
TO MARKET, TO MARKET

FULL CIRCLE AT THE LIBERTY VILLAGE FARMERS' MARKET

BY MARY LUZ MEJIA

When it comes to shopping for food, it seems that what's old is brand spanking new again. In recent years, the proliferation of farmers' markets has been spreading like rows of runaway runner beans. Recent food buying trends had been leaning heavily towards anything "organic," even if it meant that our food logged thousands of petro-miles to reach the table. Currently, we are hearing a lot more about the environmental and economic repercussions of importing our food from the

"certified local" markets in the GTA, the other being Woodbine. The "My Market" brand requires that all fruits, vegetables and artisanal products sold at these two markets be grown and produced locally and be sold by the actual farmer or producer.

Much has been written recently about a number of unscrupulous farmers' market vendors who purchase produce – both local and imported – at the Ontario Food Terminal for resale at the markets. These



other end of the continent or from across the world. The consumer has also become aware of the health and food safety benefits of eating locally grown products. Local products that have been raised naturally or organically are even more appealing to the consumer.

The proliferation of farmers' markets has helped nurture the trend towards eating locally and seasonally. The number of markets in the province has increased from a low of sixty in the 1980s to double that number today. The Liberty Village Farmers' Market is one of two new

"resellers" are doing a disservice to the markets and the consumer. Don't let a few bad apples keep you from frequenting all farmers' markets, certified or not. Get to know the farmers you buy from, and you'll soon learn how to spot the imposters.

A real bonus to shopping at farmers' markets is that it puts a face on the person growing your food. If you think this is trivial, think back to last year's E. coli-tainted packaged spinach debacle, during which hundreds of people all over North America got sick, some seriously.



When you don't know who is growing your food or how they are doing it, the faceless reality of big agribusiness can hit home in startling ways.

Meeting the person who grows your food is as easy as plucking a vine-ripened tomato, thanks in large part to these markets dotting our landscape. Here's the funny thing, though: in our mega-sized store society, many of us have become accustomed to thinking that bigger equals better. So it was on my first visit to the Liberty Village Farmers' Market when I looked around at the dozen or so stalls and wondered, "Is this it?" Of course, it was the middle of June – what was I expecting? A hundred stalls filled with local produce?

Staying open-minded has paid off. That first outing netted me some fantastic finds, including fresh garlic scapes, usually harvested in mid-to-late June. These bright green curlicues are the tops, or flower stalks, of garlic. I had never purchased these farmers' market staples before, so I started chatting with farmer James Jones of Big Ass Garlic in Dorset to learn more about his scapes, garlic and famed pickled vegetables. (Apparently, he guards his pickling recipe closer than the Colonel does his chicken seasoning.)

Jones used to work as an environmental officer, studying the effects of acid rain, before he decided to turn his gardening hobby into a second career. Looking around for a hearty crop that could handle the Muskoka region's longer winters and sandy soil, Jones settled upon garlic, which he plants in the autumn and picks in July. When I first met Jones, he had jars of assorted relishes, savoury jams and pickled garlic on hand, but his fresh bulbs were not ready yet. He offered some suggestions for using the garlic scapes. "You can chop them up and add them to stir-fries, steam them like you would broccoli, or make a pesto out of them."

Pesto sounded infinitely appealing. Later that afternoon, I set about cleaning and chopping the scapes, adding some good quality extra virgin olive oil, basil leaves from my herb garden, lemon juice, red pepper

flakes, parmesan cheese, pine nuts, sea salt and pepper, until I had achieved a bright green paste in my food processor. Suffice it to say, this pesto didn't last long and is a new summertime favourite that is great as a condiment, especially with grilled chicken.

Next up, I discovered the sweet potatoes grown on the Proracki family's farm in Waterford. Bob and Juli Proracki run Round Plains Plantation, where Beauregards, O'Henrys and Asian Kotobukis are grown without the use of herbicides, pesticides, fungicides or packaging waxes. I brought home a mix of all three, peeled and sliced them, and brushed them with olive oil, sea salt and cayenne pepper before grilling on the barbeque. In a word, phenomenal! Sweet, tender and chock-full of flavour, everything a sweet potato should be, even though they were from last year's crop (stored properly, local sweet potatoes can be purchased year-round). And best of all, these beauties are relatively guilt-free, given that each serving boasts protein, fibre, vitamin C, calcium, folic acid, and beta-carotene.

