



Welcome Guest

[Login](#) | [Register](#)

pressofAtlanticCity.com

This is for personal, noncommercial use only.

To search archives, visit

pressofatlanticcity.com/archives

In Vineland, a farmers market is a growing idea

By DANIEL WALSH Staff Writer, 856-649-2074 | Posted: Saturday, September 12, 2009 |

What's an agriculture mecca without a major farmers market?

It's Vineland, at least for another year. But beginning in 2010, the city could be home to one of New Jersey's most ambitious farmers market, and if so, it will be part of a growing trend.

The number of farmers markets in New Jersey is increasing at a rate three times the national average, a recently released study by Rutgers University's Food Innovation Center found. In 2000, there were just 40 community farmers markets in New Jersey. Today, there are about 130. Every county in the state has at least one.

New Jersey, known as the Garden State for its heritage of produce farms, has struggled to preserve farms in the face of development pressures for decades. Farmers markets have emerged as one winning strategy in recent years, the Rutgers study suggests, as they offer farmers a higher profit margin than typical wholesale channels.

Now Vineland hopes to have one that goes beyond the rest. The Vineland Development Corp. has secured a 40,000-square-foot building on downtown Vineland's Landis Avenue in which a year-round market will host about 55 farmers and other food vendors, Vineland Redevelopment Director Sandy Forosisky said. The market will be open at least three days per week, drawing Amish farmers from Lancaster County as well as potentially bakers, meat producers, cheese shops and other high-end specialty foods.

"It's experiential shopping," Forosisky said.

Most New Jersey farmers markets - which are usually larger and offer a greater variety of vendors than the typical roadside produce stand - are open just once or twice per week, and only six are open year-round, including one in Berlin, Camden County, and one in Manahawkin, Ocean County. Vineland may be a bit different, thanks to its agricultural heritage. The town doesn't merely still have farmland, but it's also home to the world-renowned Vineland Produce Auction and is where the Welch's grapes company was founded. So Vineland city officials envision something more than just the Saturday morning market hosted downtown during the summer.

The Food Innovation Center has a unique role here. On one hand, its personnel, led by Diane Holtaway, have been studying farmers markets to find out what works best. On the other, they were simultaneously producing a business plan for Vineland that is taking their academic observations and putting them into the laboratory of real life.

Like so, Vineland could be a test of the best practices that Holtaway and company identified in the study they released last week.

What they - and farmers market managers - learned is that there is no one best way to craft a market. The markets have loyal customers - 90 percent of purchases are by repeat customers, according to the Rutgers study - who Holtaway said want a relationship with their growers.

"Farmers markets are not like a cookie-cutter kind of thing," Holtaway said. "You have to design a market to meet the needs in your area."

In Vineland, the needs appear to be varied. The region is known for its agriculture but also for having a lower cost-of-living than the rest of the state, so people at least want top-quality produce for affordable prices. But they also want high-quality specialty goods. Rutgers' business plan for Vineland found the city and region were losing \$23 million worth of purchases as people left the area for high-end goods.

"The business plan came back that there was enough money being spent outside this area that we could sustain this," Forosisky said.

Whether it's enough to sustain a sizable farmers market remains to be seen.

Rutgers' study of New Jersey farm markets found the counties with the most community farmers markets are the ones with the fewest farms. The highly populated counties of Essex, Union, Middlesex, Monmouth and Ocean all have 10 or more markets, and none are known for their propensity to farm. Meanwhile, the state's rural farm belts have comparatively few: Cumberland, Salem and Gloucester counties have a combined five markets, while the northwestern counties of Sussex and Warren also have five total.

"If you're in an area where there are farms, you're not going to get in your car and go to a market because somebody has a stand near you," said Betsy Cook, director of the Collingswood Farmers Market. "There's a lot more gardening space. People grow their own things, even if they're not a farmer."

To many, Collingswood is the shining star of New Jersey farmers markets. This year, it was named the most popular small farmers market in the country by the American Farmland Trust. With 28 regular vendors, it draws numerous customers to its downtown market on Saturday mornings. Cook focuses heavily on advertising, using e-mail, a Web site, downtown banners, newspaper ads and fliers for schoolchildren to take home.

Buena farmer Ralph Formisano has been setting up a stand at Collingswood for years. His farm does most of its sales through wholesaling, but Collingswood offers an exception to that with its brisk Saturday business. He suspects Vineland may not have enough people - and may have too many good farm stands - to support a good community farmers market.

"Population is what makes good farmers markets, and you don't have it in Vineland," Formisano said. "I hate to say it, but with Hammonton and Vineland, you have good farm stands."

Others say the same about Bridgeton's market, which opens on Fridays during the summer. Local farmer Tom Rottkamp runs a farm stand just

west of the city, and he feels the rural expanses outside Bridgeton are part of what hurts the farmers market there.

"Because it's too close to the farms," Rottkamp said. "Why go there when there's farms right down the road? Now Collingswood, that's one of the biggest ones on the East Coast."

The continuing increase of housing developments in Vineland and Millville could help the Vineland market's prospects by increasing an already swelling population. So too could the branding of a downtown "restaurant row", with multiple restaurants planned for openings there in the coming year.

But the big difference could be the selling of more than just produce, and that could offer a niche that could draw people downtown for the Thursday-through-Saturday schedule that's initially planned for next fall's opening.

After all, farmers markets have thrived in plenty of other places. For example, Cook points to Ocean City's Wednesday market as a go-to place for out-of-town tourists during rental seasons.

"It was clear downtown Vineland was an excellent spot for a farmers market," Holtaway said.

That's coming from the woman who studied nearly every farmers market in New Jersey, which could bode well for Vineland.

E-mail Daniel Walsh:

DWalsh@pressofac.com

© 1970-2009 Press of Atlantic City Media Group