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Four mornings a week, Union Square in the heart of Manhattan turns into a thriving, open-air country market.

The choking smell of exhaust fumes gives way to the airy scents of sweet basil and mint and the wholesome aromas of freshly baked breads.

"Everything is freshly picked" or made, says Evelyn Strouse, 75, a neighborhood resident who is carrying just-purchased bags of vine-ripened tomatoes and whole-grain peasant bread. "There is a sense of eating well that comes from the market. You can get anything here - rabbit meat, fresh milk in glass bottles, wonderful goat cheese."

August is the high season for farmers markets, not just in Manhattan but in hundreds of cities and towns across the USA. They provide unsurpassed sources of quality and variety for urban dwellers at the same time they keep many small, family-run farms in business. Despite floods in the Midwest and drought in the Northeast and South, the markets are thriving in most communities again this summer.

In New York City, Greenmarket Farmers Markets have grown from one market at one location in 1976 to 26 markets at 18 locations today, including Union Square. Together they pull in about \$ 14 million in annual revenue. In Alexandria, Va., the local market had dwindled to 13 regular vendors in 1985; now there are 112 vendors and a waiting list of 150. The market attracts about 3,000 visitors to the Old Town section every Saturday morning. The farmers market in Madison, Wis., which residents call the best in the nation, draws 18,000 visitors on a typical Saturday to 200 stands set up around the state capitol.

The New York City markets, with their endless supply of affluent consumers, attract farmers from a median distance of 100 miles and some from as far away as 250 miles. Charlie Cherwak, 23, departs from Valois, N.Y., at midnight for the six-hour drive to Union Square to sell fresh grape juice from the vineyards of Stone Arch Farm in the Finger Lakes. Ken Migliorelli, 33, rises at 3 a.m. for his 100-mile trip to the market at 17th and Broadway from Tivoli, N.Y. He doesn't get home from selling his array of squash, tomatoes and Italian greens until after dark.

"It's a long day at the market," he says. "The market doesn't make (being a farmer) any easier. But it makes it more profitable."

Farmers markets represent an annual rebirth of a ritual from the country's rural past, a throwback to a time before supermarket chains took over food distribution.

"Probably every city in America had public markets at one time - the ubiquity of streets named Market Street attests to that," says Theodore Spitzer of Public Markets Partners, a non-profit organization that helps communities establish farmers markets.

Although they never disappeared, interest in farmers markets had waned by the '60s and early '70s under pressure from supermarket chains and the development of large-scale agriculture. Suburban expansion also devoured the nearby farmland that was a mainstay of the markets. But since the mid-'70s, farmers markets have revived across the country and now number more than 2,000, Spitzer says. Several forces have led to their rebirth: small-farm economics, changing consumer tastes and urban renewal efforts.

The uncertain financial returns from selling products to wholesalers forced small farmers to seek direct outlets. Farmers markets have proved ideal. They have become vital lifelines for many small farmers, eliminating profit-squeezing middlemen to provide a direct link to affluent urban consumers.

"Many of our vendors would not be alive in agriculture today were it not for this market," says Mary Carpenter, 46, who farms and manages the Madison market. Vendors in Madison sell about \$ 500 to \$ 1,000 worth of food products on a typical Saturday, she says, depending on the type of products and their quality.

The advantage over selling to a middleman is clear. Migliorelli, who farms with his father, says a typical wholesaler or broker would pay him \$ 6 for a 20-pound box of squash. But at the market, 20 pounds of squash brings \$ 16 to \$ 20. Before discovering Greenmarket in 1982, the Migliorelli family sold 100% of its crops to wholesalers. Now they sell 95% over-the-counter at the market. The rest mostly is sold in bulk to large buyers, such as restaurants.

"It's really turned the operation around. We were able to upgrade our equipment, draw salaries," Migliorelli says. "If not Greenmarkets, I probably wouldn't be farming."

Changing consumer tastes also have revived interest in farmers markets. Call them yuppies or gourmets, many consumers are looking for variety beyond the standard supermarket lettuce wrapped in cellophane, anemic tomatoes and one-type-fits-all green peppers. Variety is a popular feature of every market, especially in New York.

"You have a sophisticated buying public in New York City," says Hall Gibson, who operates **Ryder Farm** in Putnam County, N.Y., which has been in his wife's family since 1795. "One of the fascinations here in the market is the number of international customers. They come from all over the world. They are culinary experts. They write cookbooks."

At the market they can find such varieties as Egyptian onions, a rare variety that develops on stems instead of underground; daikons, large white radishes used in Oriental recipes; and tomatillos, tiny, yellow tomatoes contained within a pale brown, paper-like husk.

Ted Blew, who farms 160 acres in Pittstown, N.J., grows 22 varieties of tomatoes and 77 varieties of peppers. The peppers range from the mild pepperoncini to the explosive habanero, which his wife, Susan, warns has "1,000 times the fire of a jalapeno."

"It's not a fad. It reflects consumers' new interest and sophistication in food," says Robert Sommer, former director of the Center for Consumer Research at the University of California at Davis. "These markets have become test markets for new items, like golden zucchini. They start at the farmers market, then make it to the upscale, yuppie produce sections (in gourmet stores) and then to the supermarket once they are proven."

Sommer, a regular patron of his local market at Davis, says surveys show that the high quality and freshness of products at farmers markets also attract consumers. Most of the produce and other perishables are no more than 1 day old.

"If you want good sweet corn, there are only two ways of getting it: growing it yourself (or) getting it from a farmer," he says.

For some consumers, shopping at farmers markets also is an expression of a green-tinted world view. Consumers like Michelle Margetts, who was buying produce at Union Square for her 30th birthday dinner, says the market provides "a fair representation of organic produce free of the effects of "multinational pharmaceutical and chemical companies."

"Many of my most avid customers are young mothers," says Gibson, who has grown vegetables and fruits organically since the late '70s. "The whole climate has changed. . . . People used to turn up their noses and walk away."

But there's more to the markets than food and commerce. They are hubs of social interaction, even romance. Migliorelli knows of at least three marriages that resulted from chance market meetings.

"New York can be such a fierce place. It's nice to have some place where people are so friendly," Margetts says.

Urban planners have discovered farmers markets are an effective way to revitalize downtowns. Union Square once was a crime-ridden area whose major form of open-air commerce was illegal drugs, says Barry Benepe, the director of New York's Greenmarket system. Since the market was established in 1976, it has helped stabilize the area.

"It's the centerpiece of our neighborhood," says Strouse, the market shopper who also is chair of the Union Square Community Association. "The kind of coming together of all different sorts of people at the market is the healthiest thing that can happen here."

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