



One of the main reasons we love farmers' markets is the direct interaction we get with the human beings who grow our food. We preach this idea to our kids, to our colleagues, to the choir here in this organic community surrounding the Monterey Bay. The slogan, "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food," is practically old hat to us. We are big fans of shaking our farmers' soil-caked hands.

Then a pandemic happens. In a matter of hours, we are faced with a new reality, an extreme limit on our contact with others, including the farmers. And certainly no more handshakes. For those of us who gather the bulk of our grocery list from farmers' markets, it has been a frightening time, almost paralyzing. Yet, in the first hours of shelter in place, certain folks began a marathon of work, tirelessly arguing to the powers that be that we needed our farmers' markets, and that they should be deemed "essential services." The managers and directors of our local markets—often people who go unrecognized—are still at it behind the scenes, pushing with all their might to make sure we can get our local food.

NESH DHILLON

Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets

Nesh Dhillon, long-time manager of all the Santa Cruz Community Farmers' Markets, was in Mexico when his phone started ringing with news of the shelter in place order. He was at his remote plot in Baja, California, with very limited Wi-Fi service, when Santa Cruz economic development director Bonnie Lipscomb called seeking his input for meetings of the emergency COVID-19 task force. For three days straight they texted and called each other via WhatsApp, the only method to connect at the property in Mexico.

Then he returned home and hit the ground running, grateful that the markets had been deemed "essential services," thanks in no small part to his own lobbying efforts. "I told the City Manager: How does it make

sense to decrease the food supply? You want to decentralize it, diversify it. Let's be logical about this!" Dhillon explains.

With so many new systems to figure out, the first few weeks of shelter in place were extremely difficult, and public complaints, mostly indirectly on social media, were just another exhausting fire to put out. "Week one was really intense, week two a little less intense, by week four there were no complaints. Basically within three weeks we had developed our protocols. I literally had to work with every vendor individually to maximize public health and social distancing to eliminate risk," he says. "It is a lot of work to eliminate direct hand-to-hand sales."

Dhillon and his team are continuing to look for creative and outside-the-box solutions to these unprecedented and challenging times. For example, when the mask ordinance came out, Dhillon predicted correctly that customers would still show up without a face covering. So he ordered a ton of crafty, homemade masks and just gave them away for free, to remedy the public health risk.

They have also developed a curbside pickup option for customers at the flagship Downtown Santa Cruz market, where farmers offer pre-packaged boxes of produce and customers can order and pay ahead online. The system is a precursor to another idea that has been brewing for a while, a produce delivery system for folks who might be physically unable to get to the market.

Dhillon says that despite the hurdles, there have been some great, positive elements coming out of the pandemic. "It's the silver lining to COVID-19. There's a lot of great stuff happening right now even though it's pretty dire for a lot of folks. A lot of innovation," he says. "Restaurants are coming to me with killer ideas for value added products and they are doing really well." He lists examples, like Home doing charcuterie, Feel Good Foods doing fam-

Farmers' market managers keep the fresh produce flowing (clockwise from top left) Nesh Dhillon, Catherine Barr, Reid Norris, Jerry Lami.



Farmers' markets have spread out and started new safety protocols so shoppers can maintain social distancing.



ily meal boxes, chef Anthony Kresge from Belly Goat doing burger boxes, Soif and La Posta doing dried pasta and even Freddy the Forager bringing his mystical, legendary goods to sell at the market. None of this would have happened during “normal” times.

But for Dhillon, the big picture is very clear, and he is anxious to address it. “When are we going to have a national discussion about food security? How much food is being produced overseas? A ton. A serious amount. Is that really in our best interest? Is that logical? We need to start talking about that on a national level, and the economic impact of that. We can glorify farming again! That’s the big discussion that needs to start happening right now because people are paying attention to where their food is coming from.”

CATHERINE BARR

Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Markets

The thing about operating a farmers' market is that it is very dependent on property owners and institutions that provide the venue for it. Catherine Barr, manager of the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers' Markets, had a strong link to the Monterey Peninsula College for its weekly market on Fridays. But as we well know, all schools have had to close, including MPC. This was a huge blow to Barr, who had to hustle to shift the market at risk of closing it down. When asked what the hardest part about COVID-19 has been for her, she says, “Where should I start? I think the biggest hurdle was having to move the MPC market over to Del Monte Shopping Center during COVID-19. At this time MPC will not allow us to set up the market while the campus is closed. If it wasn't for Karla Corres and Denae DiBenedetto from Del Monte reaching out to our organization, I don't know what we would have done.”

Of course, that market move is just one of the many changes Barr has had to grapple with. Opening of her seasonal markets at The Barnyard and the Del Monte Center had to be delayed. And on the precipice of launching a new, highly anticipated market in Pacific Grove, Barr had to make the call of cancelling it. “Pacific Grove has been scratched for now...with all this going on, no way can anything happen for this year,” she laments.

