

A view from the stalls

Markets a win-win situation

By DAVID WHYLE

In February 2002 I started my first weekly Organic Farmers Market in Brisbane. From the very first day, it was obvious there was a huge need for better access to fresh, certified organic foods.

My customers are a wonderfully enthusiastic, very diverse group of people ranging in age from 16-80 years. All are hungry for information about the seasons, challenges that growers face, and new varieties of vegetables and fruits.

With this knowledge, they also understand why certified organics usually cost more. It is an absolute win/win situation, with the public accessing the largest range of the freshest produce possible at direct-from-the-farmer prices.

The growers thoroughly enjoy developing relationships with their buyers, getting better prices and getting paid immediately, in cash. They also have an outlet for imperfect produce (bent zucchini) and any value-added products they make to supplement their income.

We are the coalface of our industry. We get to share very important information that customers are not getting elsewhere (they know that apples available from June-January are from cold storage), and we have more time to educate them with samples, recipes, nutritional facts and important industry information.

We hear their complaints, acknowledge their frustrations, bask in their gratitude and pass on their compliments to the growers. All of these factors contribute to the worldwide increase in farmers markets, as consumers are increasingly disillusioned with supermarkets and their policies.

The alienation from community is what increasingly draws people to the markets, with their immediacy and intimacy.

Shoppers feel acknowledged, appreciated and valued, and they develop a sense of belonging that is lacking almost everywhere else.

A recent report by the United States Department of Agriculture confirms that the number of farmers markets in the US has grown dramatically, increasing 111% from 1994 to 2004, with 19,000 farmers selling their produce solely through farmers markets. At present, there are more than 3700 farmers markets operating in the US.

In Britain, markets and smaller retail are picking up an increasing share of organic sales over supermarkets. Retail sales of organic produce through direct sales and alternative market outlets – including box schemes, mail order, farm shops and farmers markets – were worth about 144 million pounds in 2004, and growing by 33.3% on the previous financial year.

This suggests there is huge scope for growth in Australia for farmers markets and also ones that cater specifically for certified organic produce.

Yes, we are a market. And we are growing and we have potential. Yes, we cater for a select crowd. But on market days when the wind is blowing and rain is falling, most of them still turn up to buy the produce because that is where they commit to buying their produce every week.

The reason for this odd behaviour is quite simple. They love it! And so do we stallholders, re-sellers, producers, agents and, most valued of all, the growers. ■

Contact: David Whyle, Organic Gold Coast Farmers Market, Miami State High School, Gold Coast Highway, Miami; PO Box 1424, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, Qld 4006; phone (07) 3358 6309 or 1300 668 603. More growers wanted.



Farmers markets mean the largest range of products at direct-from-producer prices.