



Katie Slota of Native Hill Farm restocks the greens at their table. Photo by Todd Pierson, toddpierson.com

The Weather Outside Is Frightful, But the Food Inside's Delightful

BY JANE ALBRITTON

So what did the farmers do when the West was young, the harvest was in and the months ahead looked cold and unproductive? Why they “put up”—canned, salted or pickled—produce, berries and even meats for the winter.

Storable vegetables such as winter squashes, cabbages, and leeks, onions, potatoes and other root crops could be kept for months in the root cellar. Add a cow for milk, cheese and butter (with a springhouse to store them) and the winter menu looked mighty tasty.

These days, the goods from the 19th century pantry shelf and root cellar are reappearing in Northern Colorado's winter farmers' markets that feature colorful rows of canned and pickled veggies, squashes, root crops, honey and cheeses. Only the live music, homemade tamales, Trinidadian salsas, frozen Alaskan salmon and homemade dog treats say clearly that this is not your great-grandma's pantry shelf.

The idea for the first winter farmers' market in Fort Collins emerged from a coupon book—not just any coupon book, but the Be Local Coupon Book, created by Gailmarie Kimmel to promote human-scale local commerce. Her goal was to use coupons to encourage face-to-face interaction between community members and local business owners.

“What I needed was a venue for the first Be Local Coupon Book and the Eat Local Food Map, our destination guide to healthy food available in the Fort Collins area,” Kimmel said. She also needed a like-minded partner with the business savvy to help pull it off. So she recruited Hill Grimmett, the founder and director at Northern Colorado Food *Incubator*. Both Kimmel and Grimmett knew there were off-season winter shoppers looking for interesting homemade food treats and some local vendors with local products that could meet the demand.

“For our first winter market in 2006, we had no budget and a CSU intern, Christa Carlman, to help us with marketing,” Kimmel said. “It was the first time that Hill and I had worked together, and we realized we were a good team. He's a business guy, and I am into community building. After that first market we said to ourselves, ‘This is fun, let's do it again.’”

But “doing it again” raised the question: how? The answer was: slowly.

“We had virtually no fresh produce in 2006,” Hill said. “We had one single market day featuring vendors selling honey and other locally sourced, locally processed food items like salsas and baked goods. Hi Ho Sheep Farm was there. In 2007, Hazel Dell mushrooms and NoCo Poultry—now defunct—showed up.”

That was it. Only when the market went monthly over the winter in year three—2008–09—did the farmers come to sell. Mike Ride-nour, who with his family owns Meadow Maid Food in Yoder, Wyoming, was in the class of 2008 when vegetable and meat producers made their debut.

“We were skeptical about trying a second growing season,” he said, “but the truth is that winter squashes aren’t ready until October, which leaves us only two weeks of outdoor markets to sell them. The cool days are good for root crops that can just hang out and grow.”

Ridenour added that the winter growing season, during which he uses “high tunnel” greenhouses, and the markets that go with it, are much more laid back than their summer counterparts.

“It works financially, too,” he said. “If it didn’t, producers wouldn’t continue to sign up.”

Mary Miller, who represents Ela Family Farms—fruit producers on the Western Slope—added that there was also value in having a year-round presence. “Economically, the markets prior to the holidays are best for us,” she said. “After that, this setting allows us to stay in touch with our customers and to teach them about late-season apples: the ‘keepers.’”

While the larger farming operations are finding it profitable to participate in markets through the winter, the numbers do not work as well for very small-scale farmers like Nic Koontz and Katie Slota of Native Hill Farm. With just two acres to farm, their operation is best suited to summer crops and summer farmers’ markets. This winter market will be their last.

“Colorado is the hardest place we have ever tried to farm, and that includes Alaska, Pennsylvania and South Carolina,” Koontz said. “The short season, the soil, the water rights all make it hard. In winter it’s harder to plan how to plant with two weeks on and two weeks off.”

However, for those producers whose size and goods match the concept, winter markets offer a kind of holiday bonus.

“In 2009–10, we were able to collect some data,” Grimmert said. “Over the 10 markets, two a month from November to March, we averaged 1,800 visitors per market. That’s 18,000 winter shoppers,” Grimmert said. “They put \$213,000 into the pockets of local vendors. It was then that we saw that we were beginning to affect the local food system.”

The success of the Be Local Fort Collins Winter Market—now with two venues operating twice a month, featuring over 40 vendors—has been noticed. It prompted Mary and Jeff Hiatt of Loveland to partner with Be Local and try out a kind of satellite winter market in their historic—and empty—Bonnell Building on Fourth Street downtown.

Among the 17 vendors at the inaugural market was Aaron Rice (Jodar Farms), a recent graduate of Colorado State University.

“Our poultry is not simply given access to the outdoors, but is raised outdoors with access to shelter,” Rice said. “This allows the birds to get plenty of exercise and fresh air with the opportunity to feed on insects and seeds.”

Rice’s philosophy also means that his chickens, ducks, turkeys and Cornish game hens will be in short supply in the coldest months of winter. But with or without poultry to sell, Rice plans to be at the all the Be Local Winter Markets, educating future customers on how to pick a chicken worth eating and signing up members for his poultry CSA.

Running on a separate, but parallel, track with Be Local and its winter markets, the 30-year-old Fort Collins Farmers’ Market, part of the Colorado Agricultural Marketing Cooperative, is also testing the idea of winter markets this year in unoccupied retail space in the Fort Collins Foothills Mall.

Vendors like Sherry and Clyde Holeman of Green Thumb Gardens in Fort Morgan are coming to give the concept a try.

“It’s hard to say how these winter markets will go,” Clyde Holeman said. “This is our first one. Come back next year, and we’ll let you know.”

Meanwhile, the outlook in general for winter markets is looking good. Grimmert pointed out that, based on his data taken from the Be Local Winter Markets, he can identify two encouraging trends.

“First of all, there are new producers like Wise Acres Greenhouse and Jodar Farms who weren’t here last year,” he said. “We are seeing an increase in greenhouse produce production and new poultry production.”

The second trend Grimmert has observed is that farmers are planting more root and storage crops because they have a market for them.

“We see farmers using root cellars and burying things,” he said. “These are techniques that people haven’t used in a while, and so farmers are having to relearn them.”

Organizers and vendors are still writing the story of winter farmers’ markets in Northern Colorado, but the idea seems to have found a plot line.

“It is encouraging to see the off-season production cycle come into its own,” Grimmert said. “Small producers tend to be off the food system radar. Now we can help them grow by helping them find an audience to which they can sell directly.”

So far, so good.

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