

San Francisco's Ferry Plaza Farmers Market and

Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture

By David Hess

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The Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, located outside the historic Ferry Building on the Embarcadero at the foot of San Francisco's Market Street, is the largest farmers' market in San Francisco. It has about 80-100 vendors, depending on the season, and it operates four days per week during peak season. The Ferry building itself is an active terminal for commuter boat service in the Bay area, and it has been renovated so that the bottom floor contains upscale food stores and restaurants, some of which sell organic products and food grown on regional farms. Ferry boat passengers mix with tourists and downtown workers to come to the building for lunch and shopping. On some market days, there is also a craft fair where several dozen local vendors sell jewelry and other products. Although the farmers' market has no formal relationship with the food hall and the vendors' market, it exists in a unique synergetic relationship with them. In fact, the company that was redeveloping the Ferry building asked the farmers' market to relocate to the building as part of the redevelopment effort.

The farmers' market is operated by the nonprofit organization Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture (CUESA), and it leases office space from a development firm that runs the Ferry Building. In addition to running the farmers' market, CUESA sponsors educational programs in schools, cooking programs, book signings, farm tours, workshops, panel discussions, and other activities designed to educate consumers about the value of local, sustainable agriculture. CUESA was founded by Sybella Kraus, a former cook at Chez Panisse.

Dexter Carmichael, the Director of Operations at CUESA, worked with her and now runs the farmers' market. He explained the history of the farmers' market. "I met Sybella in the early 1980s, when she was working on a farm restaurant project with Alice Waters at Chez Panisse. She founded the Farm Restaurant Project, which connected farmers with restaurants in the region. In the early 1990s, she started the San Francisco Public Market Collaborative and the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market. In 1993 they held a farmers' market here at the foot of Market Street, after the Embarcadero had been torn down. This was the first event that gave San Franciscans the potential of the waterfront, which had been left to wither. This one-day market was such a success that in 1994 she worked with the city and the port to set up a regular market. From 1994 to 1998 it was here at the foot of Market St., then from 1998 to 2003 it was at Green and Embarcadero, and then with the redevelopment of the Ferry Building it has moved down to the Ferry Building here.

"Events that came out of the farmers' market were Shop with the Chef, Cooking with Kids, and Meet the Producer, and these led to the realization that there was an

educational potential for the market. Initially the farmers' market was the central aspect of the organization, and when Sybella saw that there was further possibility in helping smaller farmers and developing educational programs—the two integral parts of our mission—that's when CUESA came about. In order to run a farmers' market in California, under the direct marketing rules, it needs to be run by a group of farmers, a community-based organization, a city government, or a nonprofit organization. The San Francisco Public Market Collaborative was then brought under CUESA. Its board of directors runs from interested farmers to food aficionados in the city, restaurateurs, some academics from Berkeley and Davis, and people in the community who are interested in food.”

One of the values of shopping at a farmers' market is buying fresh, local produce, but in some farmers' markets across the country there has been a problem of vendors who operate as retailers for nonlocal producers. The Ferry Plaza Farmers Market is a California certified market, which is not to be confused with organic certification. A California certified market means that the vendors are all certified to be growers from within the state who are not engaging in resale of food purchased elsewhere. The county agricultural departments certify farms based on visits to the farm, and they also certify farmers' markets as well. As Carmichael explained, “Under the direct marketing laws, I can pull from anywhere in the state. Most of my growers, say 50 to 60%, are within a two hour area of San Francisco. Because of the breadth of agricultural products here in the state, I'll pull citrus or dates from near the Mexican border, and in the summer I can get stone fruit like cherries from near the Oregon border. Several of the growers also operate CSAs and promote them through the market.”

Low-Income Issues and Sustainability

On the issue of low-income access, Carmichael said that they faced these issues in various ways throughout the organization's history. “We also started a Tuesday market that was really a market for the workers here. You realized that there was a significant market here for them to come and buy. There was also an interest in expanding markets to other areas of the city, especially low-income areas like the Mission and Bayview/Hunters Point. Those never got off the ground because of the focus on expanding the education into the core group of people who were coming to our markets. At this time I think we've appealed to a broad cross-section, and as market manager I've tried to maintain a mix that serves a broad range of the public here in San Francisco. I think the perception—and this is a change that has happened—is that this is a very high-end market. This is where we run into that odd dichotomy of trying to get the farmers into the urban area to get them to connect to the populace that is interested in food, but at the same time provide them with a return for their product, and they get a good percent.

“I have about 50-60% organic, and this involves another issue, which is the broad interpretation of what is 'sustainable.' Within our board, staff, customers, farmers, and even within the city government there are all sorts of opinions about what is sustainable. So you run into a whole number of issues that are astounding, although they can't be overcome. For example, you have a city that has become gentrified over the last twenty-five years to a significant degree. You have a base of customers that is fairly well-to-do relative to all farmers' markets in the area. Hence, we have some expensive prices for

some of the rare products that you won't see elsewhere. This is probably not the most ethnic-based market, but it is the largest in the city in terms of the volume of traffic and number of farmers, although Alemany may at times be of similar size.

“We do have programs here, such as WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and electronic benefits transfers. They come in with an electronic transfer and we give them, say \$40 in chips, which all the farmers accept. They turn them back into CUESA, and we subtract it from their billing. We encourage the use of these coupons and electronic transfers, and we ask that all farmers accept them as readily as cash. I really try to dispel the perception that we're this yuppie market, and I also think that the demand for low-cost food in this country is missing the understanding of what sustainable, local, and organic means.”

Policy Issues and Recommendations

One of the key problems that Carmichael has identified is that he is losing farmers, and it is very difficult to attract new people into farming. “The direct marketing law and producers' certificate allowed a large number of small farmers to expand and to have alternative markets where they could directly sell to the public. We want to continue with that and to expand those opportunities. We need to open it up more within the state to broaden how farmers can sell to increase opportunities for growers. There is a small number of small family farmers, and they aren't increasing. I'd love to see an increase, and to see opportunities for kids in inner city areas, or rural areas, to go out and grow and learn how to have opportunities in that market.

“That would probably require significant land reform, which very few countries see. I'm losing farmers via attrition. It's an eight-day-a-week job. My job is easy compared to theirs. I know they enjoy it, but it's tough on them. Who are the young people who are going to replace them? Their children, perhaps, but I think a lot of the farmers might tell them to go into something else. So I'm wondering where this new generation of growers will come from. The state law limits non-corporate farming to 900 acres or so for a family. If we're really concerned about the security of our food system, we need to open up opportunities for people to go out there and farm.”

In addition to expanding the limit on acreage for family farms, Carmichael identified schools as another area where opportunities could be expanded for small farmers. “We may be maxed out on farmers' markets, especially in relatively well-to-do areas like the Bay Area or Southern California. They are saturated in these communities. There needs to be integration into schools, where local growers could sell non-standardized packs into local community schools. If we're talking about health and access of food, schools could be a place where we could see an impact.” As a future site for expansion, direct farm-to-school programs would synthesize CUESA's mission of education, expanding opportunities for farmers, and connecting people with healthy, fresh, sustainable food sources.

Web site:

www.cuesa.org

Sources:

Interview by David Hess of Dexter Carmichael, March 9, 2005.

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