



VEGIE GROWER TROY HILLS

POTATO GROWER JOE PANTORNO



SAUCE MAKER DAVID TANNER



APPLE GROWER MARIE HARDING



MARKET MAGIC

FARMERS' MARKETS HAVE BUILT A REPUTATION FOR SELLING QUALITY PRODUCE DIRECT TO THE PUBLIC - RAIN, HAIL OR SHINE. BUT WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD? TRISTAN MADDOCKS SPOKE TO A HARDY BUNCH OF STALLHOLDERS.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUCY DI PAOLO

Geoff Rankin has a simple but eloquent way of explaining how to run an authentic and successful farmers' market.

"A good market is a community-based project. It creates a community feeling and gives local consumers a chance to meet and buy from local producers."

Mr Rankin should know – he manages the Berwick and Kingston farmers' markets, which are among about 90 such markets dotted throughout Victoria.

About 20 markets are in Melbourne, at inner suburban hot spots like Collingwood but they are also at places like Pakenham on the urban fringe.

For shoppers, the markets' lures are manifold: not only do they provide a welcome change from drab supermarkets, but fresh, high-quality produce and a chance to interact with down-to-earth food producers.

Mr Rankin says it is the promise of quality that stands farmers' markets in good stead for the future. "They will grow, because more and more people are getting concerned about the source of their fresh produce."

But last month a state parliamentary inquiry into farmers' markets found that without clever planning and funding for promotion many of the markets outside inner Melbourne are unlikely to thrive.

In contrast to large inner urban markets – which are in busy precincts and have many customers – rural markets have more difficulty attracting stallholders, the report found.

Three markets in Casey-Cardinia (Berwick, Pakenham and Pearcedale) attract an average of 20-40 stallholders compared to an average of 50-70 stallholders at inner urban markets.

Mr Rankin says farmers can justify travelling long distances to set up shop at the inner urban markets because of their consistently high customer turnouts.

"The stronger markets can attract the distant farmers but not the more mediocre markets."

City markets are not for everyone, however, and Devon Meadows vegetable grower Troy Hills sees the value in keeping things local.

"Personally, I actually like the Pakenham market the best because it's close to home," he says. "We are actually providing our local fresh produce to locals. When you tell people from Pakenham that you are from that area, they are even more keen."

The 30 year old and his partner, Amber, are part of the family operation behind Crawford Vegetables. While his aunts cover many markets in the south-east – such as Red Hill, Mornington, Grantville and Longwarry – Mr Hills is concentrating on building a reputation at Elwood and Pakenham.

"Pakenham has only just started out so it is very inconsistent at the moment. One week it's great, the next it can be bad. We had a poor weekend [in November] but the market before that

was very good."

Poor weather was by far the biggest threat to a market, he said – "you may as well stay at home if it's raining".

Those who do brave it on cold and wet days are rewarded with top-notch produce.

"The best thing about our vegies is they are picked every single week on Thursday and Friday. That's the best way to maintain the quality," Mr Hills said.

Joe Pantorno's stall doesn't have the same variety as that of Mr Hills but he is similarly committed to quality. The Gembrook potato farmer says he spends much of market day "correcting the myths people have about spuds", but thoroughly enjoys the chance to interact directly with customers.

While his duties include manning stalls in Pakenham and Spotswood, his wife has a busier market schedule with regular spots at Red Hill, Caulfield, Hawthorn and Churchill Island.

"I sit on a tractor – someone's got to actually grow the stuff."

His market sales – mostly of the sebago, nicola and kipler potato varieties – are enough to "put groceries on the table, but you are never going to buy a Ferrari with it".

A common element at the best markets is excellent green vegetable stalls, he says.

"With any farmers' market, unless you have got really good vegetable people, they don't seem to succeed. People come for greens of all types."

He thinks struggling markets face a catch 22: "People don't show up so the stallholders don't come."

Marie Harding also spends energy correcting marketgoers' misconceptions about produce.

"You tell people to keep their apples in the fridge, which is the message we try to get through over and over again," she said.

Ms Harding, whose family business Hardings Orchards started in Pakenham in 1979, aims to bring a good mix of fruit to each market, with apples, pears, lemons, peaches and plums.

Interaction with customers and other stallholders – "it's a real networking community" – keep her coming back and regular compliments don't hurt either.

"People often ask 'why can't we buy fruit like this in the supermarkets?'"

Ms Harding, who holds stalls at Kingston and Pakenham, says stallholders need to stick with markets in their early stages.

"The one we do at Kingston is run by Rotary, and that's an excellent market, but I think it takes a while to get it up and running. You've got to give it a go. There's no point having one bad market and saying 'I'm not going'. And people expect you to be there, in the same spot."

Questions remain about who should be allowed to set up shop at farmers' markets.

In its submission to the inquiry, the Victorian Farmers

Market Association suggested a need to protect authentic farmers.

"When a genuine grower is at a market, they have trouble competing with someone who is reselling; the reseller can often do it at a cheaper price."

To keep farmers' markets for the farmers, the VFMA has an accreditation process to verify that produce is being directly sourced from Victorian farms.

For regional markets like Berwick and Pakenham to be considered authentic farmers markets, 75 per cent of their stallholders need to be accredited.

In metropolitan markets, where competition is hotter, the figure is 90 per cent.

For Mr Rankin, maintaining the integrity of farmers' markets is about having such a process.

"The objective of farmers' markets is to support local producers."

"Like everything in life, if it is not regulated you get people cheating around the edges."

For Ms Harding the most important thing is that farmers maintain their quality.

"I think we have got to, as much as possible, be out there in the face of people, promoting fresh green Australian produce. To keep pushing home that we grow some of the best fruit in the world."

"We have a great clean, green image, and that's how we want to keep it. The main thing is we are passionate about what we grow."

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

BERWICK-CASEY FARMERS' MARKET

Old Cheese Factory, 34 Homestead Road, Berwick. Fourth Saturday of the month, 8am-12.30pm. Details: 97694459

BERWICK CASEY FARMERS' TWILIGHT MARKET, December 23, 4-8pm.

PAKENHAM CARDINIA RANGES FARMERS' MARKET

Pakenham racecourse, Racecourse Road. Second Saturday of the month, 8am-noon. Details: 0427057908.

PEARCEDALE FARMERS' MARKET

710 Baxter Tooradin Road, Pearcedale. Third Saturday of the month, 8am-1pm.