

In Season, But Not In Vogue

Written by Fred Jonas, Special to the BT
February 2020

Has the lark really flown on farmers markets?



It's usually a Saturday or a Sunday, you're driving along on your itinerary for the day, and you pass a congregation of people huddled under a loose canopy of tent tops. If you're ranging far enough that day, you might encounter more than one of these. If it's not obvious to you what you're passing, it might be marked by a handwritten sign: "Farmers Market."

In our area along the Biscayne Corridor, the most successful and stable of these markets is at Legion Park -- 66th Street and Biscayne Boulevard. But there are, and have been, several more. Some years back, the City of North Miami ran one on Saturdays in the plaza of the Museum of Contemporary Art. One on Miami Beach, on Saturdays at the eastern confluence of Normandy Drive and 71st Street, had been going for several years, and it just ended. A tiny one runs Sundays on 95th Street between Collins and Harding Avenues in Surfside.

There's also been one on Sundays in Optimist Park at NE 2nd Avenue and NE 94th Street, which has been open for three years, serving Greater Miami Shores. Unfortunately, that one has also just closed its doors.

And that's the catch: "successful and stable."

In most areas, and certainly here, most such markets are seasonal. The main reason is that in

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many areas, and certainly here, produce offerings are local. Our growing season is in the winter. Produce markets where locally grown food is sold tend to open in the fall, and they usually close in the spring. And we might also assume they'd be pretty steady for those several months. If only....

Two forces weave through these markets. One is the operators of the markets, and the other is the vendors. It doesn't take much delving to realize there are two organizers of markets in our area. One is an Atlanta transplant named Claire Tomlin, and the other is Art Friedrich. Each of them operates several markets.

Tomlin came to Miami in 1994, and she began by hawking her own flavored vinegars. One thing led to another, and as of about 22 years ago, she became a farmers market queen. She started with a market in Pinecrest, and now she runs the Lincoln Road market, which is very successful and stable, another on Espanola Way, and also in Miami Lakes, at Dadeland Mall, and downtown's Government Center, as well as the Normandy Isle and Optimist Park markets that just closed.

Friedrich runs the Legion Park market, the Arsht Center market, and the Surfside market. If these arrangements seem like competing cartels, they're friendlier than that. Not only do they respect each other, they share vendors, who are free to sell at any market for the cost of a booth.

It's understandable that many markets don't operate year round, but to make matters worse for continuity and reliability, they're not even stable over the course of a season. Vendors rent space by the week, and they can, and do, drop out any time. At Optimist Park in Miami Shores, for example, the market has started strong each year, with about 30 vendors. On Sunday, January 19, 2020, there were ten vendors. Maybe. And then, on Monday, January 20, the anchor booth -- the organic farmer -- pulled out unexpectedly, and Tomlin closed the market.

There's a pretty good range of what vendors sell. Many of them don't sell produce. Some sell unique prepared items, like the vinegars Tomlin used to make (and sauces, baked goods, Jamaican patties, gourmet tempeh, and home ground and blended spices and teas), and some sell various crafts that the vendors themselves made (leather items, jewelry), or that they bought elsewhere for resale at these markets. It's for this reason that Tomlin says she no longer calls these pop-ups "farmers markets." She just calls them "marketplaces."

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The vendors who sell produce often grow and harvest it themselves. Friedrich is an exception, in that he sells produce that he buys from local growers. It's often, but not always, organic. Roberto Grossman, the farmer who just left Optimist Park, and singlehandedly ended what little was left of it, has two Homestead acres, of which he uses three-quarters of an acre for agriculture. He also distributes his produce separately as community-supported agriculture shares.

But here's what happens with the markets. At first, there's lots of enthusiasm. There are plenty of customers, and plenty of vendors. Gradually, the customers thin out and the vendors quit. As Tomlin puts it, "the community doesn't support the markets." It sounds a little like an indictment, and maybe, in a way, it is.

We have choices as to where to buy foods and crafts. If we want organic, for example, Publix has a limited selection, while Whole Foods and Fresh Market have lots. But if we go to the farmers markets, we have a different experience. And that's for better and for worse. I don't know who grows the produce sold at Publix. But I met Grossman and Friedrich. They're both nice, informative fellows. And they charge more than Publix or Whole Foods does. Sometimes they charge a lot more. There may not be any middlemen, but there's also not much economy of scale, and no one to beat on the growers to lower prices.

Despite the prices, it seems more intimate to shop at farmers markets or marketplaces. It seems personal.

Evidently, that thrill goes after a while. Or maybe, since you can't do all your shopping at a farmers market, it starts out just as a lark, and eventually the lark flies away. Some people, though, come to these markets every week that they're open, and they do their produce, baked goods, and specialty shopping for the week. Whatever happens to them once the markets close for the season doesn't inhibit them from coming back the next year. At least the throngs come back at the beginning of the market season.

It's a tough business, though. For the vendors and for the organizers, it's unreliable. Apparently, it's just that they love doing it. It's a real mission for Friedrich, who's been at it for ten years and seeks to provide high-quality food to the masses. His vendors accept SNAP cards, and they double the value.

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And maybe, in a way, “we” love it, too. As one enthusiastic vendor put it to me, when you’re there, you just feel like you want to support the vendors, as much as you want the unique and often superior products. I’ve found all of that to be true.

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