

Market fresh

From ripe cherries to baby zucchini, a glorious array of produce and a taste of local culture are the star attractions at Canadian farmers' markets. This is your guide on what to take advantage of—and what to avoid—at your local market **By Diane Peters**

Lured by the promise of a healthier diet made with fresh local food, people are flocking to the growing number of farmers' markets across the country. British Columbia now has roughly 100 markets, up from 60 just a few years ago, while Ontario counts 136 today, compared with about 60 back in the early 1990s. "It's all about shoppers' desire for fresh," says Robert Chorney, executive director of Farmers' Markets Ontario.

Not only is farm-fresh better for you and the environment—on average, food travels more than 2,500 gas-guzzling kilometres to get to your table—but chances are you'll actually eat more fruits and vegetables if you go local. Researchers from Saint Louis University surveyed more than 1,600 parents who live in rural communities and found that those who often ate produce either grown in their own yards, or bought directly from a farmer or local market, were three times more likely to eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day—and so were their kids. "They also ate a wider variety and were able to say their children had more favourite fruits and vegetables," says Susie Nanney, a registered dietitian and one of the authors of the study.

Here are some tips for making the most of the in-season produce and homemade specialties available now at farmers' markets across Canada.

Set the alarm "People who are used to the grocery store experience show up at farmers' markets at noon, thinking they'll avoid lineups. But by then, things may start winding down," says Tara McDonald, executive director of Vancouver Farmers Markets. "Farmers bring a finite amount of product and when it's sold out for the day, it's sold out." Along with arriving early and bringing along your own bags, take plenty of cash, because few vendors accept credit. But leave your shopping list at home. Instead, plan the week's menu based on what's ripe.

Get out of a rut Even if you're eating enough fruits and vegetables—and let's face it, most of us aren't—you're likely sticking to the old favourites. "We need to choose variety, and choose fruits and vegetables more often," says Heidi Bates, a registered dietitian in Edmonton. A bigger range of foods means a broader array of nutrients for your body—and markets can offer "niche" produce that may be available only in limited quantities elsewhere.

Get adventurous and try: purple potatoes, which are loaded with antioxidants not found in the regular ones, due to their vibrant colour; yellow tomatoes, which have more niacin and folate than the red ones; and vitamin C-rich kohlrabi, a type of cabbage that looks like a green apple with spikes sticking out all over it. "You can ask the farmer, 'How the heck do you cook this?'" suggests Bates. If you've got picky eaters in the family, bring them to the market—getting connected to local farmers might make them more interested in experimenting.

Be sure it's safe Is food from a market less or more likely than other sources to be contaminated with bacteria such as E. coli? "It's really no different from restaurants and other food services," says Ben →



To determine whether produce is truly local—like these carotenoid-rich carrots—ask market vendors specific questions about their crops and where their farms are located.

Chapman of the department of plant agriculture at the University of Guelph. Food must be kept at the right temperature: for example, eggs in refrigerators and ready-to-eat burritos in warmers hot enough to keep pathogens at bay. And, of course, be wary of vendors who handle, say, raw meat, then grab you a turkey pot pie without washing their hands (ensure staff have a place to wash up somewhere on the premises). Also, check that the produce and meat you buy is actually from the farm that's selling it. Otherwise, in the rare event of a recall, you won't be able to trace where your food came from. As well, ask if the cheese you're about to sample is pasteurized; a salmonella and an E. coli outbreak in Canada were both linked to raw milk cheese sold at markets. Pasteurization ensures

that any harmful bacteria have been killed. (Some argue that the special flavour of raw milk cheeses is worth the small risk. These cheeses must be aged for at least 60 days before they can be sold.)

