

LOCALLY GROWN FOOD



Before You Go

Here's how to make the most of your visit to a farmers' market

Fresh food and homemade products are staples of open-air farmers' markets everywhere — but so are a few notable quirks, like oftentimes being cash only. There are few ways to get fresher produce, local meats and spices, and homemade items of many kinds. You just have to know a few tips and tricks.

DON'T FORGET CASH

In many cases, these vendors only take cash, or offer discounts for those who don't use cards, when selling their produce. Some markets set up near an ATM, or even bring a portable version along — but not every farmers' market offers such easy access to paper money. There are also usually additional charges associated with using these automated machines. So come prepared with your own money, just in case.

PLANNING AHEAD

Shopping at these markets is earth friendly because you're cutting out on long-haul shipping costs which expands farming's carbon footprint. Go one step further by bringing your own reusable shopping bags for all of your new purchases. Plan on getting there early too, since each vendor will only have a limited amount of things to sell. These things tend to go fast. Once



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you've bought everything you'd like, head straight home in order to keep anything from losing freshness — especially if it's very hot or very cold out.

DON'T RUSH IN

Don't be afraid to walk all the way around the market when you first arrive. This pro-

vides you with a better overview of everything that's available, so you don't drain your cash reserve too early to get that one thing that might have piqued your interest at the end. Ask about samples before you buy, if they're available. What strikes you most might just come as a big surprise.

TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Farmers' markets give us a great opportunity to try new things. You may stumble across a heirloom variety that you've never heard of, fancy baked products or locally crafted items that spark your interest. Be adventurous in your buying.

If you find something you really love, or if a favorite food is finally back in season after a long wait, don't be shy about buying in bulk. You'll soon be creating exciting new things in the kitchen, while helping to support industrious neighbors who help to keep your community healthy and strong.

Why It's So Important

Eating locally grown foods is good for your health — and your community

Area growers often rely on buyers like you to make ends meet, even if they've developed strong partnerships with supermarkets or distributors. At the same time, fresh foods have been consistently shown to promote wellness in a way that canned or frozen goods simply can't.

FRESH MATTERS

Studies have shown the fruits and vegetables begin losing essential nutrients like vitamins A, B, C and E pretty much as soon as someone harvests them. This is only exacerbated by the processes put in place for foods that are making a long trip to stores, since shipped produce is usually picked before it's fully ripe. Exposure to changing temperatures, artificial lights and air tends to bleed nutrients, too. You're still better off eating vegetables that have been harvested and shipped, frozen or canned, but at each step, they're losing some of their nutritional potency. Locally grown food is completely ripened, then brought to sale at its very best.

AVOIDING PRESERVATIVES

Chemical additives are usually part of the process when food has to travel long distances. Some of these compo-



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nents, even if they are biological, have been shown in various studies to have negative impacts over the long term. For instance, the nitrates that cure meats have been more recently linked to cancer. On the other hand, locally grown foods are either low in chemicals (and pesticides) or sometimes free of them. All of it works in concert to create bet-

ter nutrition for us, and a safer world for birds and other wildlife.

A BALANCED APPROACH

Much of the extra calories found in poor diets is associated with processed foods, fast food, unhealthy snacks and candies. Our diets naturally improve when we con-

sume locally grown foods, if only because farmers' markets and pick-your-own farms aren't overstuffed with junk-food options. Instead, you'll find a bounty of fresh fruit, lean proteins and healthy greens. Farm-to-table purchases also limit the number of places where potential contaminations might happen along the way.

SUSTAINABILITY

Locally grown food results in less waste in its packaging and fewer associated emissions since it doesn't have to be prepared for long-distance delivery. You're cutting down on plastic use if you bring a reusable bag of your own. Farms also boost biodiversity, and help us maintain a cleaner environment.

Focus On Farm-to-Table

Pick-your-own farms and markets aren't the only way to support local growers

Look for restaurants who support these critical community builders by buying directly from them. These food establishments will promote the relationship with verbiage like “farm-to-table,” which indicate that they buy directly from local growers instead of dealing with larger distributors or grocery-store chains.

