

# Market power

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## **From small beginnings, farmers' markets are more sophisticated, accountable and popular than ever, writes Jane Willson.**

Bronwyn and Michael Cowan embraced them to save the rare-breed large black pig. Rod and Meg Blake made it their business when water restrictions hit and they needed to diversify.

Nicholas and Fiona Chambers made the strategic move after a decade negotiating export markets and the myopic world of supermarkets. Allen and Lizette Snaith tired of putting their heart and soul into a product that didn't even return the cost of production on sale day.

Visit any one of Victoria's 70-plus farmers' markets, and it is stallholders with stories like these that you will meet. Passionate, hard workers who have opted out — or are cultivating alternatives — to the producer-wholesaler-retailer system of food distribution that most of us have grown up with and take for granted.

The Cowans say that when they started at their first Victorian market, Cardinia Ranges in 2004, people had stopped eating pork "because of lack of taste". The years since, as stallholders on at least three weekends out of four, have been about education.

The couple breed large blacks, Wessex saddlebacks, Berkshires and Tamworths on their 40-hectare property at Darnum about 100 kilometres south-east of Melbourne. Unlike the factory-farmed pork that consumers have grown used to, the pigs are slow-growing, hormone-free, roam in paddocks, and have coloured hair.

"[In the wholesale meat trade] black hair was pushed as a downside, and meant people selling coloured pigs would get a fraction of what they were really worth," says Bronwyn, who trades as The Gypsy Pig.

"Farmers' markets have been ideal, because you have a shopper who appreciates the time and effort you have put in to get the meat to market.

It's an interchange experience." It's an experience more people are choosing, motivated by the ever-growing emphasis on food provenance, seasonality, food miles and the acclaim bestowed by chefs on their producers. Tallying exact numbers of farmers' markets is difficult because they are not obliged to register. But the Victorian Farmers' Markets Association says there are now about 20 city and country markets drawing 40,000-plus people every weekend. It estimates customers spend on average \$50 each, or \$100 million a year combined.

From last month, 14 Victorian markets were accredited, the first in Australia under a system devised by the VFMA to offer a gauge of authenticity. President Miranda Sharp says it is about assuring shoppers that the person they are buying from grew or made the produce.

It makes it harder for the bloke who buys cheap bananas at the wholesale market to pass them off, for a pretty premium, as his own. Sharp says 10 more markets are in the process of applying, and nine are expected to follow.

The system, subsidised by a \$160,000 Regional Development Victoria grant, kicked off late last year when the first stallholders were accredited. More than 400 now have the tick after a rigorous application process that includes random site inspections by an independent assessment panel.

Sharp says there has been a push since as early as 2005 from stallholders to create some means of authenticity. Most, she says, are just "bloody hardworking people who are trying to eke out a living, doing it on a shoestring".

Cattle farmer Allen Snaith refers to his accreditation documents as his badge of honour. “With accreditation comes authenticity,” says Snaith, whose business Warialda is at eight markets each month. “All of our endeavours can be destroyed by a few dodgy operators.” Jane Adams, one of the pioneers of farmers’ markets in Australia, believes authenticity is part of maturity. “In the early stages, my reaction was to embrace everyone,” says Adams, the Sydney-based president of the Australian Farmers Markets Association. “Now, I ask the harder questions; tokenism is not going to encourage sustainable farmers’ markets.” In 1998, Adams took up a Geoffrey Roberts fellowship to study the then well-established farmers’ market movement in the US. She returned inspired, but believes the turning point in Australia did not come until May 21, 2002. Adams can be that precise because that was the date of a Bulletin cover story, “The real food revolution — how growers’ markets are changing the way we eat”.

“That gave what I was doing a legitimacy that I couldn’t have paid for,” says Adams. The story listed 20 markets in Australia, two of them in Victoria: South Gippsland and Yarra Valley. Today, she estimates there are 130 nationally.

