

The Downtown Farmers Market was hatched as way to draw visitors back to a quake-ravaged downtown. Well, 25 years later, it's still going strong



PHOTOS BY DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Sandra Ward is a veteran of the Downtown Santa Cruz Farmers Market, now in its 25th year. She was one of the original vendors when it was started in the former Ford's department store about six months after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

# Foodie Favorite

*Farmer's Market*

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**SANTA CRUZ** » Twenty-five years ago this month, a small group of farmers came together to establish a growers market at the site of the old Ford's department store on Pacific Avenue.

The Loma Prieta earthquake had struck six months earlier, devastating downtown Santa Cruz. Shells of buildings stood along Pacific Avenue, windows boarded over. Downtown Association members thought opening a farmers market might help to revive downtown while the area was rebuilt.

"It was a ghost town," farmer Sandra Ward of New Natives Farm, one of the original market vendors, said of downtown after the earthquake. "We were the only thing happening."

Yes, times have changed.

The Downtown Market, one of five markets run by Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets, marks a quarter-century of operation this spring. The Wednesday afternoon market has grown from a small meet-up of local growers to a weekly showcase of locally grown organic produce and prepared food that is among the most diverse in the state and distinctly Santa Cruz. Activists collect signatures and distribute pamphlets alongside a masseuse and a kids craft table as foodies and hippies, tech workers and tourists shop. First-timers ogle the myriad of goods; locals know to pick up fava beans while they can, when summer peppers and fresh corn are in their prime, and whether

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The Santa Cruz Farmers Market — which this month is hitting its 25th year — is a community focal point every Wednesday in downtown Santa Cruz.



Zane Griffin hands the first loaf of Companion Bakeshop bread to Jeff Blackburn at the Santa Cruz Farmers Market.

## AT A GLANCE

### DOWNTOWN SANTA CRUZ FARMERS MARKET

**Founded:** April 1990

**First location:** Old Ford's department store

**Current location:** Cedar Street between Cathcart and Lincoln streets

**Original growers who still sell at the market:** New Nature, Four Sisters Farms, Happy Boy Farms, Molino Creek Farm, Windmill Farm, Blue Heron Farms, Mello-dy Ranch

**Number of farms:** 45

**Number of artisan food sellers:** 23

**Market Director Nesh Dhillon's recommendations:** Eggs, artisan lettuces, avocados, local meats

**Hours:** 1:30-6:30 p.m. Wednesdays

**Information:** [www.santacruzfarmersmarket.org](http://www.santacruzfarmersmarket.org), Facebook and Twitter





Ronald Donkervoort's Windmill Farm is one of the original sellers at the Santa Cruz Farmers Market.

## Market

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to splurge on a fresh oyster. Always have an oyster.

"The whole thing has just evolved and matured," said Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets Director Nesh Dhillon, who has been with the market since 2001. "It's not just buying produce; it's meeting up with the community and supporting sustainable agriculture."

In the early days, farmers set up on the floor tiles of the wrecked Ford's building, electrical outlets still visible and the sounds of construction echoing in the background. Customers came as much for the community as they did the produce.

"The market, that first year, it was amazing," Ward said. "We were just bringing ourselves back. We did that together by selling produce."

The Downtown Santa Cruz Farmers Market was the third farmers market in the county. (The Aptos Farmers Market is the county's oldest, and the Felton market, albeit seasonal, was actually started a few months before the downtown one.) As downtown rebounded from the earthquake damage, the market bounced around to two other locations. It reorganized in 1995 to become a nonprofit under the umbrella of Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets and found a home in the city-owned parking lot on Cedar Street between Cathcart and Lincoln streets.

### Growing the market

Since Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets nonprofit was created in 1995, the group has established four other markets in the county: Live Oak (1999), Westside Santa Cruz (2007), Scotts Valley (2009) and Felton, which actually started just before the flagship Downtown Market but joined the organization in 2009.

The market group does more than simply organize the markets. In 2012, the group created the Foodshed Project, an education and outreach program geared at connecting customers with where their food comes from.

"People are disconnected from farming," Dhillon said. "They don't understand how much work goes into growing food, especially organically. It's important for people to know that."

The Foodshed Project features a free family-friendly event during the Downtown Market each month that is focused on a seasonal food item and includes tastings, a talk, music and cooking demonstrations.

