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Meet, greet, eat, learn

by **JENAY TATE / Editor and Publisher**

NORTON — Now into its eighth week, the Norton Friends and Farmers Market is living up to its name, and then some.

Every Tuesday, the market draws crowds of both friends and farmers into downtown Norton. Backyard gardeners are there, too, as are bakers, quilters, crafters, furniture makers and more.

The vendors all have at least one thing in common — they’ve grown or made their wares. The customers share something as well — a desire to sample local food and goods, and in a venue as fresh as the home-grown vegetables.

“There’s been a whole lot of enthusiasm,” says Carmen Cantrell, a volunteer and member of the Norton farmers’ market board. “This has been needed for a long time, and not just for farmers, but for bakers and crafters, too.”

Customers see the need, too, and are responding.

“I come here every week,” said long-time Norton resident Joyce Winston. “I love it.”

Winston is not alone. Each week finds the return of familiar faces in search of the freshest foods from local growers. Particularly turning heads this week was the truck load of peaches Wise County farmer Roy Mullins hauled in from land he farms with a partner near Hillsville.

They’re Virginia peaches, Mullins said, slicing one open to reveal a peach as deep in color and as juicy as any fuzzy fruit from Georgia. He freely offered samples, knowing that just a taste would likely turn a sampler into a customer.

It happened over and over again that day, at Mullins’ spot and around the market, where vendors are tuned in to shoppers.

Larry Edens from L-B Farm in Jonesville keeps a supply of spoons for tasting his extraordinary peach preserves. “Hooked,” Edens said as a captivated customer promised to return for a jar. People respond to scent, sight and taste, he says. Food stimulates memories, like Turkey Craw beans reminding them of what their grandma used to make. “They taste of it,” he says of those preserves, “and they go back in time. It’s like a time warp.”

Thomas Hobbs from Dryden runs through a supply of tasting spoons and most every week nearly sells out of his premium apple butter.

Laura Lawson gifted a shopper with a lemon cucumber from her large backyard garden in Lee County. The shopper reciprocated with the purchase of a bag of her tender-sweet, two-color zephyr squash.

Bobby Orr from Jonesville dropped an extra tomato into a customer’s bag of lettuce and cabbage, cut just that morning. A man with a big voice to match his big personality, Orr’s a go-to guy among the farmers and weaves tales easily with customers.

Cindy Laws from Laws Organic Farm in Sticklelyville hands out recipes with her tastes of Queen Anne’s lace jelly. Like other farmers, Laws shares advice, too, on how to cook and serve up fresh vegetables. She reports that those new to this kind of fresh food experience have returned to her afterward, saying, “I didn’t know food could taste that good.”

Laws, a Lee County chemistry teacher, and others remind shoppers of the value of fresh food. “There’s only a difference of hours to a day from harvest to your table,” she says, compared to the minimum of five days for produce trucked to stores. That translates into a difference in nutritional value and in taste, she notes.

“If what they’re looking for is good quality produce, this is the place to come,” Laws said. Laws says she prefers the camaraderie she and her husband, Gary, have found among farmers and customers at the market.

The response from local customers so far has been gratifying for farmers, many of whom meander up from the fertile farmlands of Lee County.

They say farmers markets like the one in Norton are growing increasingly important to them. Trying to land deals with local grocery stores and restaurants is difficult, they say, so farmers markets, even small ones, help move more of their goods.

Asked what message they wanted most to convey, each zeroed in on the need for support.

“We got the produce, honey. We need more customers,” Orr said.



MEET, GREET, LEARN

As folks meet and greet, there’s plenty of learning to be done along the way — about food, the people who grow it and the future of farming.

Just ask.

Farming is not for the faint of heart, Edens warns and, like others, sees waning interest in the profession among young people. It’s hard work.

He and his wife are up and at work in the fields each day by 6 a.m. “We’ve seen many a sunrise from there,” he says with a laugh.

Monday night they were washing produce past midnight, getting it ready for Tuesday’s market. Edens is accustomed to hard work. He spent his career in the coal mines but vowed he would retire at 55 and return to the farming he knew as a kid. His family was dirt poor, he said, and was introduced to farming out of necessity. “If we didn’t grow it, we didn’t eat,” he recalls.

Today’s challenges are tremendous, Edens and the others say.

The Laws worked hard to buy their own land after years of renting. But with the national average of farm land acreage going for between \$10,000 and \$40,000 an acre, Cindy Laws notes, it’s not a business just anyone can enter.

“But why would they want to?” wondered Orr, a fourth generation farmer tilling land that’s been in his family since 1863. “I guess if they’re crazy . . . Right now, we’ve got about 1 percent feeding the other 99 percent. And that’s not good,” he said.

The challenges are tremendous, even if you already own the land, says Roy Mullins’ wife, Dianne. Mullins is a third generation farmer in Wise.

How do you make it?

“Faith,” she says. “You can plant it but if weather and God don’t cooperate with you . . .” Her voice trails without speaking the obvious.

The farmers all have stories to tell about the failed season of crops.

And finding help to tend the crops is hard, too. Young people have little interest. Roy Mullins says he picks 75 percent of his crops himself.

Farmers markets help pay the bills, Dianne says.

Tommy Gilliam chuckles at the thought. “It’s a hobby,” he half whispers.

None of the growers see a next generation of farmers here.

“You’re looking at us,” Edens says. “We’re it.”
