

SLOW FOOD NATION

Getting fresh in the city

Here's one advantage of Toronto's sweltering summer: our fruit and vegetable markets. A decade ago, there were a handful at best, but as Sasha Chapman reveals, farmers these days are setting up stalls all over the city, selling local produce when it is at its crisp and delectable best

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It's hard to believe we're in a recession: farmers' markets have never been busier in this city, from the grand stalwart in the north St. Lawrence building to modest neighbourhood spots like the MyMarket at Bloor and Borden or the Sunshine Market Garden at the Queen Street CAMH.

And there's more reason than ever to stay in the city on Saturdays, now that three destination markets are operational: St. Lawrence, Evergreen Brick Works and The Stop's newly minted Green Bams at Wychwood.

Urban, locavore and decidedly idealistic, Toronto's local food movement gained momentum with the opening of Riverdale in 2000. Riverdale, and the dozens of Toronto markets that have opened since, boast a laidback, friendly atmosphere, spawning all sorts of community events and new initiatives, from harvest suppers to film nights.

At this time of year, farmers' markets are opening every week; by mid-June, it would be possible to spend every day of the week at one.

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But since farmers' markets are all about doing things locally (and many of the same farmers frequent the different markets), it makes sense to start with the one closest to you.

Spend some time talking to the growers and you may get some free cooking advice (and maybe a suggestion of where to find some truly fresh farm eggs) along with that bundle of sweet, fat Ontario asparagus.

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Evergreen Brick Works Farmers' Market Walk

An incredible bevy of farmers, including chef favourite Cookstown Greens, and some excellent prepared food, such as Maria Surk's com empanadas - if you are willing to wait for them. Last summer, the market drew in hordes of parents - and children, who could distract themselves with sustainable crafts or a huge sandbox. (And the wetlands are a perfect for picnics and turtle-spotting.) There might be some changes this summer, however. Some farmers have decamped across town to the Wychwood, which now runs at the same time as Evergreen, or they are trying to staff both markets. In any event, consider biking to the Brick Works or taking the shuttle from Broadview station: construction at the market is eating up precious parking spaces. *Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

North St. Lawrence**Farmers' Market**

One of the best places to buy fruit in mid-summer, from baskets of Red Haven peaches to fragrant apricots. It's also the only place to buy Ruth Klahsen's excellent Monforte cheese, such as her sharp sheep's cheddar. Currently in the midst of raising funds for a new dairy in Stratford, Ms. Klahsen plans to be back at markets across the city in 2010. *Saturdays from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m.*

Green Barn

Farmers' Market This market has been going gangbusters since it opened in December - on opening day, the crowd swept from stall to stall. Those winter offerings were surprisingly abundant - from cooler packs of meat (including duck legs, a cut that's usually hard to come by, from Harry Stoddart) and Fun Guy's unparalleled shiitake mushrooms, to artisanal flours such as rye and Red Fife. This season, the first outside of the barns, will likely not disappoint. Be sure to visit The Stop Community Centre's fabulous temperate greenhouse, where you can learn about composting and growing your own food. *Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

Sorauren

Now in its second season, this west-end hot spot is becoming a testing ground for graduates of FarmStart, a non-profit training program for fledgling farmers. Matchbox Garden & Seed Co. has a great selection of heirloom seedlings for your own garden; by mid-summer, they'll be bringing in produce from their own garden in Brampton. And if Plan B is still selling green garlic next week, buy as much as you can carry: the season is short. Next up: Sorauren's organizers have set their sights on creating a west-end food co-op to feed Roncesvalles year-round. *Mondays from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.*

