

Farmers Market builds on 20 years of tradition

IT'S an early Saturday morning in Albany and the sun has only just risen. The streets are mostly quiet, but if you are out for an early morning walk you might notice the movement of vehicles – cars with trailers, trucks and vans – heading towards Collie Street in the heart of town.

As they pull into an empty carpark a transformation begins. Crates are unloaded, marquees pop up, rows of fresh produce are arranged and the smell of freshly brewed coffee is in the air as the weekly Albany Farmers Market gets underway.

By 8am, the market is starting to buzz. Customers are lined up in front of their favourite stalls when the market bell is rung to signal the start of trading, just as it has more than 1,000 times over the course of almost 20 years.

The first Albany Farmers Market was held in 2002 in a carpark on Aberdeen Street with 13 stallholders in attendance. However, the popularity of the markets grew rapidly as consumers enthusiastically embraced the chance to buy direct from local farms and the number of stallholders doubled within the year.

Eventually, the market moved to its current location on Collie Street where it has been popping up every Saturday ever since.

In fact, there has only been one week since the beginning that the market didn't trade. This was during the ANZAC centenary celebrations in Albany when security arrangements and street closures meant it had to be cancelled.

This dedication to service the people of Albany every week has been a key to the market's success. As a result there is a loyal following of "regulars" who know the market will be open "rain, hail or shine" and turn up in hats or raincoats as needed.

From the very start, Albany Farmers Market aimed to be an "authentic" farmers market – that is, a predominantly fresh food market where local farmers and producers can sell what they have grown, reared, caught or made themselves in the Great Southern region.

The stallholders are also encouraged to value-add to their own produce, and this has led to an array of locally

RUTH SPELDEWINDE, coordinator of the Albany Farmers Market, ponders a sunny Saturday morning at the iconic gathering and its importance to the Great Southern.



manufactured products including jams, sauces, pickles, icecream and dried fruits.

This focus on fresh, local food is the main point of difference from other markets in town. A visit to Albany Farmers Market is an authentic local food experience, which has also placed it firmly on the map as a tourist destination.

Being part of events such as Taste Great Southern has attracted celebrity chefs and media, all of which has helped to raise the profile of our local food producers and the town itself.

An important part of the ethos of the market is that the people who grow or produce the food also sell the food. The customers and stallholders get to know each other and a relationship is formed which brings loyalty on both sides.

Ron and Suzanne Watkins of Payneham Vale Organics have been part of the markets since the beginning and it is the friendships they have formed with customers that have kept them coming back all these years.

Ron explains that even on the coldest mornings in winter he is motivated to show up at the market because he couldn't bear to let his customers down.

He knows they will be there to support his business and they expect to see him on the other side of the table. But he is quick to emphasise that it is about far more than just doing business, as it is the sense of community and friendship that people find at the market that is the secret to its success.

Ron and Suzanne say that they have built many friendships with their customers and it is the weekly contact that they will miss the most when they eventually retire from the market.

In fact, speak to any of the stallholders about what motivates them to turn up each week and the first thing they

say is that it is the chance to connect directly with their customers.

Stallholder Andrew Bathgate and wife Jocelyn run a busy year-round stall selling vegetables grown at their Cuthbert farm.

Like many of the stallholders, supplying the markets is just one arm of their business, but it provides a unique way of doing business.

"Selling direct really motivates you to grow and present the best possible product to people," says Andrew.

"There's a lot of hard work involved, but we enjoy the social side of the market – it's good fun," he says.

Malcolm Traill and Heather Marr run Summerhouse Supplies, selling condiments and baked goods and have been involved since the early days. They left the market in 2014, but returned after four years.

"We were away from 14-18, the war years," jokes Malcolm who is also a local historian, "but we were here every week having coffee and socialising so eventually we thought we may as well start trading again."

"We found that we missed it, and we've been here ever since."

Bred Co is another local business which has returned to the market. While they took a break last year to focus on opening their now highly successful bakery and café, owner Rhiannon Moon says they always wanted to come back to the market.

"It's where we really got our start," she says. "It was the market customers who really supported what we were doing and got behind us in the beginning, and we just miss being part of it."

