



Getting full market value an Ontario tradition

Local producers offer customers friendliness, fun and the freshest fare straight from the farm

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Take the St. Lawrence Market and add a couple of funky ethnic shops from Kensington Market. Pop up to Yorkville and kidnap some chic boutiques. Shoehorn in 85 eateries ranging from pubs to chic restaurants. Plunk an enormous fairy tale castle of a hotel a couple of blocks away and what do you have? Ottawa's ByWard Market.

The oldest and largest public market in Canada, the ByWard is not, by any means, just for the locals. Since its establishment in 1826, the market has grown to be a destination in itself, attracting as many as 50,000 visitors on a busy weekend.

"And it's as popular with tourists as with area residents," says Phillip Powell, manager of the ByWard and volunteer chair of Farmers' Markets Ontario.

It's not surprising. The market covers four city



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Ottawa's ByWard Market has been operating since 1826 and it's still going strong, attracting up to 50,000 visitors on a busy weekend.

Just the facts

Cambridge Farmers' Market, 40 Dickson St.
Open Saturdays 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Wednesday afternoons mid-June to September.

Hamilton Farmers' Market 55 York Blvd.
Open Tuesdays and Thursdays 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturdays 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

blocks bordered by wide, sweeping avenues – originally designed to accommodate hay carts. From its early rowdy days – when Irish navvies built the neighbourhood from reclaimed swampland – to today's delicious mix of food and shopping, the ByWard's location in the heart of the city has always made it a magnet.

The ByWard might be your destination if you're in search of a few glad rags. Visit such chic boutiques as Richard Robinson Haute Couture – where, it's said, Governor General Michaëlle Jean has been known to shop. Or head down the street to the first-ever Giant Tiger discount outlet store. Or satisfy your inner cowboy with a hat from Irving Rivers.

But the main draw is the food. After all, when you're catering to chefs from dozens of embassies, you'd better be sure your brie is runny and your salmon is fresh. (Apparently Prime Minister Stephen Harper's chef shops here all the time.)

Many outlets are even historically significant: The ByWard is home to the oldest fish retailer in Canada, Lapointes Fish, established in 1867. This month some 125 outdoor stands were added to the mix, selling crafts, fruits and vegetables.

Perhaps this market has always been on the leading edge of the rebirth of Ontario Farmers' Markets.

"The whole issue of local food is pushing the renaissance of local markets," says Powell, who points out that farmers' markets in Ontario plummeted in number to about 60 during the 1970s, when shopping was all about big supermarkets and malls.

"Today, consumers want food they can trust and that's fresh – plus they enjoy eyeballing the person who grew the food."

With the interest in organic food, supporting local farms, and lowering their carbon imprint, those same folks are also supporting the other vendors whose businesses mushroom around farmers' markets. But ByWard is only one. Pull out your recycleable shopping bag and let's take a little virtual tour:

St. Jacobs

St. Jacobs Farmers' Market Weber St. N., at Farmers' Market Rd., north of Waterloo. Open Thursdays and Saturdays 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and Tuesdays June through August, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. On Sundays, the sister market across the road is also open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

The clip-clop of horses hooves as they bring an Old Order Mennonite farmer and his family to market in their small wagon.

A glimpse of bonnetted teenage girls in traditional Mennonite dress expertly weighing and wrapping meat. Here at St. Jacobs (near Kitchener-Waterloo) the Mennonite tradition is strong.

Like ByWard, the market comprises indoor vendors as well as dozens of outdoor stalls which expand exponentially in the summer – more than 400 vendors in all.

It must be good: David Brown of Stone Crock Meats and Cheeses says he has customers who drive regularly from Barrie and Ottawa to stock up on ribs, steaks and cheddar.

Mark Coyle of All Things Tea will sell you the perfect cuppa from a choice of 65 international teas. Upstairs, Diane Wyatt of Grand River Pottery proudly points out that people drive from Toronto to buy her African violet planters. And there's a bonus for pint-sized visitors: a free petting farm with ponies, sheep, chickens and bunnies.

Cambridge

Perhaps more typical in size, the Cambridge market is on a downtown corner and features a bustling indoor market building and outdoor vendors in the adjacent parking lot. The market has been held on this site since 1837 (as numerous vendors will proudly tell you) and is open year-round.

Indoors is small-scale retailing at its best, with some vendors operating from hand carts. Meat, poultry, maple syrup and crafts are some of the items on display. Baker Carole Kragelj, famed locally for her butter tarts, points out that the market even has "ambassadors" – local teens who will help you to your car with your shopping.

On a recent visit, mother and daughter team Hilda and Theresa Wirsching presided over their array of fresh cut flowers.

"I've been market gardening all my life," says Hilda, "And here I sell flowers, tomatoes – whatever's in season." Theresa says that the highlight of the market for her is the customers ("They're wonderful.") while Hilda loves the harvest. "I get to wear a bathing suit and shorts on my tractor!"

Make a point to stop at the outdoor stall of the Pies and Apple Dumpling Corps – their proceeds go to the Wesley United Church next door, and are so yummy that these keen bakers raised enough funds to replace the church roof a few years ago.

Hamilton

Perhaps the perfect destination for a rainy day, the Hamilton market is entirely indoors and connected by covered walkway to the Jackson Square Shopping Centre. A tradition since 1837, this downtown market today features 80 stall holders on two levels.

"I think the local produce is outstanding," says Hamiltonian Ted Flett. "And I usually end up buying more than I mean to." Flett's purchases include spices, fruit, cheese – and fresh flowers which he says are incredibly affordable. Like a lot of market-goers, Flett enjoys the interaction with the vendors. "I just think the stall holders are better informed about their products. Plus, it becomes a social occasion and a gathering place, especially on a Saturday."

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