

Farewell To Glenora Heritage Produce: The Future Of Our Farmers Markets

One of my favorite stalls at farmers' markets around Melbourne was Glenora Heritage Produce. I say was because I just heard that Glenora are no longer attending farmers' markets. Lots of customers will miss their produce this spring and summer, especially as they were well loved for the quality and variety of their spring greens and heritage tomato varieties, so much so they supply some of Melbourne's top restaurants. Does the loss of Glenora's participation indicate a change in the health our farmers' markets? I have certainly noticed a recent decline in the number of fresh produce stalls and I am hearing anecdotally that the wholesale market and restaurant supply chain is probably an easier business model for a lot of producers than picking, packing and transporting produce to Melbourne for the vagaries of our farmers markets. For market gardeners there is also the loss of valuable farm time or the cost of hiring staff to fill the gap while they or family members attend to the uneven numbers of weekend customers at urban and regional markets. I say uneven as attendance can vary wildly due to weather, sporting events or long weekends and the popularity of farmers markets themselves. Perhaps it is the popularity of farmers markets that will slowly kill them off because with every new market around Melbourne there are fewer farmers to go around. The success and durability of farmers' markets is in maintaining a good balance of customer numbers with the number and diversity of fresh produce stalls. Fresh produce direct from the growers is after all the essence of what a farmers' market is, not value-added artisanal foods, preserves and take-away food. While customers will enjoy these things, they are discretionary purchases after all and not something you will solely travel on a weekly basis to buy. Reports, such as the *Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation Report June 2014*, and other similar studies from Australia and from the North American experience have consistently arrived at the same conclusions; there is a need

for this balance of customer and produce stall numbers but also for an energetic and experienced market manager and board (if there is one). The revenue to support managers and helpers (sometimes of charitable groups that take a cut) come largely from stall holder fees and the fee structure is also a fine balance of cost versus number of stalls. Reliance on volunteer helpers and managers is rarely durable and infrastructure support and good management comes at some cost.

What to do then?

My feeling is that to maintain a thriving farmers' market managements need to do everything they can to support existing primary producers and encourage new entrants to the market by subsidising stallholder fees to some extent in acknowledgement of their significant transport costs compared with stall holders that prepare food in a Melbourne premises. For accredited farmers' markets there is also the expectation that the farmer themselves will be in attendance and perhaps that requirement could be loosened. Even in boutique wineries one cannot always have the wine-stained hands of the vigneron/winemaker doing the pours. Balancing these concerns with what we all love about a farmers' market, having direct interaction with the producer and knowledge of provenance, is a tricky path. Additional support could be given by allowing farmers to also sell some value added products, for example, quiches, tarts or preserves made with their produce to help them in lean times, so long as the competition is balanced. This is where nuanced management is needed. Finally, having the right venue is also important. Although locals might not begrudge a \$2 donation to the primary school by way of an entry fee, many customers will not always be so forgiving if there is not much in the way of primary produce to buy. The focus on school revenue raising at the expense of market support and diversity has been a cause of many market failures.

In 2011 the Victorian Government funded the establishment of the Victorian Farmers' Market Association and their accreditation program and the current government has been funding management for regional Victorian markets but support within Melbourne is largely dependent on community group and council partnerships with councils providing support for market establishment. What is perhaps needed in the long term

is direct marketing and management funding from grants and not a model totally dependent on stall holder fees covering everything. But perhaps the elephant in the room is the loss of agricultural land to housing. Green wedges and smaller agriculture holdings are needed to ensure farmers' markets in Melbourne have a future.

Some of the wonderful produce from Glenora Heritage Produce



