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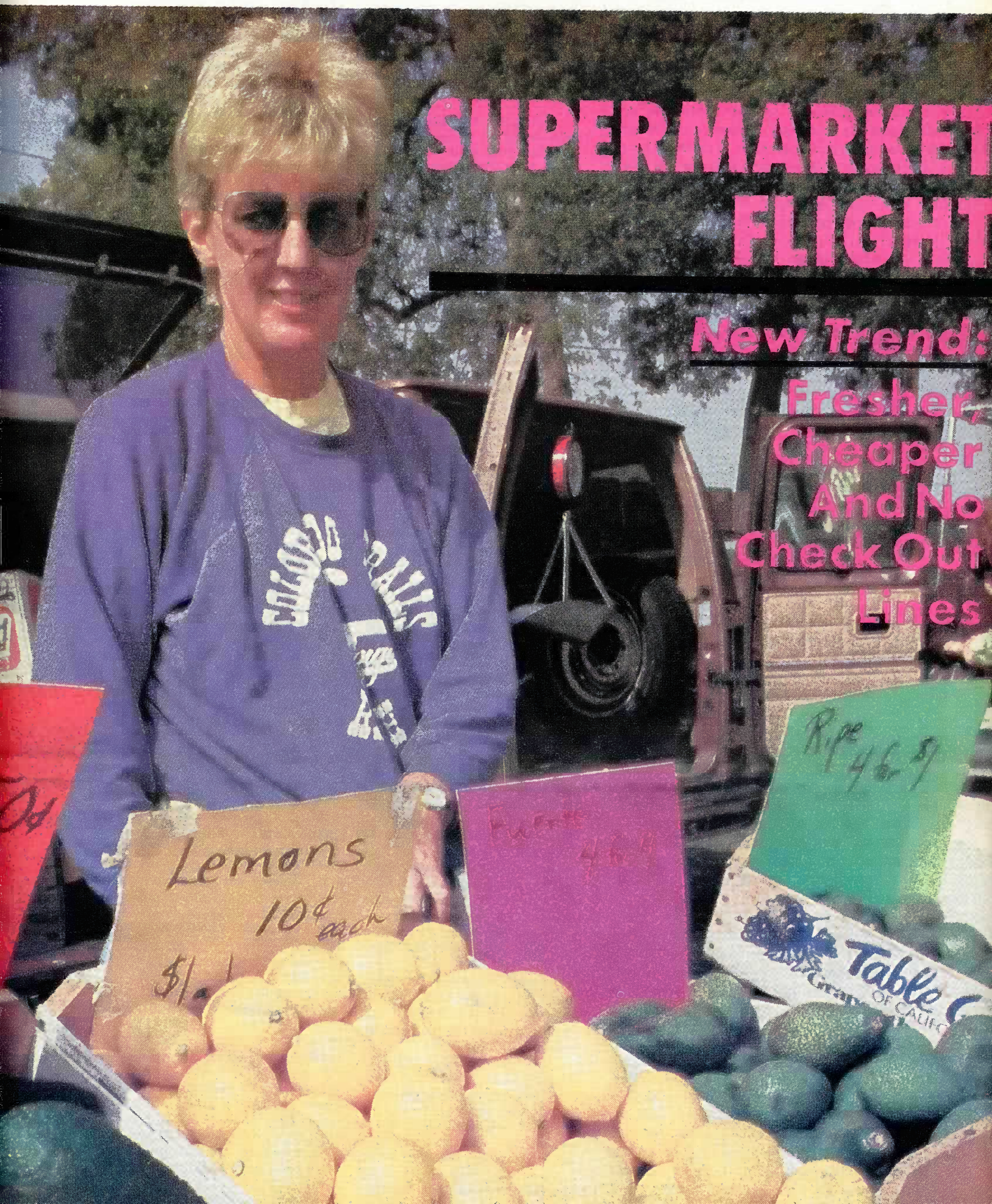
SUPERMARKET FLIGHT

New Trend: Fresher, Cheaper And No Check Out Lines



SUPERMARKET FLIGHT

New Trend: Farmers Markets- Fresher, Cheaper And No Check Out Lines

by Edward I. Placidi

They are colorful enclaves carved out of the metropolitan landscape that have become weekly rituals for a reuniting of urban and rural America. They are a return to earlier roots that were pulled up in the rampant onslaught of urbanization, and a natural progression of the growing health mind-set of today.