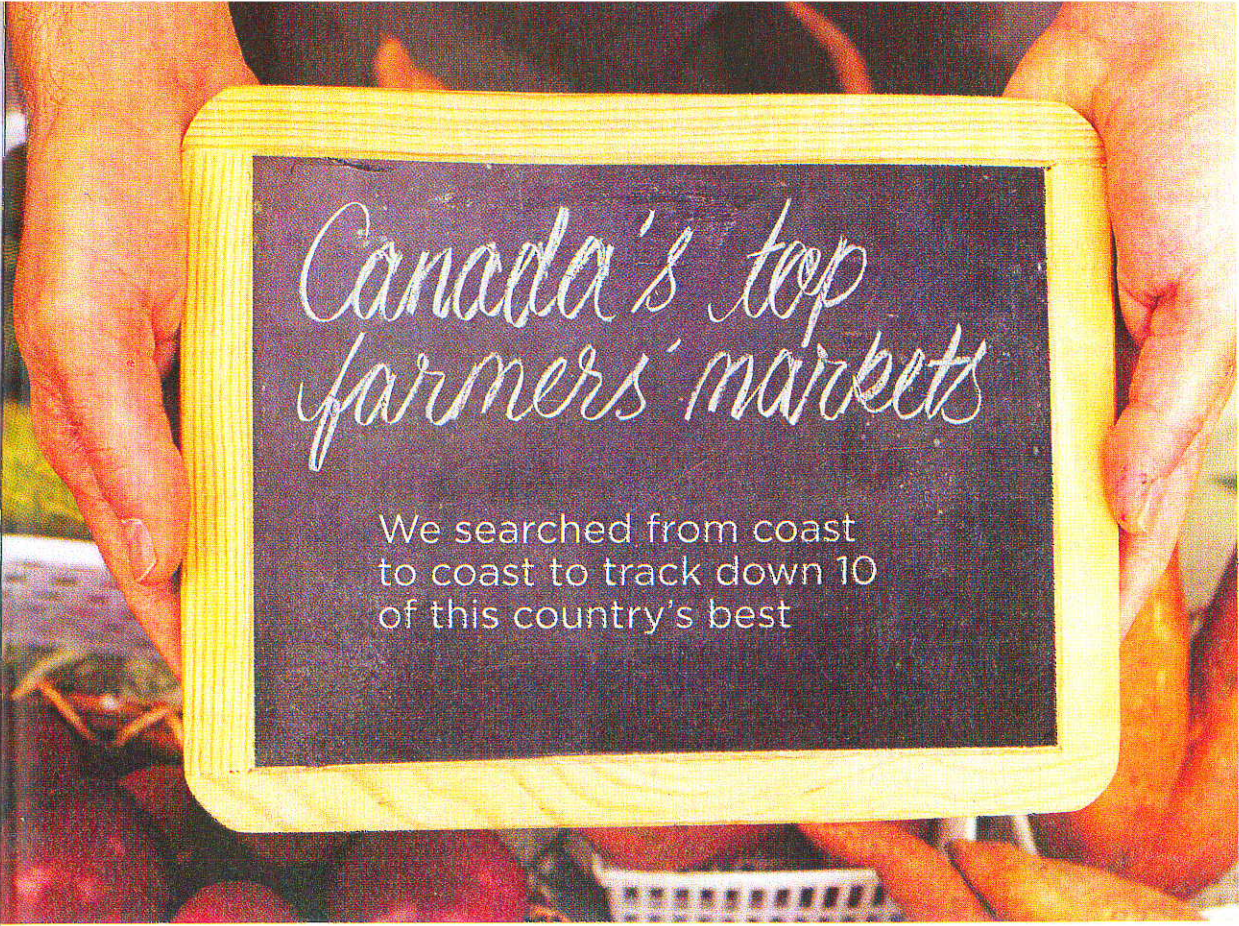
Reach for rich colours Wondering where to start when the market's stalls are overflowing with summer produce? You can't go wrong shopping for a rainbow of colours. Begin by thinking about your eyes as you look for produce that's full of the carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin, such as red and yellow peppers, spinach, zucchini and romaine lettuce. Studies have found that people who eat the most produce high in these carotenoids are the least likely to develop age-related macular degeneration, a condition that can eventually cause blindness and affects two million Canadians over the age of 50.

Handle with care Fresh local vegetables can often be healthier: Leafy vegetables, for instance, lose up to 89 percent of their vitamin C one to two days after being harvested. Also, ensure that you maintain those precious nutrients when you prepare them. A 2007 study from the University of Warwick found that finely chopping brassica vegetables—such as cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and cabbage—made them lose up to 75 percent of their anti-cancer properties after sitting for six hours. And boiling them for 30 minutes led to a loss of up to 77 percent of these beneficial qualities. The good news: Storing in the refrigerator, microwaving in a little water and steaming preserved their health value.

