

# Growth industry



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

## Farmers seeing green at outdoor markets

*Farmers Market*

By **TRINA KLEIST**  
Sentinel staff writer

✓ WATSONVILLE — Hidden behind waves of orange calendulas and golden sunflowers, Jerry Thomas passed out heads of tender green lettuce just harvested from his farm, chatted with customers and munched on what he proclaimed were "the sweetest carrots you ever tasted."

As shoppers passed by with baguettes sticking out of paper sacks and wicker baskets filled with strawberries, organic honey and sand dabs, serious business was going on at the Friday farmers market.

For small growers like Thomas and other local produc-

ers, farmers markets have become an important outlet offering economic survival. Their customers, meanwhile, enjoy the quality and freshness, as well as the direct link to food producers that people in other countries take for granted.

Thomas, who began farming in the Pajaro Valley in 1971 amid the back-to-the-land movement, said the five to six markets he sells at each week form an essential part of his business, which includes supplying special events such as weddings and selling shares in a community-supported agriculture program.

Pat and Josh Thomas of Thomas Farms in Corralitos prepare their produce for sale at the weekly Watsonville farmers market.

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# Markets

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"It provides us a marketing angle," said Thomas, 56. "We have a pretty loyal following. We're able to sell almost everything we take to the farmers markets."



**Goodman**  
Farmers  
markets'  
organizer

For Theresa McGuire, owner of Watsonville-based Santa Cruz Pasta Factory, the markets guarantee cash flow while she waits for her restaurant customers, who make up 70 percent of her sales, to pay 30 days or more after delivery.

"I do better at farmers markets than at my shop in Capitola," McGuire, 37, said as she presided over packages of fresh salmon ravioli and tubs of garlicky alfredo sauce. "We sell at grocery stores, but the farmers market does better than those."

McGuire now works 18 farmers markets a week, selling in snooty Silicon Valley towns and traveling as far as Livermore. Other local farmers thrive in Berkeley and San Francisco markets, where their organic produce earns a high price from trendy shoppers.

Though farmers markets were common in turn-of-the-century California, they fell away for decades. They were reborn in 1976 with legislation establishing a certification process designed to give an outlet to small growers who don't produce the volumes needed by big grocery chains.

## Certified farmers markets

- Downtown Santa Cruz, at Cedar and Lincoln streets, 2:30-6:30 p.m. Wednesdays.
- East Cliff Village at 15th Avenue, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sundays.
- Aptos, at Cabrillo College parking lot, 8 a.m. to noon Saturdays.
- Watsonville, next to the downtown plaza, 2:30-6:30 p.m. Fridays, May to November.
- Felton, at the Presbyterian Church, 6090 Highway 9, 2:30-7 p.m. Tuesdays, May through Thanksgiving.
- Scotts Valley, Erba Lane off Scotts Valley Drive, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays, May to October.

State Agriculture Department inspectors review a farmer's crops for quality and certify the products grown. Only listed products may be sold at certified farmers markets, and then, only by the grower, a family member or employee. Most small and medium-size growers in Santa Cruz County are certified, totaling more than 60 during the summer season.

Markets draw customers across economic, social, racial and dietary lines. Now, about 300 markets are held throughout the state, said Lea Goodman, operations manager of four of the county's six markets.

"Customers are really concerned about where their food is coming from," said Sandra Ward, a sprouts farmer and chairwoman of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers market. "They come to a farmers market and realize how many local growers there are."

Meeting customers directly helps producers, too.

McGuire said she added an eggless pasta line at the request of market regulars. Ward picks up recipes.

Depending on the size of one's operation, the demand for a seasonal crop and the popularity of the market, vendors report earning as little as \$150 and as much as \$2,000 to \$3,000 a day.

McGuire said she sells two to three times as much as in her shop, and doubles her daily grocery store sales at farmers markets.

"If a vendor comes to the market and doesn't sell at least \$300, he hasn't made enough money to be there," Goodman said.

To ensure farmers get good returns on the hours of preparation and driving they put into the markets, organizers try to coordinate the vendors so they don't duplicate each other's produce.

It takes time to build up a loyal customer base, and some farmers are unwilling to tough out the lean years, Goodman said. But those who do have seen markets in the county grow from the first one, established in Aptos in 1977, to six. The largest is the Wednesday market in downtown Santa Cruz, with about 55 vendors.

Nearby businesses report higher sales on market day as well.

"For every dollar that is spent at a farmers market, three are spent at nearby businesses," Goodman said.

In Felton, the farmers market was part of the town's general plan, intended to create a community meeting place, said market board member Peter Katzberger.

"If you drive up Highway 9 and see the tents that are colorful and people milling around, you can appreciate there's an event going on," he said.