For those looking for more of a dessert-type treat, you can't miss Bob and Juli's sweet potato muffins (some made without gluten and sugar), sweet potato pie or my new favourite, sweet potato chocolate chip cookies. Admittedly, the latter do sound a bit bizarre, but one bite and even the fussiest eaters are hooked; just ask the cookies' new number one fans – my very fussy nieces.

Delighted by the findings of my first trip, I was unabashedly thrilled when, on a second visit a few weeks later, I came upon a table heavy with deep burgundy-coloured sweet cherries that gleamed as if each had been individually polished, as well as ruby red raspberries and strawberries. At the next stall, I spotted some of the most attractive tomatoes outside of Italy. Bright yellow, mellow orange and traditional red were on offer from the Van Hart Farm in Holland Marsh. When asked if he has a Dutch background, farmer Ron Van Hart replied with a smile, "Yes, [and] we Dutch like to say we're all born with the same

disease – the disease to grow things.”

Lucky for us, because Van Hart told me that his pretty yellow tomatoes are well loved because they are less acidic than traditional red varieties. “The orange ones,” says Van Hart, “taste of apricots. They’re great on their own or in a salad.” He’s absolutely right on both counts.

The thing about shopping at farmers’ markets is that, as with many worthwhile endeavours, you have to be a bit patient. What Mother Nature brings to the table keeps changing and that variety is what makes shopping this way so alluring to food enthusiasts like me. It can be compared with shopping for antiques – you never know what you’ll find when you head out. The thrill of the hunt and the delight in finding special treasures provide much of the excitement.

And treasures you will find! A few weeks after my initial encounter with Ron and his tomatoes, his table sported gorgeous, jewel-like heirloom cherry tomato varieties in fantastic purple, striped green, yellow and orange hues. Some were as small and delicate as Champagne grapes and currants, others the size of kumquats. The best part about Van Hart’s tomatoes, and in fact most everything I bought and tried from the market, is that it brought back memories of what fruits and vegetables tasted like when I was a kid and took them totally for granted.

Making up for my childhood nonchalance, and with childlike glee, I purchased a plethora of mini-vegetables – from tiny zucchini and cauliflowers to my favourite patty pans, also known as custard marrow or scalloped squash. The first time I ate these bright yellow darling summer squash was in South Africa, where they’d been sautéed with other vegetables as an elegant side to a piece of ostrich steak. They look like a small scalloped mushroom cap and they’re not commonly found in our grocery stores, so I was duly delighted to find them at the market.

The next order of business was to cook up a batch with a bit of olive oil and garlic in a foil pouch over the grill. Perfection! Mild in flavour with a tender skin, they’re a lovely summertime squash that serve as a colourful contrast to other mini vegetables.

For those of us who love to cook, there’s nothing better than meandering through the stalls at a farmers’ market, picking up whatever looks appealing, and crafting the evening’s meal based on edible treasures. It’s the way many families in Europe still eat and it makes sense: seasonal, just-picked, vibrant food that’s grown almost in our own backyards. More and more chefs and, encouragingly, home cooks, are planning their menus based on seasonality and locality. And savouring every morsel! □

Liberty Village Farmers’ Market

34 Hanna Ave. (at East Liberty St.), Toronto

Open Sundays from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. until October 28

A complete listing of farmers’ markets in the Greater Golden Horseshoe begins on page 52.

Born in Colombia, South America, Mary Luz Mejia, has worked as a journalist, television producer/researcher/director/writer and freelance writer in three languages (English, Spanish, French). A devout follower of all things food, Mary Luz loves immersing herself in other cultures, learning about food, who makes it or grows it, and best of all, eating and writing about it. Her work has appeared in the Globe and Mail, 24 Hours Toronto, Asian Gourmet Magazine, as well as online as www.suite101.com’s Food Trend’s feature writer.