"They" are the farmers' markets that have mushroomed across the Southland, and they are a little of the above, and much, much more.

The first one sprouted up about nine years ago and others quickly followed. Each year brought more markets. Today, there are 27 in the Southland—24 in Los Angeles County and three in Orange County.

They are blossoming urban phenomena—that are the product of a collision, over a decade ago, of economic realities and human needs.

In the mid-1970s, low income areas in Los Angeles were experiencing supermarket flight. The big chain markets had lost confidence in the economic viability of these poorer areas and Mom-and-Pop stores were taking up the slack—and charging what were astronomical prices for the local residents. In response to the dilemma, the Interfaith Hunger Coalition (IHC), a grouping of community and religious organizations, formed the Hunger Organization Team (HOT) in 1978. HOT spearheaded a taskforce to look into developing farmers' markets that would bring fresh and inexpensive food to needy communities.

The IHC's campaign came on the heels of a successful farmer movement in California to eliminate laws limiting their freedom to sell directly to consumers (mainly because product and container sizes were not standardized as in supermarkets). The farmers' only sales outlet had been the wholesalers and packing houses that controlled prices, but they garnered enough consumer and political support to bring about a peeling away of most restrictions. Thus, the ground was prepared for the sowing of farmers' markets.

An earlier attempt to start one, in 1977 in Santa Monica, never got off the ground. But the IHC's efforts bore fruit, in 1979, when the first market opened in Gardena. And the rest is history.

Today, at a farmers' market near you, what is probably the freshest produce in our greater metropolitan area is on sale—and at savings that, based on comparisons with local supermarkets, average around 30 percent, but can range much higher on some items. All the products are direct from farm to consumer, and the person selling is often the farmer who grew the food. The farmers bring their harvests into the Southland for the weekly events from as far away as Fresno to the north and San Diego County to the south. The market day varies from community to community, with most markets lasting three or four hours, some up to six.

They average some 40 seller-farmers, though the largest among them, in Santa Monica, draws up to 70 each week. Santa Monica is also the biggest grossing market, according to Laura DeVenanzio, the market manager. It draws some 4,000 to 6,000 shoppers a week, she said, while most average about one-fourth of that. (The Santa Monica crowds have been thick enough to attract pickpockets searching for easy prey, prompting the posting of warning signs around the market.) But big or small, all the markets get rave reviews from neighborhood shoppers.

"I don't like frozen or canned produce, I like it fresh, and it's always fresh here, and cheaper," observed Bernice Feldstein at Victory market, one of three in Pasadena. "Want to see a great example of why people come here?" she quickly added, pointing to one of the stands, "The grapes there are 80 cents a pound and I saw them—the same type and quality—for $2.89 at a supermarket the other day."

In addition to the lure of lower prices for fresher foods, the markets are also fantastic sources for unusual fruits and vegetables that are hard to find in supermarkets. Cherimoyas and pummelos, Texas mustard greens and anise root, sugar cane and sweet lemons, Japanese daikon and bok choy, passion fruit and guavas, sunchokes and garlic chives. The list could go on and on. Nor is just produce to be found, but everything from a large variety of herbs to honey, bee

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pollen, eggs, nuts and seafood.

"I got a shrimp once that jumped out of my hand when I went to prepare it," claimed Aaron Goldberg, who was loaded down with his purchases at the market on Adams Boulevard at St. Agnes Church. "And it's the only place I've found fresh lima beans," he added.

Some markets have even become known for certain specialty items. The St. Agnes market, for example, is the only one boasting live animals—sold on a butcher-them-yourself basis. Every Wednesday, people flock to St. Agnes' to buy quacking ducks, (about $5-$6) and bleating goats ($30-$60). There are also guinea hens ($6-$10) and pheasants (about $10), as well as live crabs ($1.90 a pound) and lobsters ($6.99 a pound) from the Santa Barbara area.

