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Farmers' Markets Go Beyond Green

By [JULIA MOSKIN](#)

IN 2004, Nina Planck, who had just been dismissed as director of the New York City Greenmarkets, wrote in an Op-Ed article in The New York Times: "Perhaps it is time Greenmarket itself had some competition."

Next month, that meditation will materialize when Ms. Planck opens two outdoor food markets in Lower Manhattan. Every Saturday, these "hybrid" markets, like weekly markets in Europe, will offer more diverse products than a strictly defined farmers' market. With local makers of guacamole and sorbet selling alongside organic farmers, Ms. Planck is striking a symbolic blow at the farmers-only Greenmarket model.

"I think the farmers' market movement has failed consumers in not making it possible to buy everything they need for Saturday night dinner," said Ms. Planck, whose tenure at Greenmarket was short and tumultuous. "It's time to be more inclusive. It all helps local farms find a market."

Many in the alternative agriculture movement are surprised to hear that Ms. Planck, a vocal and frequent defender of the American family farm, will be running a market that could sell guacamole made from Costco avocados.

"It can be very confusing to the public when farmers' markets start looking more like supermarkets," said Randii MacNear, manager of the farmers' market in Davis, Calif., and an expert in farm marketing. "What's the message?"

American food shoppers who seek alternatives to agribusiness have never had so much choice about how to spend their food dollars. But they are still adjusting to being pelted with information on how to eat well. In its February issue, Consumer Reports magazine assessed the relative pesticide contents of organically and conventionally grown produce, and found that for many fruits and vegetables, the difference was imperceptible. Is this reason enough to forsake expensive organic bananas and broccoli?

And what if your shopping agenda has issues other than health, like saving family farms, sustainability and soil conservation?

"For a long time it seemed very simple," said Rena Mikulski, a school administrator in Brooklyn, who was shopping for greens at the Union Square Greenmarket last Wednesday. "Organic was good. Farmers' markets were good. Everything else was not good. Now I don't know how to choose anything. Is it local? Is it sustainable? Is it organic? Which is better? I don't know."

The hand-wringing among organic farmers that greeted Wal-Mart's announcement last week that it would begin stocking large quantities of organic produce reveals the tumultuous state of the alternative agriculture movement. In the 1960's, the movement began with far-out notions such as shortening the food chain between farmers and eaters, and entertaining the possibility that agribusiness might not have consumers' best interests at heart. At that time, both organic labeling and a national network of urban farmers' markets seemed like remote possibilities. Now that both of

those have been achieved, consumers, farmers and food policy experts are at a point of soul-searching.

"I do believe that the organic movement has been co-opted by big agribusiness," said Mike Biltonen, a fruit farmer in the Rondout Valley in New York's Catskill region. Large-scale organic farms equipped to supply huge retail clients like Wal-Mart and Whole Foods, he said, may use approved products for pest and disease control that were not designed for large-scale, continual use.

"Even though they are allowed, if you're spraying copper-based fungicides on your plants, you're going to end up with heavy metals saturating your soil," he said. "If you use a lot of sulfur, you're going to quickly upset the soil's ecosystem. That's not what I call sustainable."

Some American farmers, especially those who raise animals for dairy, eggs and meat, have become disenchanted enough with the system that they are choosing not to become certified as organic farmers, even if their methods meet or, often, exceed the organic standards.

Warren Weber is a leading organic farmer in Marin County in California and one of the farmers who helped write the state's organic regulations 30 years ago. "A lot of small farmers here are opting out of organic, which I find amazing," he said. "Consumers fought so hard to get that labeling, and now they're just letting go." Farmers' claims that they are "better than organic" are unverifiable, he said. "Farmers are only human, and there are a lot of opportunities for shortcuts," he added.

After the ideological and financial decisions that conscientious farmers make about how to grow crops, raise animals and manage land, come choices about getting the food to market.

"Farmers' markets are not for everyone," said Gina Walker, a small organic grower of salad and greens in northern Columbia County. Ms. Walker said that for a small farmer, sparing staff and vehicles to send to farmers' markets is impossible. "And the weekend is the only time I get to see my kids," she said. "There's no way I'm going to leave for the city at 4 a.m. and come back at 8 at night."

Farm-to-market sounds like a beautiful relationship, but the reality includes long days and hard choices. Can a farmer make jam from her neighbor's plums, and sell that? Can she make jam from fruit trucked in from outside the region? (Many markets call this "the no-marmalade rule.") If two farmers bring lamb shoulders the same day, who sets the price? What about cornhusk dolls and dried flowers?

In California and Texas, a statewide farmers' market authority makes such decisions. Elsewhere, markets are run by a hodgepodge of local authorities, professional managers or a combination.

Greenmarket, which runs most of New York City's farmers' markets, is the largest farm-to-city system in the country and is run by the nonprofit New York City Council on the Environment. Greenmarket's rules are among the strictest in the country: Farmers or farm staff must attend the market; farm marketing associations, which can be helpful to small farms that share costs, are not allowed to sell.

Elsewhere in the country, and the rest of the world, markets usually include independent "food artisans" selling scratch products like tomato sauce, fresh pasta, home-cured olives, sausages and butter, but Greenmarket allows only bakers and market farmers to do so. Greenmarket cheeses can be made only by farmers who raise their own dairy animals. Ms. Planck's definition of "local" includes the entire Northeast region; Greenmarket farmers, by the rules, must live within 200 miles of the city.

Ms. Planck's Real Food markets will include farmer co-ops, local artisans (people who make food from ingredients they've bought) and farmer-purveyors (farmers who sell produce grown by other farmers in the region). Market rules stipulate that if a product can be grown locally, it must be, but avocados and lemons, for example, can be bought.

Opening June 17 in Petrosino Park (on Lafayette Street between Spring and Kenmare Streets) and at the corner of Downing and Bleecker Streets, the markets will run through Dec. 23. Greenmarket is also planning new markets downtown this summer. "We're always happy when local farmers have more opportunities to sell what they grow," said Gabrielle Langholtz, Greenmarket's publicity manager.

Ms. Planck says that there should be room at markets, and at the American dinner table, for any product that supports local agriculture, however indirectly. "Instead of a food chain, I see a food web, with many points of entry," she said. She draws the line, however, at farmers' market crafts. "Crafts are for tourists," she says. "Markets should be for shoppers."

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