In October 2002, Sharp started the Collingwood Children’s Farm market, now part of a network of four thriving city markets. From 8am on the second Saturday each month, shoppers flock to this idyllic Yarra River location for Blakey’s organics, Di’s rhubarb, Maffra cheese, real meat, a fix of country community, and the cold-morning pick-me-up that is the Farmers’ Breakfast.

Rod “Blakey” Blake, from Bellellen Organics, near Stawell, talks in numbers. He says that by 10am on a good day at Collingwood, up to 3000 people have passed through the gate.

“If I only see 10 per cent of them, and they pay me \$5 — well, you know what I mean, mate,” he says.

Blakey, like many stallholders, has experienced the frustration of dealing with supermarkets. In his first year, he was receiving 80¢ for onions that retailed for \$1.10. “The next year, they said, ‘Blakey, you’ve got to come under the umbrella — how does 50¢ sound?’ ” There is a perception — indeed a reality in some cases — that shoppers pay a premium at farmers’ markets.

When this is raised with stallholders, their response is invariably the same. First, what are you comparing us to? And second, do people want to have a say in how the food they put on their plate is produced — or not?

Fernleigh Farms’ Fiona Chambers says customers often comment that her free-range meat and seasonal organic vegetables are cheap. “[But] If you say expensive compared with supermarkets, I would say probably, yes, but they are operating within a completely different food distribution system.” Fiona’s husband Nicholas says it’s about putting a true value on food: “I mean 90 per cent of meat in supermarkets is put through feedlots and whacked up on hormones.” Bronwyn Cowan talks pragmatically in terms of selling to “people who can afford to make food choices”. “But we say to people, just eat less meat — a smaller portion —and really enjoy it. My pork is in the paddock on Monday and sold in the market on Saturday. You couldn’t get that under any other system.” Simone Gordon manages Melbourne’s second only weekly market. “Up until Mulgrave [the first weekly, which is 12 months old] many people saw farmers’ markets as something you would go to once a month,” says Gordon, who helps administer the VFMA’s accreditation system, and raised the flag on the Melbourne Showgrounds market a little over two months ago.

She has a revolving roster of 30 producers and is getting the message out there that, yes, this can work as an alternative to the supermarket or, indeed, conventional market involving a middle-man.

The good markets, says farmer Fiona Chambers, get the delicate balance right between producers and consumers. “The market manager plays such an important role in trying to keep that balance.” Adams concurs, suggesting the measure of a market is not how many stallholders it has, but rather the diversity it offers. She says the hot issue in New South Wales is recruiting producers (“community and consumer demand is so high”). Looking back, Adams notes that nobody was talking about food miles in the late 1990s. “[US writer] Michael Pollan had never been heard of; food miles, carbon footprints, the whole

environment debate hadn't happened," she says. "That has been a huge impetus for farmers' markets.

It's a grassroots movement that's really taken hold, there's nothing faddish about them — they're here to stay." Still, no one suggests the work is done. Sharp wants farmers' markets in every community: "We have to break down the perception of it being an elite thing, or something people can't afford." Gordon ups the ante. She says supporting farmers' markets is something people who care about an agriculture industry in Australia can't afford not to do.

## **MEET THE PRODUCERS**

### **Allen and Lizette Snaith**

It is three decades this year since Allen Snaith and his wife Lizette started farming belted galloways, a cattle breed originating in Galloway, Scotland. He chose "belties" because he liked them — and because he thought it would motivate him to do things differently.

It was something he says his farmer brother found difficult to explain to his pub mates, but it was a decision made having experienced how unforgiving the market and weather could be.

From 1984, the couple ran a successful meat delivery system, selling sides of their beef to families in Melbourne, and at the high point in 2000 they had 25 families taking 1 side a year in bulk-pack form.

But the other half of the meat produced on their Clonbinane property went through the saleyards or "over the hooks". They did not recoup the cost of production. He says their breeding animals were no different, because they weren't mainstream. " 'Bad luck, Snaithy', the agents would say, 'Prices were down on the day'," Snaith recalls. "I always seemed to pick the one bad day."