The Fullerton market has become known for its rare fruits. John and Rosemarie Warren bring in a juicy variety of small potted trees and fruit from their orchards in Yorba Linda, such as mangos, chinottos (sour oranges), pixie tangerines, limoo sharin (sweet lemons), kumquats, loquats and calamonci (a cross between a lime and a mandarin).

Rudy Haluza, from his acreage in Rancho California, brings in two little-known treats: pummelos, the first of all citrus, and sweet and pulpy cherimoyas. And he can't sell them fast enough. "Foreigners mostly buy them—from Southeast Asia, Lebanon, South America, you name it. They're familiar with the fruit where most Americans aren't," he said.

Many of the farmers—and the markets in general—find immigrants and various ethnic groups among their best customers. They not only look for unusual foods they knew back home but often come from a society where farmers' markets in city settings were the norm.

"We try to tailor our growing to what people like," said Helen Sakata of Redlands, adding that she varies her product mix according to the market.

Kaplan is also representative of another type of grower that is drawn to the markets—urban farmers who produce small quantities of specialty products in their backyards. So is Ignacio Najera, a retired gardener who cultivates tangerines, sugar cane and a miniature avocado, called a Mexicola, at his Pasadena home.

Najera, a machete in hand, sliced open a nutty-flavored Mexicola and offered free samples to passing shoppers. "You have to eat the skin to get the good taste," he told a potential buyer, who gaped disbelievingly before downing the slice, skin and all, then nodding his head in approval.

The practice of offering free samples is widespread at the markets, especially by those selling unusual items, as is giving the buyer tips on how to eat or prepare the food.

"I find that if you slice them and then leave them on the plate a few minutes before eating them, it increases the sweetness," kiwi grower Jane Diepstraten from Valley Center in San Diego County told a customer. And as she bagged the purchase, Diepstraten and her customer talked kiwi recipes.

That kind of give-and-take with the farmers is one of the most enjoyable aspects of the markets—for the farmers too, who are very proud of the food they produce. It also means health-conscious consumers can do something that would be impossible at a supermarket: talk directly to farmers about how they grow and handle their produce: Are chemical fertilizers used? Is the fruit waxed?

Many farmers claim their produce is organically grown—and have signs touting that claim. But the term "organic" is a moot point, according to Ramona Cortes Garza, director of the Southland Farmers' Market Association (SFMA), which represents 14 markets. Organic can mean something different to every consumer, so what is an acceptable organic growing practice to one is not to another, she noted.

A few farmers have paid a fee and undergone inspections to get a California Certified Organic Farmer certificate. So concerned consumers (who agree with the state's definition of organic) can look for that certificate on display at the farmers' stands. The alternatives, the SFMA's Cortes said, are to talk to the farmer and determine for yourself if his produce is organic or check the farmer out through his county.

"Pesticide use and everything [the farmer does in raising his crops] can be traced through the county commissioners' offices," she explained, because each farmer must provide the county with such information to get the mandatory 'producer certificate'. " (The certificate itself, which must be displayed by each stand, provides a number of details on the farmer—including his telephone number in case you want to talk to him but he's not the one there selling at the market.)

A shopper who makes it a point of speaking with the farmers, however, comes away impressed by how strongly many feel about producing and selling the most natural food possible. It tends to make even the skeptic believe the produce at the farmers' markets is, at the very least, "more organic" than in the supermarkets.

But organic or not, the markets have blossomed because they are a boon to consumers, communities and farmers alike. And, in fact, in some cases they've taken on a far-greater role than envisioned by the IHC.

Noting that the inner-city St. Agnes market "reflects the intent the markets were originally set up for," Cortes said, "They've expanded from only a low-income-area community service into an economic development tool." Citing Santa Monica as the prime example, she explained, "It's an economic stimulator as well as a farmers' market because it brings in foot traffic who will also shop in the area."

Many shoppers don't just come for the market, verified Santa Monica Market Manager DeVenanzio, "They do many things the same day, such as lunch and shop in downtown."

Unfortunately, however, not all the markets have been economic stimulators, or even successful. In fact there were some setbacks in 1987: markets closed in Torrance and Monterey Park due to a lack of community support. The markets are non-profit entities each launched with the backing of community organizations or a local government body, and they can't survive without continuing support.

