

YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market: Supporting Locavorism Throughout the Winter

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Abstract

Western North Carolina is a resource rich area with many local farmers who are passionate about their products and many who consider farming a full-time occupation. Farmer's enthusiasm about enhancing the community through healthful food choices and the YMCA's goal of serving the people and the community collaborated to form the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market. The purpose of the weekly market was to allow the community members of Western North Carolina to have an easily accessible location in order to stay in touch with fresh, local diets that are beneficial to an individuals health and well-being. Operating as market manager for the winter market, I observed the consumer demands for the farmers and was responsible in reaching out to a greater audience through educational nutrition workshops provided each week during the market hours. To continue the growth of the community and the education gained from frequenting the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market I will create a market resource manual containing all the information for a successfully run market. The market manual will be implemented for future markets as a reference and to improve upon.

Key words: farmers' market, Locavorism, sustainability, health disparities, YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market

Origins of the Project

Steven Roberson, owner of East Fork Farms, and five other local growers could be found in the University of North Carolina at Asheville parking lot on Saturday mornings with hopes that they would be able to sell their products to get through the winter months.

An interaction between Diane Saccone, District Community Wellness Manager at the Woodfin YMCA, and Stephen Roberson took place in which Stephen expressed his concerns about making it through the winter with the rising cost of feed and limited space to sell products. Diane was aware of the social and economic benefits that a winter tailgate market would bring to the community. By creating a weekly central location where consumers could select and purchase food from multiple farm enterprises a winter tailgate market would be able to provide community members with a unique experience in today's fast paced world.

Diane was inspired after talking to Stephen and set to work to create an indoor winter market where customers were able to continue supporting local growers year round while educating the community. Thus, the first year of the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market started in February 2012.

The first year of the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market was held in the multipurpose room in the upstairs floor of the Woodfin YMCA. The small space could only accommodate 10 vendors causing a line that stretched down the stairs into the lobby of the YMCA and sometimes spilling out the door. The following two years of the winter tailgate market were held in a Reynolds Village retail space, but with the fast success and repeated requests from local farmers to join the market Diane searched for a larger space to hold the winter tailgate market. The search committee Diane recruited helped her to find Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. Diane collected testimonials from many farmers and specialty vendors to strengthen her case for the creation of a winter farmers market and how the market would contribute to the community, which she presented to the church board. With the church's recent investment in a community garden, the members of the church supported the nurturing of local economic development, maintaining diversity in quality products, and providing opportunities for farmers and consumers to come together to solidify bonds of local identity.

The fourth year of the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market opened the beginning of January 2015 with more than 40 vendors offering breads, meats, cheeses, greens, and specialty products. Within the first few weekly meetings and after learning of the amount of time and passion that went into getting where we were, I saw the need for a managers market manual to help sustain the market. The manual would be a compilation of all the work done throughout the market season acting as a reference for future winter markets held at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.

Methods and Work Undertaken

As market manager of the indoor winter tailgate market, I worked closely with each vendor and their product. I learned about the process, time commitment, and passion that these farmers put in and the satisfaction that they gained from a good turnout. I wanted to uphold these standards creating a market that educated the customers on how their produce traveled from the farm to the table and how to properly eat and prepare the local, fresh goods bought at the market. By

educating the people, I hoped to increase Locavorism, an effort to eat food that is grown, raised, and produced locally, usually within 100 miles of home. From this transpired the nutrition workshops that were held each Saturday during the market hours.

