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LET'S GO TO
The Market

with coverage of the 10th Annual Lawrence Business Magazine Foundation Awards



Real Food, Real People, Real Fun

Shoppers at the Lawrence Farmers' Market range in age and profession, from college students to retired couples, business owners to community leaders, and have myriad reasons for gathering.

by Bob Luder

It was a few minutes before 7, the sun barely up on a record cold April morning in Lawrence, and a line already was forming in the parking lot between Seventh and Eighth streets on the east side of New Hampshire. The Lawrence Farmers' Market, on just its third edition of the 2023 season, wouldn't open for another half hour or so, but already 30 to 40 shivering souls waited patiently to get their now-numb hands on the deliciousness that is a doughnut from Slow Rise, a pop-up business that specializes in a variety of small-batch sourdough doughnuts.

"It's my favorite doughnut," says Daria Gerasimova, a researcher at the University of Kansas (KU), managing a smile through chattering teeth and fog breathing through the cold. "It's my third year coming to the market but my first time this year that I tried these doughnuts. It's worth standing in line for."

Many agreed, as evidenced by the dozens who accompanied her in line. And as the minutes marched on and the farmers market officially opened at its traditional 7:30 a.m., the crowds only grew despite the stiff north wind and cold. If they weren't standing in line for a doughnut, they were shuffling about perusing any of the other dozens of vendors selling everything from produce, flowers, soaps, honey, barbecue, baked goods, smoothies—the list nearly is endless.



Toni and Walt Clogston and their dogs Dancer and Tango
Penélope UmbenHower on the juice blender bike



Patrons mostly shopped, but some were there to merely meet acquaintances they'd met at the market some time ago or simply take in the sights, smells and sounds of what seemed a small-town community in the middle of a larger, bustling college town.

"We've added 30 new vendors in the last three years," says Emily Lysen, in her third year as director of development for the Lawrence Farmers' Market. "We have about 65 vendors, offering everything from flowers, baked goods, prepared foods, wine, coffee, some crafts and pottery.

"And, the important thing is, we ask people here to be as local as possible," she adds.

After weathering a couple challenging years because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the market has begun to again thrive, Lysen says, oftentimes topping 2,000 patrons on Saturday mornings where the wind chills aren't in the low 20s.

Not that the wintery conditions hurt business at the Slow Rise tent. Owners Jeff and Jessica Dunkel began creating their delicious concoctions at midnight Friday. They brought 600 of the classic, classic cinnamon, mudpie, Bavarian and others to the market. A little more than an hour and a half in—at 9:11 a.m. to be precise—they sold their last available doughnut, leading to groans from hungry shoppers late to the party.

"We get here around 6:45, 7, and people are already standing in line waiting," says Madison Wyant, who served doughnuts for Slow Rise this morning. "Maybe it's the ritual of coming down here early, but they're here rain or shine. I often recognize an old classmate or acquaintance. It's fun."

Jeff Dunkel says, "I'm always just so humbled and appreciative of how nice people are here every week. I really like the pop-up concept because you get to really talk to customers. Someone drove all the way up from Wichita one time. Another lady was first in line every weekend, and she was from Topeka."

That appears to be an overriding theme among most patrons of the Lawrence Farmers' Market: While the products and prices are great, it's the people-watching and social aspects of the market that keep them coming back.



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Shopping at the Farmers' Market

Setting Records

The pandemic forced the farmers market to make a lot of adjustments through 2020 and '21, Lysen explains. Drive-through pick-up was offered. Tents were required to allow a normal tent-sized open space between vendors. Masks were required for all vendors and shoppers. Many vendors went away during that time, and foot traffic slowed.

But at least on this day, all those hard times seemed long past. As Lysen states, dozens of new vendors have come aboard the last three years. Last June, an official customer count concluded 2,600 people coming through the market on a given Saturday, up from 1,800 on an initial count in 2019 and a market record.

The Lawrence Farmers' Market doesn't allow just any vendor onto its premises either. Restrictions on craft- and pottery-makers are especially strict, Lysen says. Any craft vendor must produce at least 75 percent of source material for their crafts. All baked goods must contain at least 50 percent locally grown products.

To be a vendor, a business cannot have a store front, meaning all are pop-up businesses such as Slow Rise.

"We have some longtime vendors who were grandfathered in before all the restrictions," Lysen continues. "But having local businesses doing business locally is very important to us."

It's what's kept stalwart Lawrence businesses like Pendleton Farms coming to the farmers market every Saturday for the last 40 years. Every Saturday morning, one can find owner John Pendleton behind tables of fresh asparagus, spinach, broccoli and tons of other fresh produce in the southwest corner of the market's parking lot. Being perched in the shade of a large building directly south provided for an especially frigid setting this April morning, but Pendleton quickly says the pay-off more than comes back in the middle of the summer when the heat builds in.



Tulips for sale at the Farmers' Market

"Saturday mornings down here is a tradition," Pendleton says. "This is on everyone's schedule. We have weekday markets around town, and that's just not the case with them. Every weekday market is a challenge ... this is not."

With his family's farm situated just five miles from Eighth and New Hampshire, Pendleton feels as though the Lawrence Farmers' Market is almost an extension of the farm. It's home.

