

When Old South Meets New at the Farmers Market

Written by Debra Madaris Efirid

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Having lived in Harrisburg since 1987 does not qualify me for native status, but my twenty-plus years here have given me an appreciation of my little town perched on the broad shoulder of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Though I have witnessed its population grow exponentially, there is little likelihood that anyone will ever confuse my Harrisburg with the Pennsylvania city of the same name. However, at one point the boom of newcomers did have me worrying that the town would lose its tenuous link to its rural past. This fear was quelled in the spring of 2006 with the establishment of an old-fashioned Farmers Market. In a shady haven by the railroad tracks, barely removed from the busy highway dissecting the town, the people of Harrisburg began to come together to experience an inescapable juxtaposition of Old South and New.

During the Piedmont's protracted growing season, the Farmers Market presents a weekly opportunity for the community's newer residents to mingle with local farmers whose families have tilled the land for generations. With repeated visits, they often become attached to specific vendors, and the farmers in turn depend on the loyalty of their regular buyers. In conducting commerce at the Farmers Market, all of us help keep farming a viable occupation, continuing a long cycle of agricultural connection across the South.

Visiting the Farmers Market makes me realize that life has spun full circle, with food shopping moving from the original outdoor markets to sanitized grocery stores designed for speed and now back again to tranquil open-air settings. Parking is on a grassy field instead of a scorching sea of asphalt. Merchandise lines both sides of a roughly graveled dirt road under a canopy of cool shade trees in place of cart-clogged aisles in an icy air-conditioned store. Produce is pulled from the back of pickup trucks onto wobbly tables, not stacked on the usual counters under fake thundershowers. Dollar bills exchange hands, with real people figuring how to make change since there are no cash registers. Instead of matching shirts with nametags, vendors wear whatever they want, sharing only a smile as their uniform.

But it's not just the pleasant environment of satisfied buyers and friendly sellers that coaxes me to the outdoor market. Beneath the cheerful banter of shoppers and farmers, I sense a mysterious undercurrent of messages from the produce itself. Cucumbers, zucchini, squash, tomatoes, and corn on the cob seem to beckon for customers to buy them. Jars of prepared foods such as salsa, chowchow, and jellies shine in colorful rows, with a sign pleading, "Come have a sample." Bushel baskets of luscious apples and peaches cascade from tables, easily enticing purchase. Baked goods catch the eye of children, who skip about seeking the most mouth-watering sweets. Bright fresh flowers, swaying in tall buckets of water, beg to be carried to my kitchen table. Hand-crafted tote bags, aprons, and seasonal wreaths tempt browsers to examine their clever designs. To me, it's a magical bazaar.

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As I wander through the marketplace, I find the laid-back atmosphere infectious. People amble instead of scurry, meander instead of dash. Whereas standing in line at the grocery store often leads to impatient remarks, waiting customers at the Farmers Market engage in genial chitchat. The air is filled with a *mélange* of sound, the sharp tempo of Northern speech swirling with the lilting cadence of the Southern-born. Here and there my ears perk to the sound of international accents. Visitors, curious about unfamiliar produce, linger by the displays and show true interest in the merchandise. Questions are posed with no condescension; answers are given with no derision. The farmers understand that it is not the old Harrisburg, and newcomers appreciate the jewel they have discovered.

Other treats awaits Harrisburg market visitors before they leave laden with their goods. Those with small children often take free rides on the miniature train that travels a wide loop around a bucolic pond and through a patch of woods. Some visitors enjoy taking a peek at the restored post office/store/depot sitting adjacent to the real train tracks. Vintage rocking chairs on the porch allow shoppers to rest, and perhaps in a few minutes they'll experience a genuine life-sized train up close and personal. Inside the refurbished building, gleaming wood floors creak a bit as visitors explore. An appealing wood stove claims the middle of the main room. Artwork from local young students and adults, as well, fills shelves and walls. In the smaller room one can snoop through the old post office boxes stuffed with aged maps, news articles, and recipes from generations before. Stepping outside, long time residents reminisce about when Harrisburg was a sleepy Southern village not too long ago, and newcomers have formed a bond with the town's history.

The Farmers Market is not just a trendy alternative spot to buy vegetables. It's a bridge to the past, linking the Old South with the New. It's an inviting place, one that sparks friendships that overcome differences in customs and cultures. As I stroll down that sun-dappled lane, I feel lucky to call Harrisburg home.