Partnering with the Healthy Living Coordinator Kasey Telfer, who works in the nutrition department at the Beaverdam YMCA Youth Services Center, the first market hosted the YMCA's Healthy Living Mobile Kitchen. The transformed 72 passenger school bus is used to teach children about healthy cooking and eating. It also travels into food deserts to provide emergency food assistance, nutrition lessons, cooking demonstrations, and meals to the families who do not have access to these services otherwise. Along with the Healthy Living Mobile Kitchen, we held workshops in the church community garden on raised beds and container gardens, planting techniques, and soil mixing. The most participated in workshop involved an apple tasting comparing store bought apples and farmers' market apples (provided by Creasman Farms). Other nutrition workshops were represented using hand-outs with information on Myplate, meal planning for busy people, slow food vs. fast food, and healthy fats. The goal of providing the community with takeaway information was to make them more comfortable buying and preparing foods, while also making them aware of their relations to the environment, food, and public health.

With the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market now being held at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church we wanted to continue to keep up the number of customers and sales. This meant that advertising the new location and new additions of vendors and their products were important to communicate to as many different audiences as possible. Fortunately, we were able to advertise through different mediums including the published newspapers of Western North Carolina and Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) newsletter. Through these we reached the audiences utilizing the YMCA facilities, members of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, and those taking classes at the University of North Carolina at Asheville and at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). The most effective way of learning about established markets was by word of mouth. It was found more than two-fifths, or 45 percent, found out about markets by word-of-mouth and one-third, or 32 percent, learned of the markets from roadside signs or driving by the market (Hunt). Every Saturday we nailed big banners and signs into the ground to attract drivers on Merrimon Avenue. I would overhear customers walking into the market saying they had seen the large pink banner outside and the following week they would return with their friends after sharing their positive experience at the market.

Along with marketing, vendor communication required many hours of care in order to build strong, lasting relationships with the farmers and artisans. Vendor communication started at the end of 2014 and was a continuous responsibility in order to meet vendor's requirements and implement a smooth market. Diane would forward all emails to me. Anything regarding interest in joining the market, requests for a vendor spot change, or a cancellation email. In order to present myself in a professional manner, I responded to emails within 48 hours of receiving them. For the vendors interested in joining the winter market I would learn about their product and at times I would make a trip out to their shop. For example, when Mountain Juicery started their business and learned about the winter market from their produce provider I drove out to check out the shop, meet the creator, ask some questions, and taste the juice. It was great to see a small new business reaching out to the community to give back and share their product.

Ties to Academia

Working with the farmers market and majoring in Health and Wellness Promotion helped solidify discussions from my courses discussing Health Parity: Domestic and Global Context, Nutrition and Lifestyle, Food Politics, and Health Communications. I was able to apply what I had learned from readings and lectures in class to real world experiences.

Food for a locavore generally means high-quality fruits and vegetables, specialty meat and seafood, and artisanal cheeses and breads. But food for a significant portion of the world, food staples consist largely of grains—corn and rice. My Health Parity class discussed issues pertaining to residents in low-income neighborhoods facing health disparities when it comes to equal opportunity and access to healthy food choices. In some areas, the variety and freshness of produce is limited to the corner shops and gas stations available and low-income neighborhoods are usually charged more for groceries in areas with poor access to supermarkets. For low-income families, influencing factors that contribute to the extent of the limited access to affordable and nutritious food include: factors that influence where and when they shop, how families shop, strategies to stretch food dollars, and the children's role in grocery shopping. Low-income families usually shop at large retail stores or discount stores because they can buy most everything in one store and because large retail stores accept food stamps. The challenge is that most low-income families do not own their own cars so they must depend on public transportation which charges a fare, monopolizes their time, and affects the frequency of grocery stores visits. Families prioritize their foods, considering meat as the most important and which they allocate the most of their food dollars towards, whereas vegetables have a lower portion of money set aside. Items that can be obtained from other assistance programs, such as milk and canned goods, are placed lower on the list. When children come shopping it often leads to a higher bill, which only leads to a heightened knowledge of the best discount stores and awareness of waste to make up for those few dollars put toward a children's influenced buy (Wiig).

