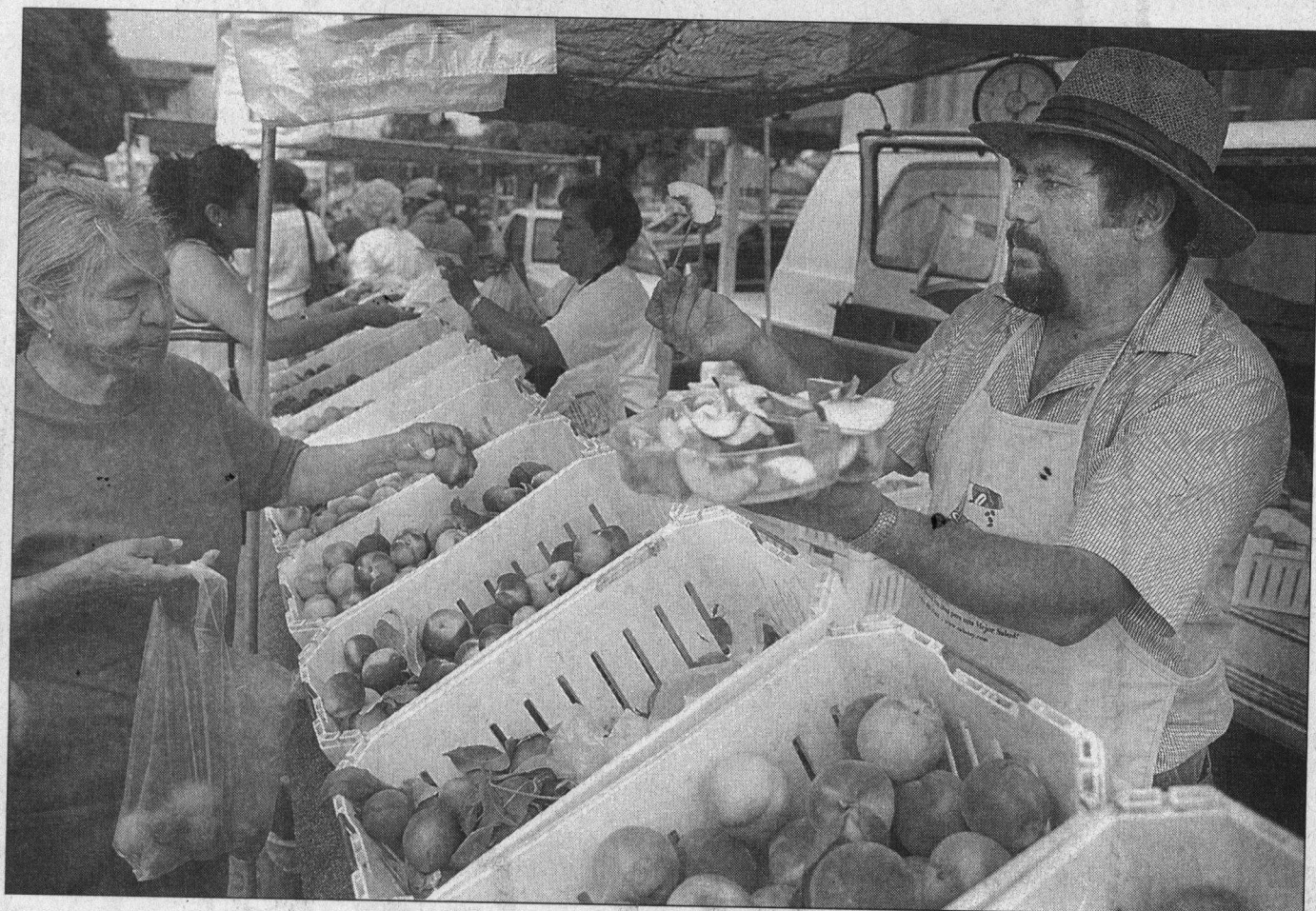


FARMERS MARKET PUTS DOWN ROOTS



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Humberto Ontiveros offers free samples of fruit at the Watsonville Farmers Market last week.

Vendors optimistic as Friday event sheds its troubles

By LIZ KELLAR
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

After four years of turmoil, the Watsonville Farmers Market is beginning to hit its stride.

One recent Friday afternoon, shoppers selected **WATSONVILLE** fresh cherries from Hollister and sunflowers from La Selva Beach as a guitarist noodled through some blues.

Kim Fryer, who calls herself a dedicated market-goer, sat on the grass sharing an apricot with her Rottweiler-shepherd mix puppy, Agnes of Dog.

"I think it's getting a little more utilitarian," she says of the market. "More fruits and vegetables rather than biscotti and croissants."

Jaime Martinez, owner of the nearby Del Sol Market, estimates the number of people visiting the market has doubled since last year.

"There's better products, more variety," he says. "It's a nice chance for people to get out and check out what's going on."

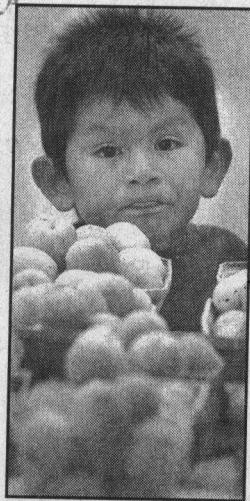
The once-popular market was a casualty of the 1989 earthquake, and was revived in 1998 by Main Street Watsonville.

The market suffered a loss of stability when that organization folded, and when manager Lea Goodman resigned last year. Nancy Gammons of Four Sisters Farm in Aromas took the helm.

"Nancy is doing a wonderful, wonderful job of building the market from the bottom up," said farmers market board member Sam Earnshaw.

Some changes instituted last year, including moving the hours back to 4 to 8 p.m., remain. Gammons hopes to bring back prepared food, such as pizza and sandwiches.

"I love Watsonville's diversity. ... I felt it was really important to bring into the market all the best of that diversity," said Gammons.



Jose Marin checks out some fresh apricots.

"I do seek out smaller businesses that need a break, that need a place to sell. I think the market is getting better and better and more people are coming out."

Gammons says the market board is working toward becoming a nonprofit organization. The market has been coasting on last year's grants from the city of Watsonville and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"If we can get through this year, we'll be in great shape," she said. "It's been a struggle."

Most vendors at the market are optimistic about the future of Watsonville as a viable venue for fresh produce.

Jean Byrne of High Ground Organics says Watsonville has "been improving each week for us. We're committed — you can't beat a market close to home."

"There seems to be a little more demand for organic product," said Roger Waddell of Crystal Bay Farm.

Waddell, like other vendors in Watsonville, is on the waiting list for more established markets in Santa Cruz and at Cabrillo College. He sells at markets in San Jose, San Mateo and Morgan Hill, where he can get higher prices for his produce.

He remains committed to the market in Watsonville, however.

"I grew up in this area, so I feel like I'm doing a service to my community, that people can eat high-quality food," he said.

"Watsonville is growing in a positive direction, it has a friendly, happy vibe," he added. "I think it will build in the next five or 10 years."

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