Farmers' markets came along at the right time. Snaith says it has allowed them to deal direct with their customers and now represents 75-80 per cent of business. The rest goes to restaurants. His live cattle sales have also doubled in the past five years. "Mostly to breeders who now see the true value of the animal in the meat," he says.

There is invariably a queue at the Snaiths' stall. Yes, it is a good product, but it is also because they spend so much time talking to customers about how to cook it. He loves that interface: "When I stand under my accreditation sign and tell the mother who is looking at me in the eye, with her two kids by her side, that there is definitely no preservatives or milk solids in my sausages, would I lie?"

### **Fiona and Nicholas Chambers**

A Churchill Fellowship in 2003 changed Fiona Chambers' thinking. She stopped in 12 countries in as many weeks and was blown away by the direction of farmers' markets in Europe and the US.

Fiona returned to the farm she runs with husband Nicholas at Bullarto near Daylesford, posing curly questions such as: "When is organic food no longer organic because of food miles?" Their business, Fernleigh Farms, was supplying Coles nationally and exporting to Asia.

The couple's first farmers' market, at Lancefield, followed soon after and a slow phase-out from supermarkets began. Seven years later, the withdrawal is complete and their free-range, organic meat and vegetable business is now a 10/30/60 split of farm gate, farmers' markets and retailers/restaurants.

Fiona says the most significant benefit for their business has been diversification; smaller scales can be economic, and that means their farm is more sustainable.

She describes the markets they attend — Fernleigh Farms is still at Lancefield on the fourth Saturday every month, along with a roster of others that can require them to be in two places at once — as "just a lovely environment to work in", where there is a community of fellow stallholders and shoppers.

Nicholas says farmers' markets represent only a small percentage of the buying public and most consumers "don't actually get it". But he also offers the story of a couple who do. "A few guys at Geelong always give us a tip . . . if it's \$95, they give us \$100." It is resisted but Nicholas says they insist. "They say, 'We appreciate what you're doing, and we want to make it worth your while'."

### **John Howell**

John Howell's apples are not always the best lookers but they win the taste test.

Howell is a fifth-generation, mixed-fruit grower based on about six hectares at Wandin North. He left school at 15 and joined his father's wholesale business, but when that was sold in 1991, Howell says he struggled.

"I tried selling through other wholesalers, but the returns really weren't satisfactory."

In 1999, he started selling plums, figs, apples, persimmons, quinces, pears and cherries at craft markets. Interest was high; turnover less so.

The turning point was St Kilda's Veg Out market in 2002. Howell kept the wholesale side going until a couple of years ago, but he now generates the business's entire income from the 11 farmers' markets he — or one of his three children — attend each month.

"I'm now replanting with products that will sell well at farmers' markets — apples and lemons, for example," he says. "It's more profitable and much more satisfying." And, unlike supermarkets, his customers do not tend to quibble over the product's looks. "It doesn't affect taste."

## **WHY FARMERS' MARKETS?**

### **For consumers**

- Buy fresh, just-picked, seasonal foods.
- Talk to the producer. How has it be grown? How do I cook it? If it is meat, what is the cheapest/most efficacious cut for my recipe?
- Quality.
- Comeback. Rare to find a producer who does not welcome feedback.
- Limits food miles, less packaging and cold storage.
- Access to heirloom varieties that do not have a hope in industrial food system.
- Reverses trend for food industry dominance by big, bottom-line-driven manufacturers and imports.
- Changes the way you shop, inspiring customers by what is available.
- Helps strengthen local economies, particularly in regional areas.

### **For producers**

- Supports diversification, smaller scales, more sustainable farm practices.
- Cash flow.
- Offers marketplace for rare breeds.
- Build brand awareness.
- Meet chefs.

Story from: <http://www.theage.com.au/small-business/managing/market-power-20100629-zgi1.html>