Riverdale Farm

You'll like it, but, more important, the kids will like it too. Take a tour of the barns and meet some piglets and capricious goats before meandering over to the market, where you can get a cone of sheep's-milk ice cream and sing a few refrains with a guitarist strumming *Old MacDonald*. Some of the best asparagus I've ever eaten came from the farmers at Riverdale; you can also find less common greens, such as lovage, which tastes a little like celery and makes a fantastic addition to any recipe for burgers. A number of chefs in the city frequent this market; from Yasser Qahawish, late of Osgoode Hall, I learned that veteran farmer Ted Thorpe's green lettuce was less bitter than his red; from Jamie Kennedy, I found out who had the sweetest tomatoes that week. *Tuesdays from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.*

Trinity Bellwoods**Farmers' Market**

The hippest market by far (chances are, those jeans drooping off the hips on the girl next to you cost more than a few weeks of shopping at Whole Foods), Trinity Bellwoods attracts many of the same vendors - such as Ted Thorpe, Bees Universe and St. John's Bakery - who come to other markets around the city. Artisan baker Dawn Woodward sells her inimitable crackers here, and forager extraordinaire, Forbes Wild Foods, always has something interesting from up north, whether it's porcini mushrooms or paw-paws. *Tuesdays, 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.*

Nathan Phillips Square**Market**

Catering to city hall officials, court staff and Bay Street suits, this market serves the best picnic lunches in the concrete jungle. Roasted corn, amazing artisanal curds from Gurth Pretty's Cheese of Canada table and a loaf of bread makes for a stellar lunch. Finish off the meal with some ripe berries or juicy peaches. *Wednesdays, 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., June 7 to October 18.*

AppleTree Market

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One of the newest markets on the block, it's wedged in the park space next to North Toronto Memorial Community Centre. Surrounded by families who are there to swim or play soccer, this market is sure to be mobbed by hungry kids who will no doubt gobble up the prepared food from market organizers Lesley Stoyan and Chris Trussell. People who sign up for Kawartha Ecological Growers' Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program will be able to collect weekly boxes of farm goods from Mark Trealout here. This year, Mr. Trealout is offering more than just produce to members; there will be options to add on meat (such as sausages made by Starfish chef Kyle Deming) and plenty of pantry items. *Thursdays from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.*

Dufferin Grove

This west-end mainstay has a great community feel. Growers kibbitz with regular shoppers, and hand out free samples - maybe a slice of a crisp apple or a honey stick for that herbal tea made from weeds collected in Kensington Market. Although the market runs year-round, nothing beats mid-summer, the bright, fleeting moments when a 100-mile diet seems tenable. Buy your bread from the bakers in the park, or bring your own dough from 3 p.m. onward and use the residual heat in the wood-fired oven to bake your own loaves. The bakers will even share their sourdough starter with you. *Thursdays from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.*

Mississauga's Square One Farmers' Market

Like everything else in the suburbs, this market is vast, boasting twice as many vendors (150) as the St. Lawrence Farmers' Market. It's worth the trip if you are planning to buy fruit or vegetables in bulk: i.e., if you are thinking of putting up some preserves later in the season. Tomatoes and cucumbers are sold by the bushel, and there's a great selection of Eastern European products, from deli meats to pickles. You might even pick up some preserving tips from the babushkas who frequent the stalls. *Fridays 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sundays 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., all year*

The best of the St. Lawrence Market

Best Butcher:

Whitehouse Meats. Top Meadow's naturally raised steaks are great on the barbeque, and vac-packed strips of "stir-fry" meat will yield one of the most flavourful dishes you've ever tossed in your wok.

Best Cheesemonger:

Alex Farm Cheese. It's hard to beat the breadth and depth of this cheese counter. I've always loved their Spanish collection, and will be forever grateful for my introduction to Garroxta, a semi-firm goat's cheese, and creamy blue Valdeon, two of my favourite cheeses to end a meal.

Best Deli Counter:

Scheffler's may have the best prosciutto collection in the city, from Niagara (cured by Mario Pingue) to the internationally renowned La Quercia, which is produced in Iowa. Visiting Italians are impressed, even a little defensive.

Best Chocolate Fix:

Aren't We Sweet carries a wide range of organic and fair-trade chocolate, not to mention cocoa nibs and spiced bars.

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