### AT A GLANCE MARKET TIPS

- Most vendors are cash-only so stop at the ATM on your way.
- Bring your own reusable shopping bags.
- Strollers and kids are welcome.
- Leave dogs at home.
- Take advantage of free bike valet parking.
- Try the 'Veggie Valet' service at the information booth that allows you to leave your bags and continue shopping, or bring your car around for curbside pickup.
- Eat outdoors. Grab lunch or dinner from the food trucks and eat in the market's cafe seating area.



PHOTOS BY DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Mali McGee of Bonny Doon milks one of her goats next to the Downtown Santa Cruz Farmers Market back in 2011 to protest the state's crackdown on unlicensed dairy collectives. Samples were passed around the growing crowd for those who wanted to take a taste.



Eve Krammer mans the Dirty Girl Produce booth at the Downtown Santa Cruz Farmers Market.

Market is thriving. Many of the original growers continue to sell their produce and bunches of other farmers have joined, helping the market mushroom from just a couple rows of vendors to filling the entire parking lot during the peak growing season.

"I find the market more mature now," Dhillon said. "It has a calmness, even though it's busy."

Approximately 45 growers and more than 20 artisans food purveyors set up stalls on Wednesday afternoons, providing rows of fresh fruits, veggies and flowers, as well as rustic displays of small-batch food products for customers to select from.

"Wednesday is the best day of the week for me," said Ward, of New Natives, who still sells organically grown microgreens and sprouts from a stall in near the end of the first row. "The energy of the farmers market is always a celebration — we're celebrating abundance."

In addition to providing area growers with a place to sell their produce, the Downtown Farmers Market has had great success launching upstart food van-

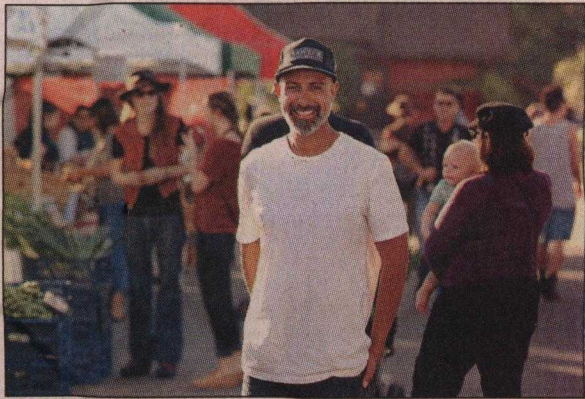
guards into successful local businesses.

Sauerkraut maker Farmhouse Culture, Westside bakery Companion Bake-shop and community butcher El Salchichero can all trace their beginnings to the Downtown Farmers Market — and all still sell at the market, even as they operate storefronts and sell their foodstuffs on a much larger scale.

"It's a great place to start your business," said Kathryn Lukas, founder and CEO of Farmhouse Culture

said. "It allows for you to find out if you truly have a viable product."

Lukas launched Farmhouse Culture at the market in 2009. Back then, she made about 500-600 pounds of fresh organic sauerkraut a week. Now



Nesh Dhillon has been with the Santa Cruz Community Farmers Markets since 2001.

Farmhouse Culture is now the No. 1-selling fresh kraut maker in America, producing more than 30,000 pounds of sauerkraut weekly.

"I'll be at the market for as long as we can be," Lukas said. "It's such an amazing opportunity to be connected with the local community."

The market operates year-round, though growing seasons affect the selection of fruits, veggies and other foods available.

Strawberries and asparagus, two spring favorites, popped up about a month ago, and stone fruit should be back in season any week now.

"It's a comfortable, safe environment. Look at all of these families," Dhillon said as he strolled between the stalls on a recent Wednesday, checking in with growers, greeting customers and patting a friend's young daughter on the head. "And it's all centered around food — what's not to like?"



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The Foodshed Project features a free family-friendly event during the Downtown Market each month that is focused on a seasonal food item and includes tastings, a talk, music and cooking demonstrations.

"I'm trying to create an environment that everyone feels comfortable, gets an education and walks around with a smile," Dhillon said.

The Foodshed Project was originally funded with a California Department of Food and Agriculture grant. When the grant expired, the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Market established its Pop-Up Breakfast Series at the Westside and Scotts Valley markets, with proceeds supporting the Foodshed Project's ongoing work. A few times each year, chefs create a farm-to-table multi-course brunch from produce, eggs and other food items available that morning at the market.

"It's really to link people with the food that comes from the market," Dhillon said. "It's an amazing community event."

## **Cultivating the future**

The Downtown Farmers

celebrating abundance.  
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