"This is such a good market," he says. "The biggest thing is the consistency of where you set up. I like our neighbor vendors. Everyone gets along. And we have regular shoppers I recognize from weekend to weekend."

Establishing Family Traditions

Many of the market's shoppers have made weekly visits into family traditions. Count Lawrence native Greg Rupp among those. On any given Saturday, he'll walk from his home down to the market, usually with one of his children. On this day, he was at the market with his son, Thomas, and friend Andy Lees.

They even have a ritual they follow.

"We go out early, take a lap and survey," Rupp says. "Then we take a second lap and shop. It's vegetables when they're in-season—I love the beets, okra. Then we have the folks over for Sunday dinner, using the veggies we bought.

"We also usually get breakfast while we're down here," he adds.

Thomas Rupp seemed to be completely enjoying his time with his dad and friend, despite the chilly air.

"It's nice just walking down here, the routine every Saturday," he says. "We say hi to the people, run into people we know."

Lees says, "For 20-plus years, we've come down pretty much every weekend. We both are sure to get treats for our wives and bring them back.

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“The one thing you enjoy is seeing people you know. It just has that small-town feel,” he continues.

Toni and Walt Clogston moved to Lawrence from St. Louis a year-and-a-half ago and say the farmers market has been one of the greatest treats of their new home. Residents of East Lawrence, they say they walk to the market most weekends with their two dogs—Dancer, an Irish setter, and Tango, a golden retriever—in tow ... or, being towed by them. Toni says she comes for a sausage and biscuit breakfast, and often buys pork chops or brisket from Flory Family Farm. On this day, she purchased eggs, honey and mushrooms.

“Sometimes we see our neighbors,” she says. “I just love the neighborhood feel.”

Walt says, “It’s great to see the community come out. And we got some delicious produce. You can’t beat it. Living downtown is great.”

Shattering a Myth

For a vast majority of college students, Saturday morning is a time to sleep in, rewarding oneself for completing another hard week of classes or recovering from a late Friday night rewarding oneself for completing another week.

That’s not the case with all, however, as several groups of college students were walking around and examining many of the booths at the farmers market early this morning.

“This reminds me of the farmers market back home in Wichita,” says Mckayla Wheeler, a junior at KU majoring in exercise science. “I come down here looking for everything: bread, fresh fruit and vegetables. I got some kale.”

The Lawrence Farmers’ Market has a strong presence on social media, and that’s how organizations get through and communicate with today’s young people. Wheeler and the friend with whom she was shopping, fellow junior Audra Webster, discovered the market through its Facebook page.

“Lawrence just seems nicer,” says Webster, who’s majoring in psychology. “The community’s nicer and calmer. The vendors here are so nice, so sweet. I feel like I’m being cared for when I’m down here.

“I feel like, if I have a question, it’s going to be answered,” she adds.

Keely English, Maddy McGavran and Madison Hilgenkamp, all students at KU, also chose to shop at the farmers market on a cold Saturday morning in search of the very freshest foods they could find.

“I usually come here for eggs and local produce,” English says. “Or kombucha. I think the eggs are honestly better here. Really fresh.”

For McGavran, who’s from Olathe, it was her first time at the market.

“I came down to look at some honey,” she says. “But I just wanted to walk around and look at all the different products. I like supporting local businesses.”



KU Students Mckayla Wheeler and Audra Webster

Karen Hanneman of Queen of Tarts and Emily Lysen

Ednice Metz with relatives from Brazil visits the LFM during Graduation weekend

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*Andy Lees and his son Danger with Greg Rupp and his son Thomas
Three friends enjoying Slow Rise donuts, breakfast burritos and
tamales from Circle S Tamales
A couple dances to the music of an accordion player
Kathryn Unruh shares a Flory's sausage with her dog Mavis*



Hilgenkamp says she's familiar with farmers markets because of the small one that operates near her home in Omaha.

"It's a smaller farmers market," she says. "I like this because it's bigger. It's fun to talk to the people who are selling, talk to them about their products."

Making Community Connections

Some at the Lawrence Farmers' Market weren't there to shop, buy or sell, but rather to just be seen and talk to people about their organizations and what they do.

Marissa Boyle, quality improvement manager at Bert Nash, a community mental health center, stood steadfastly at a table adorned with an apron promoting the center and chatted with anyone who stopped by wanting to learn more about it.

"I hope to have a different type of outreach," Boyle says. "We're always striving for a strong community connection. I usually try to have one staff member and one board member here each weekend. It's important to get feedback from the community and access people in a new and different way.

"And it's fun to come out and have a doughnut and just see and meet new and different people," she says.

Ah, yes, back to the savory Slow Rise doughnuts, which prompted the long line in the wee hours of a frosty mid-spring morning. As Gerasimova waited patiently in line for the delicious concoctions under the tent, the native of Russia began making a list in her mind of what else she wanted to pick up for the week.

"I love the high quality of the produce and the fact that it's grown here," she says. "I think it's better than what a grocery store can offer.

"They have vegetables here not available at a grocery store, like kohlrabi. It's better in the summer, but I can also get some eggs and honey today," she continues.

And if, in the meantime, she gets to sink her teeth into a mouthwatering doughnut, or two, so much the better. At the Lawrence Farmers' Market on this day, it seemed as though everyone could warm up to that. ▲



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