

Farmers' markets: Inevitable or a passing fad?

Leslie Wilson reports from New Zealand's first farmers market conference.

At the inaugural Farmers' Market conference in Havelock North last month, nearly 100 people were treated to a dynamic presentation by co-director of the Washington DC Fresh Farm Markets, Bernadine Prince (pictured right).

Prince started her presentation with a graphic demonstration on how much land there is in the world to grow our food supply on, represented by the peel of one 32nd of an apple.

The rest of the apple, she explained, is water, land unsuitable for agriculture or land that has been paved over for housing, roading, and shopping centres.

Having captivated her audience, Prince went onto give details about the motivation behind her work.

"I am not a farmer, but I buy everything I eat from the local market and producers. My area, the Chesapeake Bay watershed, is in America's top ten of endangered urban farmlands. Annually in America, we lose a billion tonnes of topsoil due to erosion and we pave over our farmland at a rate of 400 000 hectares per year."

Prince noted that there was a revolution happening in America and that there are now over 4000 Farmers' Markets across the country. The Delicious Revolution, as she called it, has grown out of the consumers' concern for their health and a wish to reconnect with the community. She noted that American supermarket shelves were stocked with processed foods, two-thirds of which contained genetically modified produce as producers are looking towards biotechnology to increase food production.

"We are not labelling our food 'GM' because we don't want the customers to be scared. Our fast food culture has caused a public health crisis in our nation. We have children in our schools now that will have shorter life spans than their parents. Spending your food dollars locally gives



you quality food, a healthy environment and a thriving community," she said.

The concept of food miles, or the distance food has to travel before it gets to the consumer, rang loud throughout the conference.

"Food at a Farmers' Market does not have any frequent flyer miles. Much of the food in America travels 1500 miles from farm to plate – there are a lot of negatives associated with this."

Jane Adams

Jane Adams, consultant, food writer and Chairperson of the Australian Farmers' Market Association, also highlighted food miles.

"A lettuce travels an average of 1000 miles

to get to the customer. The less distance the food travels, the fewer nasties that go with it such as fuel emissions and packaging."

Adams is not only interested in the global issues but also the effects on the local community and its food system.

"Farmers' Markets are an integral part of the community food system: when you support local farmers by spending your food dollar with them you, instead of walking off the land, they stay."

The Australian Department of Primary Industry has estimated that the turnover of the Australian Farmers' Markets is \$40 million dollars. Adams thinks this is a gross underestimation and

is more likely to be half as much again. However the DPI has shown that the economic impact is effectively double that.

"A deregulated market place has had a strong impact on the type of farming that occurs, farms have diversified, and there is the whole notion of urban and rural renewal with rural communities often staggering and the urban community wanting to reconnect with the land."

"The average food miles travelled were between 20 km and 155 km and the average spend was between \$20 and \$100. It's not just the immediate impact either, it's the focus where you start to build the networks, it's the ripple effect."

Adams key message is to "grow locally, eat locally and eat seasonally."



Dr Alan Cameron and (right) and Massey lecturer Phil Wycherley

There are many threats to the success of a Farmers' Market, with weather being high on the list and the venue being a key consideration. "Wind is the worst factor in a Farmers' Market – stuff gets blown around everywhere."

Other issues include vendors not obeying market rules, finding a good location, deciding on the correct day and time to open, and how the market is advertised.

However, the key components that consumers are looking for in the markets are trustworthiness, reliability and authenticity.

NOTE: there will be a fuller report on the research next month.

Markets may grow bigger

"Farmers' Markets are not a flash in the pan and may grow ever bigger."

Lex Chalmers, geographer from Waikato University, took the issue further and looked at what the industry could do if it wanted to build.

He believes that though there is now an established public awareness of Farmers' Markets, there is only limited discussion in the media about the important global and community ideals that underpin such innovation.

"I am interested in sustainability and to me, building a long-term sustainable brand is about talking to people who are within 15–20 kms of your Farmers' Market every week. Tourism is critical but for sustainability, local is key."

Chalmers considers the concept of provisioning as not being expressed enough. "Provisioning is where you use your Farmers' Markets to do your weekly shopping."

The dynamics of the farmers market phenomenon

The worldwide comeback of Farmers' Markets has sparked the interest of Dr Alan Cameron, Researcher at Massey University. For a number of years, Dr Cameron has been studying the dynamics that lie behind the Farmers' Market phenomenon.

With 26 Farmers' Markets in existence in New Zealand and 75% of those being formed in the last years, the trend shows little sign of slowing down. This trend is reflected worldwide.

Dr Cameron notes that there are many reasons as to why a Farmers' Market is successful or not, but authenticity plays a huge role.

"People are getting sick of the big spin and over-marketing hype. We now have more discriminating consumers. I call them conscious consumers," he said. "They want personalised shopping. When was the last time you went into a supermarket and said 'Mr Heinz, could I have a tin or

your spaghetti please?"

Many of the Farmers' Markets in New Zealand and worldwide have been set up by producers for producers. But what was the initial impetus behind this?