Food stamps are the first line of defense in fighting hunger in the United States by increasing the purchasing power of low-income individuals and families, participation in the Food Stamp Program (FSP), but recipients are not empowered if they only have access to less nutritious foods linked to poor diets, obesity, and other chronic diseases. The goal is to change the consumer's preferences and to educate them on healthy food and how to prepare and eat healthfully through farmers markets. At most farmers markets, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) are offered. The goal of SNAP or food stamps is to provide recipients the means to access and maintain a healthy diet through the purchase of fruits and vegetables. It offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities. SNAP distributes funds for purchasing food through EBT cards. EBT cards are discreet in that they are similar to bank cards; as long as there are benefits in the account the recipients account is debited for the amount of purchase. SNAP EBT alone was directly associated with significant increases in fruit and vegetable intake from low-income families ("Farmers Markets"). More and more farmers are accepting of SNAP EBT so that everyone, despite level of income, has access to healthy foods, while increasing farmer's sales and keeping the market viable. Since the initiation of EBT at farmers markets, the amount of annual sales has grown by an average of 57 percent each year (Martinez).

As discussed in my Nutrition and Lifestyle and Food Politics courses, another way to heighten awareness of food and break down the barriers of health disparities within low-income communities is to start a community garden. National surveillance data and numerous other research studies consistently indicate that low-income populations are less likely to meet recommended fruit and vegetable intake levels, compared to high-income populations (Treuhaft). Community gardens are growing in popularity because of the act of reconnecting to the land, revitalizing neighborhoods, and promoting a green and sustainable environment through an increase in the consumption of locally grown fruits and vegetables. By putting a community garden in a food desert (defined as residents who live in low-income areas that have low levels of access to a grocery store or healthy, affordable food retail outlet), it educates community members where food comes from, how food is grown, and issues of environmental sustainability. Education alone is associated with significant improvement in attitudes about fruits and vegetables which appear to promote increased fruit and vegetable intake (McCormack). Adults with household members who participated in community gardens consumed 1.4 times more fruits and vegetables than those non-gardeners. Gardener households were also more likely to consume fruits and vegetables at least five times a day (McCormack).

Overall, pairing efforts to bring more healthful foods to the food deserts with strategies that limit the consumption of junk foods is critical to the health of the community members and the community as a whole.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

Despite the rising popularity of farmers markets, markets face a steady stream of challenges. The biggest challenge I faced as market manager was creating the vendor layout. What made finalizing a market layout complicated was that the market had three types of vendors: weekly vendors, bimonthly vendors, and day vendors. The weekly vendors had specified on the vendor agreement form that they would be consistent in their presence for both the market flow and their customers. The bimonthly vendors were paired with another bimonthly vendor and they alternated weeks and shared a vendor space. The day vendors served as a fill in vendor, mostly specialty items that could be called last minute, not needing as much prior notice as produce or bakery goods.

Once all vendors had confirmed attendance to the winter market, I sat down and created a vendor layout with the space the church had reserved for us every Saturday. I did not realize how hard it would be after taking into considerations including: spacing out similar vendor products, placing some vendors near outlets, and not knowing how much space a vendor table would take up. Then to make vendor layouts more challenging, some vendors dropped the market due to low sales, new vendors wanted to join half way through the market, equipment broke, and the unpredictable winter weather caused some last minute cancellations. We thanked those vendors for being a part of the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market and wished them the best; we welcomed as many late comer vendors as we could while keeping the focus on enhancing the food aspect of the market and being conscious of the limited amount of space we had to work with; and we faced broken equipment and unpredictable weather head on and called in backups.

I soon learned to be flexible and accept that a concrete vendor layout was not realistic. I faced these challenges with the adaption of being able to critically think and problem solve on the spot. If it was not for my supportive environment I would not have been able to make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and succeed. I soon gained confidence in the position title I was responsible

for and applied the YMCA's values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility into my decisions while representing the YMCA at the winter markets.