BE ADVENTUROUS

Many farm-to-table operations have ever-changing menus, based on the freshest and best produce available that week. You're likely going to have to become comfortable with a different process when ordering. You may not be able to have that favorite dish you enjoyed last month, since the ingredients aren't available from local growers anymore. On the other hand, the menu will be dotted with only the tastiest in-season foods, and these ever-changing food sources allow chefs to be incredibly inventive.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Some restaurateurs go the extra mile by planting their own gardens, thus joining the farm-to-table movement as participants. These backyard-grown fruits, vegetables and fresh herbs will only add



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to the culinary experience. In some cases, you may even be able to tour their planting spaces and get a peek at the fresh produce that will soon be served back inside. Either way, don't be afraid to ask plenty of questions — in particular if there are varieties or local specialty items that you're unfamiliar with. Learning more about the ori-

gin and history of your food only adds to the experience.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This kind of freshness doesn't come cheaply. The reason most restaurant operations tend to buy in bulk is because of the deep discounts associated with the process. Volume sales help drive down

prices. Local farmers are much smaller operations, so you're going to pay a little extra to get the best possible ingredients. Also, keep in mind that you're directly supporting your neighbors — and there's a reward in that, too.

At the same time, be on the lookout for fraud. The government doesn't regulate this designation. In the meantime,

more than one investigation has uncovered instances in which restaurants have promoted themselves as farm-to-table while still using major distribution channels. It's simply a scam to get more money out of unsuspecting customers. So, take the time to do a little search and make sure they're actually on the up and up.

More Foods Than You Think

Eating local is no longer limited to the same old fruits and vegetables

Seasonal produce will always be the heart and soul of farmers' markets and pick-your-own operations — but that's not the sum total of what you'll find. Look for local meats and cheeses, milk and eggs, honey and grains, and herbs and spices — then head home to blend it all together into a fresh and tasty meal. Here's a look at a few key options.

MEATS

As with heirloom fruits and vegetables, some farmers specialize in unique breeds of cows, lambs or chicken in order to produce their own unique flavors. These meats may be available at farmers' markets, local butcher shops or locally owned markets. Ask for local options where you shop, or visit area farms yourself for the freshest possible options. Closely read labels, and you may discover that there were local options all along.

EGGS

Eggs have always been a big part of the offerings at farmers' markets — but there may never have been more options. Credit the lack of widespread regulation for small-scale operations, which have opened the door for all manner of free-range and uniquely fed variations. Look for eggs with unblemished shells, and don't



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be surprised if they're a different color than you may be used to at a chain grocery store.

Eggs should be dry, since moisture can allow bacteria to enter through the shell. If you visit a farm, make sure the perches, food storage and nests are clean and operating properly before buying. Don't

buy eggs with abnormal shapes, cracks or irregularities or any odd spots.

HERBS AND SPICES

One of the most interesting finds at these markets are the homegrown herbs and specially blended spices. There seems to be as many recipes for sea-

sonings, rubs and marinades as there are vendors in any given location. Each one is different in their own ways, and may appeal to you based on your preferences for spice, sweetness or tangy flavors.

You'll also quickly discover that homegrown herbs deliver a flavor punch that the dried ver-

sions in plastic containers can never match. Ask for advice from those who have them for sale, and pair their recommendations with the fresh produce and other products available for sale on any given day at the market or pick-your-own farm. Each visit could yield an exciting new surprise.

Keeping It in the Family

Most farming operations are run by relatives, strengthening their bond

There are more than 2 million farms in the U.S., with a huge corresponding variation in characteristics and size. Annual gross revenue can range from \$1,000 for part-time operations into the millions. What unites all of these many farms is who runs them: Some 98% of all them are family operated, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

The USDA classifies family farms as those where the business is principally owned by the operator and their relatives. Smaller family farms were also the largest portion of all U.S. operations, accounting for 89% in the same 2021 survey. They operate nearly half of all farmland, according to government statistics, while accounting for 59% of all hay production and nearly half of the production of eggs and poultry.

Large-scale family farms accounted for 47% of all production, the USDA says. Women make up 36% of U.S. farm operators, according to the American Farm Bureau Federation. Some 56% of all farms boast at least one decision-maker who is female.



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WHAT THEY FARM

With small farms dominating poultry, eggs and hay production in the U.S., mid- and large-scale farmers have a shared focus on cash grains, cotton and oilseed. Most dairy is produced by the largest operations, which also dominates in the areas of beef, vegetables, nursery or greenhouse products and fruits and tree nuts.

