

Jack Knox: Strange politics leave some farmers out in cold

BY JACK KNOX, TIMES COLONIST MAY 28, 2010

Tom Henry admits he reacted badly this spring when told there was no room for him, a Metchosin farmer, in the Metchosin Farmers' Market.

"I totally disgraced myself, blew my stack, said a lot of bad words," says Henry, who is also an author whose book *The Ideal Dog* includes an excellent essay on the therapeutic value of losing one's temper.

OK, they managed to work things out. When the weekly Metchosin market opened the other day, there was Henry selling his pork, lamb and chicken.

Still, it still bugs him to hear stories of local farmers being turned away from farmers' markets dotted with craft vendors selling everything from dreamcatchers to tie-dyed whatnots. Yes, crafters have to eat, too, but aren't farmers the priority at a farm market? "Something really stinks about this," he says.

You wouldn't think this would be a problem, not with the public demand for locally grown produce outstripping the supply, and not with so many of the area's newly sprouted markets clamouring for the food vendors that bring them legitimacy. But sometimes the shortage of farmers means markets fill their spots with whomever they can get -- exhibitors they are then reluctant to boot out later. (Though note that 25 of Metchosin's 30 vendors are said to sell farm products.)

Then there's the question of who qualifies as a "local" farmer, and of whether vendors should be allowed to sell someone else's goods, and of what actually constitutes a "farmers' market" as opposed to a plain old "market," and ...

Good lord, market politics can rival those of the politburo, or even -- gasp -- volunteer fire departments. Who sells what, where it comes from and who makes it are all hot topics of debate.

What it comes down to is each market operates by its own rules, says Victoria's Brent Warner, the past executive director of Farmers' Markets Canada. Certified members of the B.C. Association of Farmers' Markets are supposed to abide by make it/bake it/grow it guidelines that require vendors to sell only what they themselves produce, but there's no requirement for markets to belong to the association. Only Ontario restricts who can use the term "farmers' market."

Some markets are evangelically local, but others are more receptive to out-of-towners, particularly in areas where the range of crops is limited. Kelowna's market won't accept out-of-area apple growers, but Okanagan orchardists are welcome in Prince George, where few grow fruit. Saskatoon's market features an Okanagan farmer who hauls his fruit in a refrigerated truck each week.

Last week saw Warner at the Hollywood farmers' market in California, which has the strictest rules in North America. Inspectors in that state even check out the vendors' fields; if you're selling 10 acres worth of melons but have a farm that should only produce five, expect a visit from the Farmers' Market

Police, or whatever they're called.

As for non-food vendors, Warner says they're needed, but in limited numbers. "If you want to be a farmers' market, you should be aiming for 80 per cent food-based products and 20 per cent crafts."

Underlying all of this is the troubling question of whether farmers can survive at all. Members of the B.C. Fruit Growers Association will bring their frustrations to Victoria tomorrow, highlighting their plight by selling apples for 12 cents a pound -- the amount they were paid for their crop last year -- at the James Bay Farmers' Market.

Henry readily admits he is selling his pork, lamb and chicken at the Metchosin and Goldstream markets by necessity, not desire. He's a farmer, not a salesman. Haying season is coming up; he should be in the seat of a tractor, not making change in a parking lot. But the economics of local farming mean he can only survive by earning retail prices.

"I'm not even sure that's going to do it."

That, not a squabble over who should get market stall space -- lamb or leathercrafts -- is what really matters.

"We've got to do something, because the farms aren't viable."

jknox@tc.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist