

19 Jun

LANE
MONTHLY

A Century of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables



Lane County Farmers Market hits 100

By Joanna Bartlett

A hundred years ago, Eugene was home to about 10,000 people—and a farmers market. The Eugene Producers Market first opened shop in 1915 on 8th Ave. and Park St., beginning a century-long tradition of supporting local food growers and producers.

"The market today is at the same location as it started," says Jake Gariepy, Public Outreach Coordinator for the Lane County Farmers Market.

Not everything stayed the same for that 100 years, however. "After 10 to 15 years, the market moved from being an outdoor market to a location at Charnelton and Broadway," Gariepy says.

In a time when people shopped for fresh food every day, visiting different stalls and shops for each of their needs—meat, cheese, produce, flowers and the like—the market flourished. But, by the end of the 1950s, when supermarkets came to town, the farmers market lost its customer base and closed in 1959.

It wasn't until 1970 when the Saturday Market opened that local farmers once again had a central location downtown to sell their crops to Eugeneans. In 1978, the Lane County Farmers Market split off from the Saturday Market and formed its own organization. The two symbiotically exist today on each side of 8th Ave.

A unique aspect of the Lane County Farmers Market is that it's owned by the vendors, says Richard Wilen of Hayhurst Organic Farm. "That's very Eugene. Across the country, most of them are owned by the government or private organizations."

Throughout its years, the farmers market has served as an incubator for local farms.

"It's a little different today than it was 25 or 30 years ago, but it's still a place where new farms come to break in and get started," Wilen says. "We started our farm from scratch, and the farmers market was our main source of income. We built the business there."

Farms are still getting their start at the Lane County Farmers Market. Mickie Myrmo works for Maple Organic Farm and sells produce at the Tuesday and Thursday markets. It's the farm's first year. "It's going pretty good," Myrmo says. "I can't wait until the cucumbers are out. They're my favorite."

Northern Lights Christmas Tree Farm, selling pastured poultry, eggs and grass-fed beef,

has been at the Lane County Farmers Market for two years. “I love doing farmers markets,” owner Lynn Schutte says. “It offers me a chance to interact with the customer. They can ask me a question about how their meat and eggs are raised and treated. It’s a very respectful relationship.”

It’s the kind of relationship many farmers enjoy.

“I’m a people person, so it’s great to interact,” says Becca Conaway, an intern at Organic Redneck. “I like to work out in the field, but when people come by and say, ‘Your asparagus is so beautiful. I love your lettuce,’ that’s the gratification moment.”

The connection with his customers is a draw for Wilen as well. “Farming can be pretty isolating. You’re out on your tractor or out in your field,” he says. “Then you go to market and it’s a very intense and social thing.”

Wilen says he’s been at his booth almost every Saturday for 24 years and it’s the people that keep him going. “I’ve been there so long that I stand there and my old friends walk past,” he says. “We’ve seen kids grow up and literally come work in my booth, go off to college, have kids. The relationships are phenomenal and it’s part of what keeps you going, because what we do is really hard.”

For the customer, there are plenty of benefits from shopping at a farmer’s market.

“You’re supporting local agriculture,” Gariepy says. “The bulk of the farmers are small in size, they’re local. You’re not only helping to keep them afloat but you’re also contributing to the local economy.” Those farmers in turn employ local workers and spend their profits in our communities.

Plus, you can talk to the person who’s grown your food.

“I answer so many questions,” says Rachel Weiner, president of the Lane County Farmers Market board of directors and owner of Slo Farm. “It’s fun to help people understand a little bit more about where food comes from and what it takes to get it there.”

The market is also a gathering place for the community. People see friends and neighbors, chat and compare their hauls. “For some people, they see their neighbors more at the market than they do on their street. They’ll chat at the market more than they do at home. It’s a great feeling there,” Wilen says.

In its 100th anniversary year, Lane County Farmers Market wants to keep that great feeling and improve on it. “There are a few new features to the market this year that people seem to be enjoying,” Gariepy says. Friends of the Farmers Market, a volunteer-run group dedicated to supporting local agriculture and promoting the market, is organizing Bienvenidos/Welcome to the Market days on the first and third Saturdays of each month. These include an on-site Spanish interpreter, market guides to help you find your way around, cooking demonstrations and a veggie valet service.

“If you have difficulty getting your produce back to your car, you can ask one of the market guides and they’ll take it for you,” Gariepy says. Veggie valets, identifiable by their bright yellow vests, are available to provide an extra set of hands from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on first and third Saturdays.

The cooking demonstrations, at 11 a.m. on the first and third Saturdays, whip up tasty dishes from fresh, local produce available at the market that day. They’re held near the Beer Garden at the end of Park St. and offer free samples and recipes.

Increasing public awareness of the market and its offerings is high on the agenda for this and future years. The Lane County Public Market is receiving grant funding from the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program through Willamette Farm and Food Coalition. The grant funds a public outreach coordinator and volunteer coordinator to organize the Friends of the Farmers Market volunteers.

What does the future hold for the Lane County Farmers Market?

“Expansion has been a topic of discussion and some debate,” says Weiner. “If we can make room for more vendors, that would be great. “What I’d like to see for the farmers market is to have an open space where our customers can move more freely around. I think the future will be a more vibrant community space.”

Those plans may take time to come to fruition, but the Lane County Farmers Market is a vibrant Eugene fixture that’s here to stay.

Lane County Farmers Market

8th Ave and Oak St. in downtown Eugene

Saturday – 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. (until Nov. 15)

Tuesday – 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. (until Oct. 28)

Thursday – 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. (until Sept. 24)

100th Anniversary Celebration

What: Lane County Farmers Market will host a barbecue featuring food made with ingredients sourced from Lane County Farmers Market vendors

When: Sunday, Aug. 23, 5-7 p.m.

Where: Probably on West Park St. and 8th Ave.

More info: Tickets will be available to the public beginning in June and will cost no more than \$10. Profits from the event will go to LCFM's SNAP Match program benefiting SNAP recipients.