

Farmers in Short Supply at Farmers' Markets

By WINNIE HU, New York Times



Tony Manna does not worry about having enough customers at the hugely popular farmers' market in Union Square in Manhattan, or at most of the 27 other markets scattered across the city that he oversees for the Greenmarket program.

What he does worry about is having enough farmers for all of them. So later this summer he plans to head for the fields in Orange, Ulster and Dutchess Counties, to knock on barn doors in an effort to meet the demands of the markets in operation and a dozen more that the program wants to open. "We are running out of farmers," he said. "Could we use at least 50 more farmers in the next five years? Absolutely."

It is getting to be a common problem. As people grow ever more picky about their vine-ripened tomatoes, and cities and towns from the Hudson Valley to the San Francisco Bay area search for ways to keep their residents happy, it seems that just about everyone

without a farmers' market is angling for one in their town. And many are finding that there are simply not enough farmers to go around.

Though the most popular markets have no shortage of farmers — and sometimes even have waiting lists — the newer and less-established ones are often lacking. The result is a textbook lesson in supply and demand: farmers who once haggled with middlemen to sell their crops are now being fought over themselves.

In Haverstraw, N.Y., for instance, it took nearly two years to line up three farmers to start a market in July 2000. "I thought, 'Build it and they will come,'" said Mark Russo, a program director for the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rockland County, who helped organize the market. "No way. There are just not enough of them."

This month, a market in Bound Brook, N.J., could not open as planned because not one of the 30 or so farmers contacted through phone calls, letters and visits during the previous four months was available. "It's still a work in progress," said Karen Fritz, a resident who is leading the search.

The nation's growers will roll out their harvests at more than 3,000 farmers' markets this year, a resounding comeback for the markets, which all but disappeared in many places with the spread of refrigeration, prepackaged foods and supermarket chains. New York State has 270 markets, or nearly one-third more than in 1996, trailing only California, with 403 markets, in sheer number. The number of markets in New Jersey nearly doubled, to 49, during the same period.

Farmers' markets — just like the produce they sell — come in all sizes and varieties. The smaller ones typically have two or three farmers, though in large city markets, it is not unusual to find 50 to 100.

In some places, a single farmer may even pass a farm stand off as a market.

But the love affair with farmers' markets comes at a time when large amounts of farmland are disappearing around the country. In the past decade, more than 40 million acres of farmland, including about 700,000 acres in New York, were lost to development and other uses, according to figures from the United States Department of Agriculture. So while the number of farms and farmers are shrinking, the farmers who actually go to the markets are an even smaller group. Markets enable the farmers to sell directly to consumers, and turn higher profits by cutting out middlemen. Some farmers earn enough to support their operations year-round.

But more traditional growers tend to shun the markets, saying they do not have enough time or workers, or in truth, any real inclination, to hawk their corn and tomatoes.

"Farmers are dinosaurs," said Ethel Terry, a farmer in Orient Point, N.Y., on the eastern end of Long Island's North Fork, who coordinates nine markets in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. "They're creatures of habit — as we all are — and they don't want to leave the farm."

Other farmers say they have become frustrated with some markets that are poorly run and draw too few people to be profitable. Vance Corum, a market consultant and a co-

author of "The New Farmers' Market: Farm-Fresh Ideas for Producers, Managers & Communities," said that most market organizers do not realize the amount of work and planning involved.

Many farmers' markets grew out of a grass-roots movement in American cities in the mid-1970's. Farmers' advocates saw the markets as a way to help struggling farmers, while urban planners hoped to draw crowds to areas that had been neglected, like Union Square and Harlem. John McPhee added a touch of glamour when he went to work weighing green peppers at a Brooklyn green market and later wrote about his experience for The New Yorker.

A 1976 federal law helped to expand the markets by providing millions of dollars to state agriculture departments to support direct marketing activities by farmers. Today, federal and state programs continue to promote the markets by giving vouchers to low-income women and children and the elderly to buy food from them.

In many states, including New York and New Jersey, agriculture departments work closely with communities that want to start farmers' markets. They give out grants to the markets and help promote them on their Web sites.

But as these markets have multiplied, so has the competition for farmers. Big cities, of course, still offer them the largest pool of customers and the highest profit margins, in general. But increasingly, small towns and villages have been able to compete for farmers

because they have the advantage of being closer to the farms and in much less congested areas.

Miriam Haas, a consultant who has organized a dozen markets, primarily in Westchester and Rockland Counties, mailed out letters to more than 500 farmers this spring. She followed up with phone calls and visits. So far, only two new farmers have been tapped for her markets.

The demand for farmers has allowed Oleh Maczaj, a former computer consultant in Manhattan, and his wife, Nadia, an archaeologist, to work full time on their two-acre organic farm in Ulster Heights, N.Y. They refused invitations from six farmers' markets this spring because they simply could not grow enough vegetables.

"I think it's great to be in demand," said Mr. Maczaj, as he handed a bundle of slender garlic stalks — five for a dollar — to a woman at the Suffern farmers' market — one of two markets he participates in — last month. "But it's also a sign that things aren't well. There should be a lot of farmers in this area."

In Forked River, N.J., the farmers' market opened for its third summer last Friday, with piles of sweet white corn, tomatoes and peaches displayed under blue-and-white tents. Propelled by a yearning for fresh fruits and vegetables, Kathy Gartner and three of her neighbors spent more than two years trying to find farmers for the market.

When they eventually found one farmer, he brought barely enough produce to open the market in July 2000. His one truck was picked clean in an hour and a half.

Since then, five more farmers have signed up for the market and Mrs. Gartner and the others started a waiting list, because they do not want to expand too fast. "We were just four retired ladies who said, 'We've got to have a market,' " she said. "And we really thought we'd be doing something for the farmers, too."