I was not the only one that faced challenges at the market. For farmers, the challenge was customer demands. Even though sales are on the rise, farmers' markets account for less than one percent of agricultural sales in the state and there are still more than 15 grocery stores for each farmers market in the United States (Hinrichs). Farmers markets are reaching out and educating consumers on the benefits of eating fresh, locally grown food, but farmers have to be aware of their audiences. A market segmentation study was performed by Hunt that found three main consumer cluster characteristics attend farmers markets: lifestylers, seasonal shoppers, and utilitarians. Lifestylers are the largest group who have the highest concern about factors external to food production, show an interest in talking to farmers, and have the greatest diversity in their purchases. Seasonal shoppers represent the second largest representation and are most concerned about food quality and less concerned about external factors. Seasonal shoppers tend to buy mostly fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Finally, utilitarians, with the lowest representation at markets, have no concern with synthetic chemicals or desire to contact to have contact with farmers, and focus on high food quality (57-59).

The market welcomed many new vendors that had little experience selling at market. Not only did these vendors have to know their audiences, but the vendors also had to gauge how much of their product to bring to market, so as not to have waste. For example, The Cricket Girl was a new vendor that the YMCA market brought in and a new product that gained a lot of attention from the customers and the newspapers. Alyssa, The Cricket Girl, specialized in making protein bars from crickets. The first market she attended she only brought three types of bars, all of which had been taste tested for feedback and the recipes had been perfected. By the end of the market, she was not only bringing more bars to market, but also experimenting with selling chocolates and stuffed dates and had cricket flour available for interested customers.

Results

The YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market completed a successful fourth year running. Starting from a small room that could only accommodate 10 vendors and transitioning to a two floor market that welcomed more than 40 vendors varying in specialty.

The social aspect, such as having fun and interacting with the vendors, were important factors for shopping at the farmers market and contributed to spending at the market. Many shoppers make visiting the market a family event or bring a friend along, with only two-fifths of shoppers shopping alone (Hunt). Thanks to the great numbers of consumers, the YMCA winter market was able to benefit small and medium-sized producers, consumers, and the community. The market helped businesses obtain better prices for high-value products and obtain a reliable source for future purchases. Consumers had access to locally produced, healthful farm-fresh food, were able to develop face-to-face relationships with the farmers who grow the food, and the opportunity to contribute directly to local farm viability. Finally, the market served as a fundamental part of creating a robust local economy and provided easier access to fresh, healthful food in communities where access to fresh, nutritious food may be otherwise limited.

When I first became involved in helping Diane implement the winter market I was not aware of the extent to which I was going to be responsible in managing, which is why at the conclusion of the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market I compiled all the work implemented to create a managers resource manual. The manual includes: the origins of the YMCA Indoor Winter

Tailgate Market, vendor testimonials presented to the church board for approval of the use of their church, vendor agreement forms, welcome letters, vendor contact information, market template layouts, and information containing nutrition workshops. Since the YMCA winter market is still in its early years, the manual's purpose is to make future implementation of the indoor winter market run smoothly and successfully by referring to previous information and adding to the resources. The manual will also be implemented in introducing new interns, managers, and volunteers to what the market's goals are and what is expected during the market season.

Diane Saccone and I sat down at the conclusion of the market to discuss the winter market as a whole. Diane shared with me that many farmers she had run into at the outdoor spring markets were still so grateful for the opportunity they were able to partake in over the winter months. Farmers shared that if it had not been for the income from the winter market, winter would have been much harder. East Fork, for example, was able to raise their sales by 30 percent and many other vendors experienced similar success in sales by selling out most weeks. The YMCA is as grateful, if not more, for the farmers participating in the winter market as they are. The YMCA being able to provide a central location for passionate farmers to share their knowledge and produce is nothing compared to what the farmers give back to the community. The YMCA uses the weekly vendor fees as gifts to scholarship those who are underserved be able to participate in programs that help enrich the health and wellbeing of our community. The fees support programs like LIVESTRONG at the YMCA, exercise programs for cancer survivors, diabetes prevention programs, youth mentoring programs at Enka and Erwin Middle school as well as a new mentoring program serving elementary school children for those children at risk and the expansion of youth development programs and youth sports programming in northern Buncombe County.

