



“Next left” for a chance to chat with real local people about their lives; “300m on” to find out what is grown in this region, at this time of year; “Park here” to take home a taste of this beautiful place, captured forever in a bottle or jar; “Walk this way” to be part of the local community, even if only briefly.



If only road signs on your travels were more descriptive. If those signs point to a local farmers market in New Zealand, the above is bound to be what you will find as a result of your intrepidity.

New Zealand has more than 40 local farmers markets, many of them in small regional communities. They exist to feed families good, fresh local food, but almost all have something reminiscent of bottled sunshine that can be transported to enjoy half a hemisphere away in the depths of winter. You also can procure the freshest cheese and still-warm bread to devour at the perfect picnic spot that the New Zealand countryside seems to have in abundance.

By definition, authentic farmers markets are food-only markets; there are no resellers, so those who have grown or made the food are selling the food. The markets also reflect their regional heartland, so there are no bananas down south, where it is too cold for them to be grown.

A great example of this is the Otago Farmers Market. It's held in Dunedin every Saturday morning from 8 to 12:30 in the north car park adjoining the magnificent Railway Station buildings. These buildings and the fence surrounding the site comprise one of the country's best known and loved heritage sites.

On any given Saturday, you might find organic vegetables, free range pork, luxury tarts, venison salami, fresh fish, handmade chocolates, bread, organic beers, and extra virgin olive oil.

If your timing is right, in spring you might happen upon fresh asparagus, soft cheeses, artichokes, and new spring lamb. In summer, add soft berries, stone fruit, tomatoes, and garlic; in autumn, meet the mushroom, walnut, and quince producers; and leading into winter, some of the best apples and pears to be found anywhere in the world.

Standing in the bustling crowd, you really get a sense of the community that exists here, as well as a strong dose of famous southern hospitality. People look you in the eye, shake your hand and greet you warmly.

It's not just the bigger cities that offer this unique experience, however. The next morning, Sunday, sees the Oxford Farmers Market set up under a huge old tree on the main street of the North Canterbury town. Although the population of this lovely little town hovers around 2000, it seems that every householder is out in the sunshine this morning.

**It's immediately obvious what grows well in this region:** absolutely beautiful cuts of local venison, succulent lamb, the most delicious freshly squeezed apple juice, and even fresh figs, as well as bags of traffic light-coloured capsicums, jars of Manuka honey, seedless watermelons, and fresh corn on the cob.

**It is also obvious that a lot of town business goes on here:** catching up on the week's events, local committee meetings, even some local politicking.





“Many fantastic small food businesses use farmers markets as their shop front.”

There are lots of families here, as there are in all farmers markets in New Zealand. At the Saturday morning Waipara Valley Farmers Market, also in North Canterbury, local children have their favourite stallholders: they head straight for the cinnamon scrolls, one dollar coins clutched tightly in their fists, and the “ice cream lady,” as she is known, is a firm favourite, and little tubs of chocolate, ginger, and lime or local berry ice cream are heaven in a handful for small people.

The local organic vegetable producers Stonecircle Farm often have a few second grade carrots tucked in a bucket; they are fed by little ones to the horses over the fence. They must be the most delicious, nutritious horse food in the country!

Farmers markets can act as gateways to the bigger story of New Zealand-produced food. The Marlborough Farmers Market happens every Sunday morning from 9 to noon at the A&P Park, Maxwell Rd, Blenheim.

Many producers are at this market because it is their most accessible selling point. It is the place where people can see, smell, and even taste their wares, and ask questions of the growers or makers themselves. The producers can trial new products or varieties and get immediate feedback from an informed and interested public.

Many fantastic small food businesses use farmers markets as their shop front. An example of this is Premium Game, which sells wild game meat, including venison, wild pork, goat, thar, hare, rabbit, and wallaby. While they have a very

successful wholesale and restaurant business, they still see the local farmers market as an important part of their marketing strategy. They use it to increase their profile and educate customers about their product.

The Marlborough Farmers Market has a breakfast stall with such offerings as wild pork sausages with fried onions, Dave’s cucumbers, and organic yogurt with mint in a wrap, or alternatively, a wild venison fillet with mushy peas, red currants, and hazelnut dukkah. This provides the perfect opportunity for hungry shoppers to try something new as they wander around the market, perhaps something they were unlikely to pick up in a supermarket without previous recommendation.

The Hawkes Bay Farmers Market is held on Sunday mornings from 8:30 to 12:30 at the Hawke’s Bay Showgrounds, Kenilworth Road, Hastings. Clive Potter from Epicurean Supplies has been with the market from the beginning, and originally saw it as a great project well worth supporting. He has an established clientele in the restaurant trade but it is not hard to see the reason for his success in a farmers market setting as well.

He offers baskets of florence fennel, piles of baby turnips, and boxes full of the chef’s favourite: cavalo nero, also known as black kale. It’s a chance for customers to compare different types of potatoes and heirloom tomatoes, or be enticed with names like Lipstick sweet peppers, Asian Bride eggplants or Minikins pumpkins. It’s a journey into fresh food simply not seen outside farmers markets.



Farmers markets play an important role in sustainability as well. They encourage organic producers because shoppers can ask the growers directly what their inputs (sprays and fertilisers) have been. Organic producers enjoy the opportunity to explain to people how their produce is different from conventionally grown. As the “proof is in the pudding,” farmers markets can allow consumers to taste the flavour difference with organically produced fruit and vegetables.

They are also an outlet for heritage varieties. Modern agriculture and distribution systems such as supermarkets have limited the choice of fruits and vegetables we now are offered. Producers talk of customers rediscovering food they had given up on long ago.

Farmers markets have redefined what a tomato should taste like, how a ripe peach smells, and how long a bag of salad greens will last in the fridge. Fresh corn consumed before it goes starchy, or apricots picked and sold fully ripe, or even the availability of soft fruit such as mulberries and figs, has allowed people to discover new fruit and vegetables, or to remember why they liked them in the first place.

Perhaps it is this idea of freshness that is the key success of New Zealand Farmers Markets. You need only look at some of the logos of farmers markets around the country – “made & grown nature’s way,” “fresh is best,” “from farm gate to dinner plate” – to understand the proximity between production and consumption. This proximity also means there are very few

“food miles” consumed. An apple bought directly from a local orchardist makes so much more sense than one shipped to a central distribution point only to be transported back to your local retail outlet.

There are other ways farmers markets increase sustainability in their communities. With their regional focus, they provide sales outlets for even the smallest producers who otherwise might struggle to get their product to market. Farmers who might find it difficult to meet the financial and quantity demands of global supermarket chains still can find an outlet. This in turn encourages the preservation of agricultural and horticultural land. It also encourages biodiversity of land use – smaller amounts of multiple crops rather than big monocultures of just one crop.

At the same time, farmers markets play a role in the regions’ social collateral by fostering a sense of community and pride. They also encourage closer ties between the urban centre and the surrounding rural areas that sustain it.

So, take that left turn next time you see a farmers market sign posted in New Zealand. You’ll find an authentic local experience that is kind to your pocket, the community you find yourself in, and even the planet itself. More than that, you can fill up on the freshest, tastiest New Zealand food available. ■