As the morning wears on you can see these connections in action as everywhere there are customers and stallholders exchanging greetings, chatting and bantering.

It is the welcoming atmosphere that draws people like Claudia and Erik who

■ Cousins Clint and Zac Mostert with another stall filled with amazing fresh produce.



travel from out of town to the market every week. They moved to Australia from Germany a few years ago and are currently living and working on a farm in Borden.

It's an hour-long trip to town, but they have made a visit to the farmers market part of their Saturday morning routine.



“It is so important to us to come to the market”, says Claudia. “We want to support small farms as we know first-hand the hard work involved to grow, harvest and pack fresh food and bring it to market.”
While it was the chance to buy fresh, local produce that drew them to the

market, they explain that they like to chat to the stallholders and enjoy the atmosphere,. They now feel part of the community and look forward to seeing everyone.
The market has helped them to feel at home in a new place.
The last few years has seen a



■ Enthusiastic customers Claudia and Erik make the weekly trip from Borden to stock up on their favourite produce.

“changing of the guard”, as most of the founding members who were still involved with the market have retired, as did long-serving market coordinator Ian Haines who was in the role for 18 years.
Along with many others, these were the people who did the hard work of establishing the farmers market and keeping it true to its aims. The solid foundation created has seen the market through many ups and downs, including

the recent challenge of COVID.
However, what at first seemed to threaten the continuation of the market ultimately resulted in a resurgence in interest in locally grown food as customers sought to buy healthy produce close to home with the bonus of being able to shop outdoors.
As the last of the founding members, Ron and Suzanne Watkins, prepare to retire from the market next

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■ Brian Hart with yoghurt from his Redmond dairy, Yard 86.



month it is heartening to have so many young farmers involved. Steven Piacun grows vegetables and runs an egg business and partners with mum Ann to run their stall each week.

Laura and Brian Hart are siblings who are making their mark with products from their family-owned dairy, Yard 86.

Clint Mostert is carving out his own niche in his family vegetable-growing business, helping his parents to run their market stall and creating some fun with his “teenage carrots”.

The markets is also a family affair for the Theron family whose children help out weekly at their Gloria Dieu stall selling prime lamb and apricots, and Bornholm growers Jeni and daughter Lucy who sell macadamias and avocados when in season.

For these families, farming and the markets are part of building a future for their children.

There’s also those who have been attracted back to Albany to work in the family business. Gina Soumelidis didn’t think she would ever move back to Albany, but after completing her university studies she has returned to work with her parents in their business, Great Southern Seafoods, and run their stall at the market



■ Steven Piacun with some of the vegetables, eggs and honey produced by Piacun Farm.

selling locally caught fish.

Jill Lake also returned home to work with her family at their Mount Barker farm, Redgum Hill Orchard, and has become a regular face at their market

stall each Saturday.

For this new generation of farmers the market presents an opportunity to establish their agricultural career, grow their networks and receive

mentoring. In an industry that sometimes struggles to attract the younger generation, the market presents an opportunity to get a solid start. As the market winds to a

close for another Saturday, the bell is rung and it doesn’t take long before marquees are dismantled, vehicles are packed and the space returns to being a regular carpark.



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CHUNKY BEEF PIE VOTED #3 BEST PIE IN AUSTRALIA!

A large assortment of baked goods is displayed on a wooden surface. There are several round pies, some with golden-brown crusts and others with white icing and fruit toppings. There are also long, braided breads, some with sesame seeds, and various pastries and rolls. The items are arranged in a way that showcases their variety and freshness.



■ Andrew Bathgate with some of the fresh produce from Bathgate Farm at Cuthbert.

But the powerful social and economic benefits continue to flow between each market day, as family businesses are sustained for another week, nourishing food is provided,

and relaxation and connection provide a recharge for the week ahead.

In nearly 20 years of operation the Farmers Market has become an integral part

of the activities that foster the wellbeing of our Albany community and, with respect for the past and an eye on the future, it will continue its work for many years to come. **S**



■ Johan Theron from Gloria Dieu with his daughter Johane.

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