BOUNCING BACK

Grocery stores and restaurants accounted for some 42% of U.S. farm operations' direct sales into 2020, with a nearly \$500 million increase in year-over-year sales. Sales fell as the pandemic worsened, before finally bouncing back. Similar increases have been seen with sales at farmers' markets, roadside operations

and on-farm stores after quarantines were lifted. Still, only about 8% of American farms market their crops through intermediated or direct-to-customer sales, according to the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Many family-farm households have turned to off-farm jobs to generate additional income, and to receive key

benefits like health-care insurance. The American Farm Bureau Federation also reports that farmers and ranchers may receive as little as 8 cents on the dollar after accounting for costs — and much of that happens after the harvest crosses the farm gate in the form of processing, transportation, distribution, salaries and marketing.

Defining Organic Foods

The USDA has strict guidelines when it comes to what is — and isn't organic

The government doesn't always strictly regulate the foods we eat or the labels that are slapped on them. For instance, locally grown eggs aren't subject to federal oversight. Similarly, the term "farm-to-table" isn't strictly defined. But organic foods are different. In order to earn U.S. Department of Agriculture certification, these foods must be grown and then produced under strict guidelines that include elements like soil quality, how it's raised or processed, the use of weed or pest control and the presence of additives. Here's a deeper look.

WHAT'S ORGANIC?

Organic food producers must rely on natural substances by USDA rule, and there are only certain allowable farming methods. Synthetic substances generally can't be used, but there are notable exceptions. For instance, vaccines can be administered to guard against animal disease, and pheromones may be used to confuse crop-damaging insects. Naturally occurring toxins like arsenic and strychnine, on the other hand, are prohibited.

MULTI-INGREDIENT VARIATIONS

There are different consid-



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erations for foods with multiple ingredients. Processed organic foods aren't allowed to contain artificial colors, flavors or preservatives. All ingredients must be organic, except for non-agricultural elements like baking soda used to make fluffier baked goods or the thickener pectin in fruit jams.

PROHIBITED GMOS

Genetically modified organ-

isms are not allowed in organic foods by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They're typically used to increase yields in crops that are plagued by weeds or insects. Over time, plants build in a natural resistance that lowers or eliminates the need for chemicals. There is no generally accepted evidence yet that GMOs are unsafe, but the concept is still fairly new. In the meantime,

organic farmers have to work doubly hard to avoid cross-contamination from nearby farms who employ GMOs, or they risk their certification.

COST CONSIDERATIONS

Organic foods have many upsides: They are better for the environment, promote animal welfare and can have positive health impacts for farmers who aren't working

around potentially toxic chemicals. The downside is that organics typically cost more than non-organic alternatives. A lot of extra work ends up going into meeting government standards. Prices are also higher for goods like organics that are in shorter supply. There are also additional processing and transportation costs since they have to be kept separate from non-organics.

Get Out There!

Supporting local growers can also include visiting their places of work

Agri-tourism is a growing segment that brings tourists to an agricultural operation like a ranch or farm. It's providing another critical form of income for those who spend their lives bolstering our country and our economy. Visitors can now pick their own fruits and vegetables and get up close and personal with farmers and their animals in places as different as traditional farms to dude ranches. Some operations even include overnight-stay options.

FINDING YOUR WAY

Agri-tourism partners can be found through your local extension office, state agriculture department or through related national groups like the U.S. Farm Stay Association, the USDA's National Agricultural Library and Dude Ranches Association of America, among others. What happens next is up to you, whether it's riding a horse, picking strawberries or participating in farm crafts like cheesemaking.

BIG BENEFITS

The accommodations for overnight stays may vary from rustic quarters to a spot in the main farmhouse. Pricing is similarly varied. But you don't have to spend more than an afternoon to



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learn a great deal. These visits provide terrific insight into how the food we all eat arrives on store shelves and our tables. You may get a little dirty along the way, but the result will be a deeper understanding of one of the nation's oldest and most important industries.

At the same time, agri-tourism helps farmers generate

needed extra revenue from various activities on their land, including tours, "pick-your-own" programs and other recreational activities. This remains a small amount of total farm revenue, accounting for less than 10 percent of revenues in recent surveys, but it's been growing at an exponential rate. Smaller farms, mid-sized

operations and beginning farmers are finding this second income particularly helpful when yields aren't what they'd hoped.

MORE THAN A MEAL

Arrive hungry. You may get to pick key elements of the next meal you'll make. There could be an opportunity to ride a horse, or shop in a

quaint little farm gift shop. Some operations are even taking part in programs where hikers can explore their sprawling farmlands. But in the end, you're making unforgettable memories after getting hands-on experience, an up-close appreciation of farmers and the work they do, and a greater sense of our shared agricultural heritage.