Be on local patrol That guy handing you a pint of fresh strawberries or a basket of new potatoes may be as nice as can be, but be warned: Some people just load up trucks at the nearest food terminal—often with imported produce—and rent a market stall. Market operators don't like this, but it still happens. Chorney suggests buying only fruits and vegetables that are obviously in season.

Go easy on baked goods Yummy-looking pies, muffins and breads are featured at most markets. But Bates advises resisting these shopping treats, especially when fresh fruit is available. (Find a spot to wash some so you can nibble as you stroll.) Since market baked goods don't require grocery store-style labelling, you don't know if that apple pie is loaded with saturated or trans fat. Ask the vendor about ingredients, and choose foods made with butter instead of lard or shortening. Or, better still, pick artisanal whole-grain breads to bring home instead. →

Eating more flavonoids—antioxidants found in fresh fruits and vegetables—may help prevent the loss of brain power over time.



Canada's top farmers' markets

We searched from coast to coast to track down 10 of this country's best

BRITISH COLUMBIA **Kelowna Farmers' and Crafters' Market**

Known for its diverse foods and crafts and its friendly atmosphere, this is also the prime place to pick up the freshest peaches, apricots and cherries grown in the desert-like Okanagan Valley.

ALBERTA **Millarville Farmers' Market**

With more than 160 vendors, this destination market 45 minutes southwest of Calgary is all about country atmosphere. "It has so many wonderful Alberta farm and ranch products," says Edmonton dietitian Heidi Bates. She loves the wide array of produce, fresh flowers and bedding plants for sale. There's also live entertainment.

SASKATCHEWAN **Saskatoon Farmers' Market**

Set in a large sunlit space close to the riverbank, the market offers great local produce, as well as bison, fish from the northern lakes and delicious buns made with local lentils.

MANITOBA **Marché St. Norbert Farmers' Market**

Farmers own and run this market on the south side of Winnipeg, so you know all the vendors are legitimate. Line up for the free-range chickens and Asian greens (even in the off season—the grower has a greenhouse). Local musicians, from Métis fiddlers to accordion players, make for a fun outing for everyone in the family.

ONTARIO **Cambridge Farmers' Market**

Dating back to 1830, it is still located in the same spot in downtown Cambridge. "It's a delightful market in an old market building," says Robert Chorney of Farmers' Markets Ontario. There's an assortment of produce, meats, cheeses and homemade treats sold by local farmers, some of them Mennonite.

QUEBEC **Jean-Talon Market**

This Montreal destination overflows on Saturday with farmers selling heaps of seasonal produce. But you can grab gourmet meats and cheeses every day. One of the shops, le Marché des saveurs du Québec, specializes in foods made on local farms,

such as maple syrup and ice wine.

NEW BRUNSWICK **W.W. Boyce Farmers' Market**

The history of this indoor market in Fredericton—the original market predates the city itself—is almost as interesting as the selection. Along with lots of produce (from more than 200 vendors), there's a stall that sells the most delicious little samosas.

NOVA SCOTIA **Halifax Farmers' Market**

This year-round market near the city's bus-

ting waterfront mixes seafood and produce with a hip vibe. "It's just a neat place to be and a great spot to choose tasty treats from all food groups," says Halifax dietitian Mary Sue Waisman. Among the goodies: the to-die-for organic pizza at Big Life Whole Foods, and authentic French pastries and bread at Boulangerie La Vendienne.

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND **Charlottetown Farmers' Market**

You want potatoes? The vendors here have advice on boiling and baking the dozen or so varieties they sell. You can also get fresh produce, some of the best smoked salmon you'll ever taste, and sausages made from meat so lean they won't shrink when cooked.

NEWFOUNDLAND **St. John's Farmers' Market**

This market has found a more permanent home for the summer at the Lion's Club Chalet. Pick from a great selection of organic fruits and vegetables plus some tasty international foods. □

For opening times and locations of all these markets, go to besthealthmag.ca/markets.