Dr Cameron identified the vendors at the market as coming largely from two distinct groups. There were the opportunistic entrepreneurs who saw the market as an opportunity and went for it. These producers used the markets as a launching pad for their business. Then there were those vendors who used the market as a safety net, another outlet for their produce when it was not longer profitable to continue as they had been.

"Farmers' Markets being used as business incubators is a common trend. With grower margins being squeezed by supermarkets, many vendors are forced to market their produce in a different manner and value-added products fall in to this; the Farmers' Market provides that outlet," he said.

Farmers Markets: pleasures & pitfalls

The inaugural Farmers' Market conference held recently in Havelock gave many of the attendees a chance to network and compare notes. By definition, food sold at a Farmers' Market must be local and such isolation can be an issue when solving generic issues.

Several market managers were afforded the opportunity to convey their experiences when setting up a Farmers' Market and it made for enlightening listening.

Whangarei market manager Murray Burns (pictured below) told a disquieting story about the reaction of supermarkets and wholesalers to their Farmers' Market formation.

"I was a commercial tomato grower. We supplied supermarkets, who gave us 70c/kg in our pocket and they never sold at below \$3.65. If they didn't sell it, we had to take it back; they took no risk. I started a Farmers' Market in an effort to get to the customers. It took us a year to set up, as we knew we had to dot our Is and cross our Ts. The reaction of the supermarkets was to tell Turners and Growers that any grower that was in our market would be blacklisted, and Turners and Growers responded by saying that any shops, wholesalers or restaurants that bought from the market would find it extremely difficult to get imported produce."

That was eight years ago, and though it took a long time to get established, it is now a prosperous market. "We have 35 regular vendors now and they peak to between 60 and 70 in the summer. We don't want any more customers; we are about two years away from catching up."



Burns is generous in his praise for the Whangarei Council and credits their support with much of the success. The market is outside and prone to the vagrancies of the weather, but the customers always come.

"The council were great; they provided power, water and lights. We need lights some mornings: the customers start at 6 a.m. and they bring torches."

The Farmers' Market has allowed the Burns' business to adapt and diversify. They now grow cucumbers and lettuces and make pesto. "It took three years at the Farmers' Market to get to the stage where we could reinvest in the farm. After four years, we had enough money to start a kitchen."



Sharon and Ross Kirk

Six weeks from plan to opening

When Sharon Kirk started the Gisborne Farmers' Market, she operated on a completely different timescale (see report to the left). The committee started planning their market just before Christmas in 2005 and six weeks later, they had held their first very successful day.

"Every market has challenges to overcome and the timescale and venue were our issues. Six weeks is a very short time in which to organise everything, but we did it".

The original venue for the market was outdoors at the Gisborne A&P showgrounds and though this was pleasant when the weather was fine, the crowds stayed away when it wasn't. It was eventually decided to turn the sheep pavilion into the market venue.

"We had to steam clean, fumigate and tidy up this venue. It has a very different feel to the outdoor venue with vendors shoulder to shoulder and the customers feeling like they are down on the farm buying the produce."

Kirk is quick to point out that there are many challenges ahead.

"Though it's been a hectic journey and the diversity of product range is continuing to increase and we are still looking to build



"Farmers' Markets are often promoted as a shopping experience – enjoyable, relaxing and a place to meet friends; they should be marketed as *the* shopping experience".

Lex Chalmers, geographer from Waikato University,

This young visitor to the Farmers Market in Hastings would agree.

the market. We want to increase profits and vendor numbers, we want to encourage a wider cross section of the community and we are now wondering if we have the right day."

Kirk's motivation to undertake this mammoth task was simple.

"My husband Ross and I run a producing, packing and export operation. We produce some interesting products but the supermarkets weren't buying local. We wanted to take the opportunity to give our local region the chance to share the taste sensation of our produce and the Farmers' Market seems like a great way to do this."

New association forged out of passion and intensity

Since its inception last November, Farmers' Market New Zealand Inc. (NZMFA) has been actively involved in the promotion and support of the many and varied Farmers' Markets throughout New Zealand.

With the stated aims of facilitating the formation of a network of authentic Farmers' Markets throughout New Zealand and to clearly define the concept of an authentic Farmers' Market, one of its first major roles was to host the inaugural Farmers' Market New Zealand Conference.

Held in Hawkes Bay and attended by nearly 100 delegates, the conference proved to be a valuable place for networking and idea sharing, and this, alongside the array of mouth-watering local produce and visits to local artisan producers, made the conference a huge success.

Ian Price, Chairman of the NZFMA, drew a deep breath as he opened proceedings.

"Having been in existence for a little over seven months, it's quite an achievement for us to be holding this conference and to have the support of delegates from Keri Keri to Invercargill."

In addition to this conference, the association has also managed an impressive list of achievements.

"This month sees the release of the NZFMA Market Management Handbook and this is to be followed later in the year by the release of the Vendor's Handbook. We are also involved in the Australasian Farmers' Market guide book which is to be released later this year." adds Price. These handbooks are supported by the newly developed website.

Price is very definite about how they achieved so much in such a short time.

Alongside the support from New Zealand Trade and Enterprise were a group of enthusiastic individuals.

"Passion and intensity" says Price, "are the keys to our success."

