

Why you shouldn't ignore farmers markets in winter

Even with lower temperatures, Capital Region farmers grow their produce,
local makers sell wares

By Pam Abrams, *The Times Union*

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Greg Triestman, of Buddhapesto, sets up his booth on Saturday, Jan. 20, 2024, at the Farmers Market in Troy, NY.
(Jim Franco/Times Union)

For a long time, I thought of the farmers market as a warm-season pleasure, an open-air haven of sunlight and tomatoes, not a destination to trudge to in snow boots. But count me in as a recent convert to winter market shopping — and here's why. Buying directly from farmers and small-batch makers generally gives folks access to healthier and better tasting food than I can get at the supermarket. Shopping locally reduces my carbon footprint and supports small businesses. And the advances farmers have made growing year-round in greenhouses and high tunnels has caught my attention. With minimal heating of such indoor spaces and careful attention to the hours of daylight, more small farmers are growing all sorts of greens, herbs and more all year long. It's a revelation, really, that the best months to have the oven humming is also a time to cook with local produce.

“Winter spinach grown in the Northeast has the highest brix (sugar) content thanks to our cold winters,” said Corinne Hansch of Amsterdam-based Lovin' Mama Farm, She sells produce at the Troy, Saratoga and Schenectady farmers markets. “It's out of this world,” she said, but “winter growing is no easy task in our frigid northern climate.”



Jenna Pavone, of Lovin' Mama Farm, sorts produce on Saturday, Jan. 20, 2024, at the Farmers Market in Troy, NY. (Jim Franco/Times Union)

Hansch grows in heated and unheated greenhouses. “We minimally heat our propagation house to 45 degrees, to grow our microgreens, pea shoots (and) potted herbs like rosemary and thyme,” she said. “We minimally heat a large high tunnel to 32 degrees to keep the more tender lettuce, kale and chard going all winter.” And in the unheated tunnels, they grow arugula, mustard greens, Asian greens, scallions and radishes. Even that awesome spinach can grow in an unheated house, “with several layers of row cover on the nights that get into the low teens or single or negative digits.”

The financial challenges for Hansch of winter farming is that despite minimal heating, the propane bill for a place like Lovin' Mama Farm is more than \$7,000 for the winter months. On

top of that, she does not like propane. “As organic and regenerative growers, we despise using propane,” Hansch said. But geothermal alternatives are cost prohibitive for her at the moment. “We hope that providing our community with nutrient-dense local greens throughout the dead of winter somehow equalizes our propane use.”

Hansch acknowledged she’s learned plenty from pioneers like Paul and Sandy Arnold from Pleasant Valley Farm in Argyle, whose produce is legendary at Capital Region farmers markets and beyond. “There are a handful of farmers with expertise who are just crushing it with winter growing,” Hansch said

The upside of the off-season

The winter market at Troy draws between 2,000 and 5,000 people a week, a fraction of the 10,000 to 15,000 people who show up each weekend in summer. But even in smaller numbers, these patrons are crucial for many of the small business vendors who need year-round income to keep things chugging.

“We’ve seen farmers adapt their winter production by improving crop storage, adding high tunnels, and diversifying their crop production to be successful over the winter months,” said Steve Ridler, market manager of the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market. That means quality local potatoes, carrots and other root vegetables alongside lettuces, pea shoots and herbs year-round are available at the market.



Corey Jenkins, of Jadey's Cookies and Sweets, on Saturday, Jan. 20, 2024, at the Farmers Market in Troy, NY. (Jim Franco/Times Union)

At the Troy winter market, the growers have plenty of company from the makers. Small business vendors like Corey Jenkins of Jadey's Cookies and Sweets said, "Having a year-round platform gives us a chance to continue growing our business and connect to our community." Andrew Rowles, of Wayward Lane Brewing, said the more intimate atmosphere makes it easy to get to know his fellow entrepreneurs.

Though the smaller winter crowd leads to leaner weekly income, vendors agree that there are still important benefits. Jamie and Josh Wallbank, who own Collar City Candles, consider the Troy market their "once-a-week pop-up retail store." And smaller crowds mean an easier shopping and parking experience.

Shop small, shop local, eat well

At the Atrium in Troy, where the winter market is held from November to April, there's a whole floor dedicated to hot food vendors, where tables and chairs make it a convenient place to meet up with friends or take the family out to eat. From breakfast sandwiches and pastries to made-to-order crepes, Greek mains and Caribbean classics, there's a wide choice of prepared foods to enjoy as part of a winter market shopping trip. Live music adds to the pleasure. In Saratoga Springs, the Sunday Market at the Lincoln Baths has been an popular venue for local musicians, including the kids' band The Rolling Pebbles, who formed at Caffè Lena's School of Music.

Community gathering spots like the winter market are welcome by residents and vendors alike. "Take your time," said Marty Irion, of The Vermont Spatzle Company, who sells his homemade German egg noodles at the Troy market. "Enjoy the music, sample a lot of great food, have a nice breakfast." All that, he said, while "you help support local businesses that truly care about providing the best quality products at a fair price."



Nikita Purner, of Slyboro Cider House, waits on customers on Saturday, Jan. 20, 2024, at the Farmers Market in Troy, NY. (Jim Franco/Times Union)

“Shopping your winter farmers market is the best way to support your farming and producing neighbors,” said Pat and Joanne Rose of Sweet Mama’s Soap. “You’re putting money directly in their hands,” echoing the sentiments of many who prefer to shop small.

“When you shop the winter market, the small businesses in turn support their communities, hiring local staff and purchasing locally,” said Mary Lussier of Muddy Trail Jerky Company, which pops up at the Troy and Saratoga Springs markets. And in Troy, where the market is downtown, customers to the market are apt to also explore the shops, cafes and restaurants, adding to the city’s economy.

There may be an abundance of produce in summer and fall, but winter is when so many of us really like to cook. Thanks to some favorite recipe websites (like Food 52 and The New York Times) and cookbooks (“Roast Figs, Sugar Snow: Food to Warm the Soul” by Diana Henry) I will never run out of glorious ideas for cooking with spinach and kale, sausage and chicken, apples and pears, cheese and bread.