In other words, it's up to each community to make its market work—so the setbacks in 1987 have not daunted the aspirations and confidence of several cities that are looking to open markets this year: plans are on the drawing board in Lynwood, Lakewood, Agoura and Long Beach, which already has two markets.

One hurdle all the markets face on a continuous basis, though, is a lack of funds to publicize themselves—in a society that lives and dies by advertising and promotion. Farmers pay a small percentage (generally four to six percent of their sales receipts) to the market to cover costs. But after the market manager, liability insurance and other bills are paid, there's usually little or nothing left for promotion. The individual markets—and the 14 members of SFMA who also promote as a group—can do little more than run an occasional ad in a local paper or distribute a few flyers.

Instead, they rely on their customers to spread the word. Echoing the comments of other market managers, Betty Hamilton, co-manager of Victory market, said, "Our best advertising is still word-of-mouth—if people go home and tell their friends about us. And stories in newspapers help much more than flyers or ads."

"We try to tailor our growing to what people like," said Helen Sakata of Redlands, adding that she varies her product mix according to the market.

Sakata is one of many farmers who go to as many as four, five or more markets a week across the Southland. They are usually the life-long farmers, running the fast-paced stands piled with mounds of varied greens and fruits. They pull up with the bigger trucks and often have a hand or two from the farm along to help sell. As the buying frenzy around their stands slows toward the end of the market, they also are the ones heard shouting out special close-out deals, such as "Buy one celery, get one free!"

In contrast to the life-long farmers is a new breed of farmer that in large part has grown up with the markets—those who left the stressful city workplace behind to get back to the land.

Joe Avitua, of the Lester Kirksey farm in Exeter, Tulare County, dropped out of law school, "because it was boring. I decided to go back to my parents' ranch and then later went to work at the Kirksey farm. It's more interesting and less stressful."

Jim Barnes, the "olive man" from Lindsay in the Bakersfield area, left behind his training as an opthalmic technician (eyeglass maker)—and is happy he did. "I'm a people person and I love to see my regular customers as well as new faces to share religion, philosophy, even stock market tips," he said, his jars of olive oil and olives (pickled, with garlic, etc.) stacked in front of him at Victory market. He also said he feels "so much healthier eating fresh farm foods. There's nothing like going into a field, tearing off a stalk and eating raw corn. You never had anything so sweet in your life!"

Joan Kaplan, the "sprout lady" from Altadena, was a teacher for eight years who "wanted to do something more basic, something organic. Teaching is stressful anyway and I was working at an inner city school. Now I make a living providing healthy food for people." She has been at it for seven years, goes to four or five markets a week and grows 14 different varieties from sunflower to radish sprouts.

Cover Story

Your Guide to Area Certified Farmers' Markets:

Burbank—First and Magnolia Streets—Fridays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
Compton—Alameda Street at Compton Boulevard—Fridays, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
Costa Mesa—88 Fair Drive—Tuesdays, 9 a.m.-1 p.m., and Thursdays, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.
Crenshaw—4401 Crenshaw Boulevard—Sundays, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.
Fullerton—Corner of Orangethorpe at Richmond—Wednesdays, 10:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.
Inglewood—Locust Street, near Regent and Manchester—Saturdays, 1-5 p.m.
Long Beach—Cedar Avenue near Broadway and Third Street—Fridays, noon-5 p.m.
Long Beach—1432 West Adams at Vermont Avenue—Wednesdays, 2-5 p.m.
Orange—Junction of Glassell and the Garden Grove Freeway—Tuesdays, 9:30 a.m.-2 p.m.
Pasadena—100 N. Garfield—Thursdays, 4-7 p.m.
Pasadena—Paloma and Sierra Madre—Saturdays, 9 a.m.-noon
Pasadena—363 East Villa Street—Tuesdays, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.
Redondo Beach—400 North Francisca Avenue at Beryl—Thursdays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.
San Pedro—Third Street at Mesa—Thursdays, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.
Santa Monica—Arizona Avenue near Second Street—Wednesdays, 2-8 p.m.
West Hollywood—7377 Santa Monica Boulevard—Mondays, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

–From the Dept. of Food and Agriculture, 1987