

Does Venice have a town square?

Ocean Front Walk was lost to the tourists long ago. Abbot Kinney Boulevard has a number of popular gathering spots but no real center. A strong argument can be made that even though it exists for only a few hours a week the Venice Farmers' Market is our local town square.

Every Friday from 7 until 11 a.m. people from all over Venice and nearby communities gather in the parking lot located in the 400 block of Venice Boulevard not only to shop but also to experience a connection with their community. Neighbors



meet and catch up while sitting at the coffee cart. Out of touch friends run into each other in serendipitous encounters across displays of carrots or cauliflower. Children play

together and point at the ducks stepping out from their nests in the nearby landscaping. Moments like these repeated hundreds of times over every Friday morning make the Market the frontrunner for Venice town square status.

It's usually the produce and the quality of the produce that initially attracts people to the market. "Farm fresh produce — that's what brings people here," says Jim Murez, Venice Farmers' Market Manager since 1986. Venice is a certified farmers' market. To be in a certified market, according to Murez, individual farmers must be inspected and licensed by the agricultural department of their county of production to insure that the farm products they offer for sale are actually produced from "the first leaf" on their farm.

Organic certification, which many Venice market farmers hold, is a separate two-part process. "If somebody wants to sell an organic product they have to prove to the Department of Agriculture that they haven't used any kind of commercial fertilizers, insecticides, spray or ground treatment over the past three years. They also have to be inspected by a third party independent inspector," says Murez.

Produce ranges from all the expected staples to the unusual, such as fingerling and purple potatoes, "stellar" lettuce mix with herbs and flower petals included, and fruits that change with the season from different varieties of strawberries to stone fruits. The market is alive with color from sellers of flowers ranging from familiar domestics such as gerberas to exotic tropical varieties.

But there's more than farm fresh produce at the Market. Shoppers can actually purchase items for a complete gourmet feast from a variety of specialty food sellers. Fresh baked breads, mid-Eastern appetizers, nuts and dried fruits, farm produced cheeses can all be found at the west end of the market. Croissants, cinnamon rolls, tea breads by the slice or in loaves are popular to have on the spot with fresh coffee and to take home for weekend brunches. Prepared gourmet desserts make a complete meal easy for busy party hosts. With cage-free "eggs from happy chickens," low fat bison meat, and fresh caught fish from the Channel Islands also available at the market, shoppers don't need to go anywhere else for their weekend food shopping.



Finding Community at Venice's Farmers' Market

by Ann Arens

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Venice Farmers' Market, every Friday from 7 to 11 a.m.
Venice Boulevard between Ocean and Dell Avenues



Shoppers can be assured of the quality and safety of the food they buy from farmers' markets. The Department of Agriculture carries out continual inspections of farm products, and the Department of

Weights and Measures checks for the accuracy of scales. Specialty foods sold at farmers' markets must be prepared in kitchens certified by the Los Angeles County Health Department. Vendors are inspected regularly both at their kitchens and at the farmers' markets to be sure they are following



The market also features specialty foods such as baked goods and farm-produced cheeses

safe practices for food preparation, packaging, and storage and are providing accurate labeling information.

What the public will not find at the Venice Market that are found at many other farmers' markets include craft and clothing items, and foods made by third parties and sold by distributors. All farm and specialty foods at the Venice Farmer's Market are grown or made by the companies selling them.

Although now as busy and popular as any town center, the Venice Farmers' Market almost didn't make it through its first year. In 1986, the Venice Action Committee, a group of local business people and residents, decided to establish some place for the local community to gather on a regular basis. "And what better way," says Jim Murez, "than a grass roots kind of environment where they could do their grocery shopping for healthy food. That was the beginning of the farmers' market."

Originally the market was located in front of the Venice Pavilion. But after six months with only five farmers remaining and a dwindling number of shoppers, the market appeared to be

failing. "At a Committee meeting someone said, 'Does anybody want to take this thing over before we kill it?'" Jim recalls. "And everybody kind of looked at me and said 'Why don't you do it?' I didn't know anything about it, but there was some farming in my background. And so I did."

Jim moved the market over to Pacific and Venice Boulevard, put up some banners and street advertising, and all of a sudden it started growing.

The market was able to move to its current location on Venice between Dell and Ocean because of an agreement Jim Murez worked out when the City paved over the area without the proper permits. Murez got the Coastal Commission to mandate on the City permit that the parking lot be environmentally correct for storm water management and be landscaped and that the Venice Farmers' Market be there in perpetuity.

Although the market draws shoppers from nearby towns as well as tourists traveling in the area, the great majority who attend are local regulars. Many shoppers arrive at the same time each week and travel familiar paths to their favorite vendors purchasing food and flowers that they've come to view as absolutely necessary to their sense of well-being.

Over time individuals coming to the market start showing up as half of a couple; pregnant customers disappear for a few weeks and return pushing carriages; infants grow and join the teeming crowd of toddlers playing in the market's open area with flowers or pastries in hand. Boundaries of the seller-customer relationships start to disappear as each learns more



The community buys fresh produce direct from the farm about each other's lives through brief weekly conversations. Potato Man, Lettuce Man, the Frenchman, and the Candy Lady become Kenny, Dennis, Jon, and Ann.

"The original philosophy for twenty years from the start of the market was to create a community gathering point," says Jim Murez. "The day of the week and the hour of the day was chosen to be when the locals would come."

A noted Venice artist arrives wearing the colors of her latest work on her clothing. A young mother sports magenta hair and tattoos covering every exposed inch of skin. Old friends meet and comment on how things have changed since back in the '60s heyday of Venice when they first got together at a meeting of the Peace and Freedom party and marched in protest to the War. It's a Town Square...Venice style.



Neighbors meet weekly at the kid-friendly Venice Farmers' Market