The Beet

By Mary Niedenfuer
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"Before eating, always take time to thank the food." Arapaho Proverb

The St. Joseph Farmers' Market celebrates its Eighth Annual Harvest Festival on Friday, September 14 from 3:00 until 7:00 PM. It's a great day to come to the market. You can sit and listen to local band, Cannery Row, perform their bluesy folk music, sample wonderful dishes created by food columnist, Roger Sorensen, who'll demonstrate how simple it can be to cook with fresh, local produce, visit with yaks and farm animals and engage in plain, old-fashioned fun while catching up with friends and neighbors. Plus you can still purchase the best food the area has to offer.

The St. Joseph market is going strong, thanks to all the local support. Within the past six years the number of farmers markets in the U.S. has almost doubled. According to the USDA, in 2006, there were 4,385 markets in the U.S. In our area alone in just the last few years several new markets have sprung up like eager seedlings. Sauk Rapids, Cold Spring and Avon now have markets, each one open on a different day of the week. They are evidence of the strong interest in fresh, locally-grown food. We wish these markets great success.

Part of what makes the St. Joe market special is its growers and vendors. We have a solid base of fruit and vegetable producers and an interesting variety of vendors—those who sell products they make but who don't grow the ingredients. Within both groups, we have a small number of niche producers. Niche products can make a farmers' market successful and unique. Think: Willenbrings' asparagus, Carlsons' maple syrup, Swany White bread mixes, and Forest Mushrooms.

Heirloom fruits and vegetables are becoming quite prominent as a niche product in most farmers' markets. You may have noticed more of them being offered at the St. Joe market. It's part of a quiet yet growing movement among small farmers. Heirloom produce is prized because those specimens are genetically distinct from the commercial varieties. Heirlooms have unique colors, textures and flavors that you can't find in supermarket produce. But more importantly, growers of heirloom crops are helping preserve genetic diversity. Since most of the global seed market is controlled by only three or four huge companies, stores tend to offer only a few, widely-used commercial varieties of fruits and vegetables. Because of this seed monopoly, many traditional plant varieties have disappeared. In fact, almost 96% of commercial vegetable varieties available in 1903 are now extinct. But thanks to sustainable farming practices, the biodiversity of many heirloom crops and animal breeds are being preserved that would otherwise be lost. And without biodiversity, none of our food could be produced.

Of course, such foods grown organically don't come cheaply. It's a fact that raising food without pesticides and chemical fertilizers costs more than foods raised by conventional methods. Americans want cheap food. We spend less on it than any other nation in the world. But cheap food comes with hidden costs that we all pay in the form of subsidies and a polluted environment. Small local farming operations are fighting to preserve a lifestyle as well as biodiversity while, in the words of author, Barbara Kingsolver, "working like mad to protect the goodness and food security of a largely ungrateful nation."

Good food from the St. Joseph Farmers' Market comes from fields just down the road from you, from farmers you know. They're growing food the right way, the ethical way. It's worth every penny and every ounce of our support.

Fortunately, September marks only the end of the growing season—not the end of the market season which will run until October 12, followed by our monthly Winter Market. As growers start to contemplate putting their gardens to bed for the winter, it's a good time to start thinking about next year.

The St. Joseph Farmers' Market welcomes new producers and vendors, particularly niche sellers. So if you've ever wandered around the market thinking, "I could do this," consider submitting an application for next year. You can leave your name with Bill Otto, our market manager, from Windmill Orchard. Or drop me an email. And then plan to spend your winter pouring over seed catalogs.

In the meantime, there are still plenty of market days left this season. We're starting to see more squash and pumpkins.

We hope to see you at the market and on September 14 for the Harvest Festival!

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