

MICHIGAN FORAGER

THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT AT THE ROYAL OAK FARMERS MARKET

BY CHRIS HARDMAN

The corner of 11 Mile and Troy in Royal Oak is home to one of the best places in Southeastern Michigan to find local food products. On any Saturday morning shoppers can drop in to the Royal Oak Farmers' Market, grab a cup of coffee and find a variety of locally grown and locally made grocery items.

There is a sense of permanency at this market that appeals to its customers. Perhaps it is the sturdy brick building or the familiarity with the customers the vendors seem to have. Market Master Gwen Ross attributes the feel to the market's 82-year history as a landmark in Royal Oak.

"We have people who have been coming here for generations," she explains.

That longevity applies to both the customers and the vendors. John Wendland, 74—one of the market's most devoted supporters—actually

grew up at the market. His parents' farm used to be across from the market, where the 44th District Court now stands. Wendland funnels his love of the market into a full-time volunteer position as a gardener, photographer and historian.

Vendor Don Mattson of Busy Bee Orchard in Imlay City also spent his youth at the market. He joined the market in 1959, selling apples with his parents. Nearly 50 years later, he continues to uphold the family legacy of selling high-quality Michigan apples and cider.

The Royal Oak Farmers' Market is one of the few markets in the *edible WOW* area that operates year-round. Even in the dead of winter, when the fields are barren and the trees have shed their leaves, farmers gather to sell Michigan produce inside the heated building.



Photograph: Kate Harper

Red and yellow Michigan apples from the Busy Bee Orchard brighten up the market throughout the winter months. According to Don Mattson, apples can last six to eight months in cold storage if they are picked at the right time. To ensure maximum quality, his apples go into storage within 30 minutes after they are picked. "The faster you get them in there, the better it is," he says.

Also selling through the winter is tall, affable Don Van Houtte, who fills up six stalls with his Michigan grown squash, cabbage, carrots, onions, leeks and potatoes. He happily answers questions about his hothouse rhubarb, which he grows in the winter completely in the dark.

He explains that rhubarb takes two years in the field to develop large roots. After he separates the roots, he stores them in a dark building. In late December he turns on the heat, and one month later he has hothouse

rhubarb. Van Houtte recalls that about 40 years ago Macomb County was the world capital of hothouse rhubarb when some 300 to 400 growers shipped the fruit-like vegetable from Michigan to rhubarb fans throughout the country. Over time, as the younger generation abandoned their family farms, the industry faded to only three Michigan hothouse rhubarb growers.

A variety of year-round non-produce items make the market a one-stop shop. Stroll through the well-worn aisles and find biscotti, salsa, honey, bread, tea, herbs, pastries, muffins, eggs and milk. As in any farmers' market, each vendor has a story to tell.

Beekeeper Rich Wieske from Green Toe Gardens sells products from beehives he tends in the cities of Detroit and Royal Oak. His golden-colored honeys hint at the irony of

urban bees with names like Wild Detroit and 8 Mile Honey. Down the aisle from Wieske is Kathy O'Grady of O'Grady's, who specializes in fresh nut butters. She says that although she can't grow nuts in Michigan, she can make fresh nut butters in Michigan. She is proud to say that her peanut butter, almond butter, cashew butter and sunflower seed butter contain no preservatives or added sugars.

The market also has a wide variety of meat farmers peddling pork, beef, buffalo and chicken. The advantage to buying meat at the market, says Market Master Ross, is that you can find out exactly how the animal was treated, fed and processed.

For example Otto's Poultry Farm of Middleville raises chickens without the use of growth promotants, hormones or antibiotics. As the owner of their own production plant, they control every stage of the chicken production process. "He can tell you everything about [the chicken] from the time it was hatched," says Ross. "None of our people use steroids or antibiotics."

On Sundays the market transforms into a high-end flea market. Since 1978 rent from flea market vendors has supplemented the market's income.

"In the course of the year, the flea market provides about 72 percent of our total income," Ross says. "The farmers give us all the ambience and the flea market pays the bill, but you can't have one without the other." Ross explains that the flea market appeals to hunters and collectors who enjoy searching for war relics, handicrafts, Depression-era figurines, glassware and a wide array of antiques.



The most valuable antique of all is the market itself. Created in 1925 to serve the growing town of Royal Oak, the market's location—just a few blocks from Woodward Avenue, I-696 and I-75—made it an ideal distribution center for farmers from throughout Southeastern Michigan. In 1927 the market received an upgrade with the construction of a permanent brick building measuring 23,000 square feet. On the first day of business more than 300 customers flocked to the market to buy potatoes, apples, cabbage, butter and poultry.

Originally the city of Royal Oak and Oakland County owned the market in a joint venture, but in 1996 Royal Oak bought out the county and took over full ownership. In May of that year, the Royal Oak Downtown Development Authority completed a million-dollar renovation of the farmers' market to bring the building up to code and improve heating and ventilation.

Local historians boast that the market has been used for Home Guard volunteer practices, Boy Scouts drum and bugle corps drills, square dances, public meetings, a wedding and storage for fire trucks when a fire station was under construction.

With its place in the community firmly established, the Royal Oak Farmers' Market remains, above all, a premier destination for fresh food.

"The citizens of Royal Oak and the surrounding area have a love of this market," says Ross. "We know we are in the 2000s and we need to be kind of hip to what is happening, but we like having our hands still in the past."



Photograph: Michelle Goik

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