

LE MARCHÉ ST. NORBERT FARMERS' MARKET

A Truly Local Farmer's Market



Photo Credit: Folks Film

Who is St. Norbert Farmers' Market?

An Interview with Marilyn Firth

MCA had the pleasure of interviewing Marilyn Firth, the Executive Director of Le Marché St. Norbert Farmers' Market, who shed light on just how unique their market is and what it means for them to be a cooperative. The St. Norbert Farmer's Market is a producer co-op, which is sometimes also known as a marketing co-op, formed in 1988 and consisting of approximately 400 members (200 that are currently active). They are a non-profit cooperative committed to supporting the province's small producers. The mandate of St. Norbert Farmers' Market is to "provide a marketing opportunity for small producers in a cooperative environment." Their motto: "we make it, bake it, and grow it for YOU!"

The first St. Norbert Farmers' Market was held on July 16, 1988. On that sunny day, over three decades ago, 8 vendors gathered on the grass to sell their wares, with no canopies or parking lot, and little to no fanfare. The mood was local even then: it was a "make it, bake it, grow it" market, supporting local producers. Since that first successful year, the market has grown by leaps and bounds. At St. Norbert Farmers' Market, everything you see is made right here in Manitoba - you can talk to the person who grew your dinner, meet the baker and the soap maker. You can sample cookies, honey and cantaloupe while enjoying music from entertainers and buskers. Browse craft stalls that carry everything from wooden toys and leather purses to outdoor furniture, creative metal works and fine jewelry. The market is an important community gathering place, a source of pride for Manitoba's residents. This is Manitoba's largest farmers' market, where they're always local, and always fresh!

Pandemic Adaptations

As explained by Marilyn, "We do always focus on the 7 co-op principles. We strive to engage with our members. We hold an annual general meeting where our members vote on issues of concern. Our market runs with a 7 member volunteer board of directors - they must be active members and engaged in the market on a current basis. Our longest running board member is 31 years. Board members are re-elected on a 2 year cycle and are elected by the membership. Financially, we are very determined to be self-supporting meaning that the only time we seek out external funding is for something like a capital project. In the past 7-8 years we have done quite a bit of infrastructure work at the market to make it a more enjoyable place. So for those types of big structural projects we simply don't have the financial capacity to build them on our own - so we will try to seek government or private funding. But on the operational side of business we are fully self-funded. We are very determined to remain self-funded because it ensures autonomy and that we don't have to rely on potentially precarious external funding for staffing."

"The pandemic was very difficult. We were determined from the beginning to stay open and remain as an essential outlet for Manitobans, unless we were told by the government that we needed to shut down. If grocery stores were allowed to remain open, then we should be able to as well. We felt it was very important to offer Manitobans locally produced products, especially food, and to highlight that farmer's markets hold a very important place as a community space for those consumers to access local products."

"At the beginning of the pandemic, we offered an online market within weeks. We were able to get that up and running fairly quickly because we had operated an online market in the past, between 2014 and 2017. Our Online Market has been quite successful for us."

"One of the most difficult aspects of the pandemic for us is that we pride ourselves on being a community gathering place and encourage families to come out. But during the pandemic we asked people to try and come in alone or in pairs, instead of bringing the entire family. That's a huge challenge. We are trying to welcome our customers, but cannot offer that community gathering space as we usually do. It's a difficult message that we have had to express."

"We had to hire a lot of new staff just to keep up with the regulations and make sure that sanitary measures were in place. We've never had to fence off the entire grounds before, or metre entry. The pandemic added a lot of labor costs, though we did get some financial support for that. We tried to make sure our membership had as many opportunities to sell their products as possible. For example, we lowered their fees and expanded the number of spaces that were open. We actually ran more days than ever during the pandemic because we couldn't put as many vendors inside the building during one time. We ran more days of the year so we could swap vendors out."



What Makes the Market Unique?

"I think one of the most important aspects of our market is that we are completely local. The word local gets thrown around a lot. What does it truly mean to be local? Our market is completely a "make it, bake it, grow it" Manitoba market. You cannot sell at our market unless you are producing it yourself. If you are a crafter or a farmer or a baker, you can't just send a staff person to sell that work on your behalf, you have to be there physically at the market, representing yourself. For example, on a 120 vendors market day, everyone selling is local, representing our Manitoba community, culture and showing what can be done in this province. Every tourist should want to come to our market to see what is happening because it is an amazing picture of the variety, depth and creative ideas that come in, completely produced here in our province. If you want to support the place you live in, a farmer's market should be all local. For Manitoba, it's normal for a farmers' market to be mostly local, but this isn't as common or typical across Canada as you might think. I don't think many Manitobans realize that many other farmers' markets in other Canadian provinces are not like this. To me, it's a little jewel that needs to be tapped into! It connects us in an irrevocable way with who we are and how we are represented as a province."



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Membership Rules

Membership in St. Norbert's Co-op

"Our board of directors, which is our 7 volunteers from our active membership, meet about 12 times a year, so once a month. The annual general meeting is held once a year. At that point, we bring all of our members together, whether they are active or non-active - they're all invited to come. All of our members pay a lifelong membership fee of \$5.00 when they join our market and at that point they get voting rights at our annual general meeting. Some of the things we discuss at the annual general meeting are approving fees for the year, or anything of significance that is affecting market activities. Anytime you take on big projects, you want to ensure your members are on board and understand the parameters of what will happen. We will create a plan and then bring it to the annual meeting to see if the members approve of it and discuss any concerns. We engage them on bigger issues, not the day to day small details. We also try to provide some sort of an educational component at our annual general meetings. So, for example, we might have a topic such as how to market well, or how to use social media to better market your products to the public. We also always invite our Public Health Inspector, so our vendors have the opportunity to ask questions about updates and changes."



"It is important to know that our membership draws from all over the province. We are a geographically large province and some of our members drive in 1.5 hours for every market. To get people together is challenging. We don't try to bring our members in often for meetings outside of the annual general meeting, because some live very far away."

"In the past couple of years I've been weighing the question of what it truly means to be part of a cooperative. I think it's important to remind our members that they are a part of a co-op, that it's more than just coming together to vend: it's having ownership in the organization. You can kind of slip out of the habit of engaging your membership in that kind of way as it grows over time. It's important that members understand that they have a voice. We want to hear what their concerns and ideas are, and for them to understand that their engagement matters."