Yet she sees the positive within the hurdles of the pandemic and says that customers have been extremely loyal, moving without complaint to a new venue, and continuing to support the vendors who are able to sell their goods, thanks to Barr for keeping the markets operating. “We have seen new customers as well, who don't necessarily want to go inside a grocery store to buy food. They like the new setup,” she adds.

And the big picture remains for Barr, who has been doing this job for 28 years. “Coming from a farming background, I get how hard these farmers work to bring food to your table. Interacting with the farmers

and seeing the third and fourth generations taking over the family business...it's exciting to see what the next generation is coming up with to improve crops and marketing at the farmers' markets.”

REID NORRIS

Everyone's Harvest

One of the major tenets behind Everyone's Harvest is serving the surrounding community by promoting health and nutrition. For executive director Reid Norris the shock of shelter in place was incredibly challenging. But he says that “the most important thing for us is to keep the markets and our employees and customers as safe as possible so we can continue to fulfill our mission and get healthy food to people in our community who need it most right now.”

Staying safe came in the form of a Social Distancing Plan, made up of best practices developed in close collaboration between the health department, local governments and other market organizations. Yet, Norris says, “It's still a really anxious time for essential businesses like ours whose employees and partners are out serving the public, and for everyone who's trying to figure out how to operate sustainably at a time when the economy is in shock and the loan programs created by the government are overwhelmed and, so far, unresponsive.”

In addition, Everyone's Harvest has launched a personal shopper service at the Marina and Pacific Grove markets, a very convenient option

Any time you go through a challenge like this you learn more about yourself and you grow closer as a community

for folks to get fresh produce and other goods. It uses an online, pre-order format, in which customers select items, a price point and time slot, then a customized box of produce is assembled for pickup.

Everyone's Harvest is also the only market group in Monterey County that offers Market Match, the program that doubles EBT and CalFresh spending for market produce. Norris says, "It's been so great to see this program continue to thrive at this time. I wish everybody knew about Market Match, because it's accessible to any family who shops with a Cal-Fresh card, and 100% of the Match supports local farmers."

Everyone's Harvest's regular market season would have offered cooking workshops led by local chefs for families to learn about cooking with local produce, but they are unable to host these during COVID-19 times. However, Norris says they are exploring alternate ways to bring these workshops to market or get them out to us virtually.

Amidst the struggles and intense logistical juggling, Norris has been able to reflect on the work his organization does, celebrating victories like the June re-opening and 10th anniversary of the market at the Salinas Valley Memorial Healthcare System. "Any time you go through a challenge like this you learn more about yourself and you grow closer as a community. Being a small nonprofit or small business is always incredibly hard work, but it's so worth it to see the positive impact you can have on the health and lives of people you work with and care about," he says.

JERRY LAMI West Coast Farmers' Markets

Jerry Lami, manager of the large network of West Coast Farmers' Markets, got his start in a supermarket. He never imagined he would be managing farmers' markets in six different counties, acting as a go-between for farmers, food producers and county governments.

"I have a lot of satisfaction in the dozen or so markets that I run, in that I employ 300–400 vendors, cut out the middleman, give them an opportunity to sell what they grow and create an opportunity for them to make a living," he says.

But that opportunity was drastically cut when COVID-19 hit, especially in locations with strict regulations concerning who could still sell goods at the farmers' market. He says that Monterey County, in particular, has been tough because it halted all on-site cooking and hot food vendors. His Carmel Valley market had 30 vendors and was reduced to 14, while Oldtown Salinas had 35 and is now down to 12. "More than 60% of the vendors were eliminated by restrictions put on by Monterey County. I was forced to close four of my markets," he says regrettably.

Despite the restrictions, he has been impressed by those who are still present at the market, "the resilience of my farmers that keep coming and keep trying despite that their sales have probably dropped about 90%. The hope that they will survive at all is that customers will remember them and keep buying from them."

Lami also says that customer feedback has been very positive. "They like that we are still allowed to have packaged foods, like hummus. They like the ability to be able to shop in the open air. I think that it'd be a lot better if the restrictions weren't so tough in Monterey County, but I guess having some vendors is better than none."

Ultimately, his hope is that "the heat of the summer will kill off the virus and we can all go back to work and things will just go back to the way it used to be. I personally feel that farmers' markets are in a good position, being outdoors, and we have the opportunity to be healthier and safer." 🍷

Amber Turpin is a freelance food and travel writer based in the Santa Cruz Mountains.



MARGARITAVILLE
CAPICOLA, CALIFORNIA

831.476.2263
231 ESPLANADE, CAPICOLA
MARGARITAVILLECAPICOLA.COM



  

BOLD AND UNIQUE
FLAVORS IN A NEW AGE
TAQUERIA SETTING

MIJO'S TAQUERIA
CAPICOLA VILLAGE, CA
831.465.0228



BLADE TECH

**Monterey Bay
Knife Sharpening**

Mobile Service

WWW.BLADETECHUSA.COM
(831) 917-1330



THE CORK
&
P L O U G H

OPEN FOR DINE IN & TAKE OUT

200 BROADWAY STREET
KING CITY · 831.386.9491

WWW.THECORKANDPLOUGH.COM