As a final close on the 2015 YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market, the YMCA market team met with the church's operations manager, associate pastor, and community gardens coordinator to discuss the market's success and areas of improvement. Although, I will not be continuing as market manager next winter market it comforts me to hear that Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church is prepared to reserve Saturday mornings for the 2016 indoor winter tailgate market.

Sustainability

Sales ranged from week to week, but many greens vendors found they sold out most regularly, which only indicates the high demand leading to sustainability of the farmers' market culture. The demands from the customers desiring to support and buy local for the betterment of the individual, the community, and the environment will be sustained through the farmers markets. Consumers buy local because many believe that buying local products contribute to agricultural open space to keep farms viable. Consumers also seek the quality in local products, seek the personal market atmosphere with music and people, and consumers want to support the farmers who support themselves with market income. Other reasons consumers buy local include environmental reasons: wanting to sustain genetic diversity through heirloom variety, low sprat or chemical use, certified organic, organic practices without organic certification, and free range animal production.

Farmers markets draw these passionate customers who are educated on the relationship the food has on the land and those customers who seek a more personal shopping experience with farmers willing to advance customers knowledge. The direct relationships with customers are the main

motivator for farmers to attend markets, besides the profits, independence, and control of business. From face-to-face interactions typical of direct markets, farmers receive feedback on new products and develop personal connections with customers. Two-thirds, or 41 percent, of farmers changed their products due to consumer demand, demonstrating that there is a direct customer feedback for farmers and that customer feedback has a role in changing environmental quality by influencing farmers production practices (Hunt).

Connecting consumers to producers shortens the food links. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is the perfect example. CSAs are a cooperative agreement between farmers and consumers; consumer buy shares in the farm's output and have some say in what is grown. When crops come in, they are divided among shareholders according to the volume of their shares, and the rest may be sold at market. CSA farmers get revenue in advance to cover costs of tilling, soil preparation and seed. Shareholders get fresh produce grown locally and contribute to sustainable farming practices (Brown). Wildwood Herbal, a greens vendor at the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market, offers CSA which started in 2012. Their CSA name is Flying Fish.

After 22 some years of farming Wildwood Herbal made the change in order to be more sustainable and to develop another aspect of their farm while using organic practices and ensuring the healthiest products. Flying Fish is a market-style share, a newer trend in CSAs. In Flying Fish's case, customers come out to the farm on Friday afternoons and pick out what they'd like for the week, including add-ons like meat, eggs and breads from others in the local food community. It gives members a direct choice in what they consume, and since it's a pay-as-you go CSA it means members don't lose a share if they don't come one week. It's the members' responsibility to use up their credit before the year's end.

Another way to secure incomes for farmers while educationally linking urban families to the changing fate of farming, seasonal food cycles, and farm production experiences is creating a relationship with farmers markets and the local food system, such as local restaurants and institutions such as schools. When small-scale farmers are able to sell their products to local stores and institutions, they gain new and reliable markets, consumers gain access to what is often higher-quality, more healthful food, and more food dollars are invested in the local economy.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) farm to school program supports efforts to connect farmers directly with public schools. The 1998 Agriculture Appropriations Bill from the House of Representatives mandated that federal Food and Nutrition Service "acquire commodities from local farmers markets and cooperatives to maximum extent possible" (Starr). School programs are usually driven by nutritional concerns, but many schools and universities have contracts with food services that make procurement from locally produced foods harder. In New York State, NY Farms is urging the state legislature to ease the bidding requirements for contracts with school lunch programs to allow school food service directors to use more locally produced foods. There have been many successful implementations of farm to school programs including a school in Minnesota that provides markets for local farmers, while seeking to influence children's food preferences, by involving youth in growing, harvesting, preparing, taste-testing, learning about products, and touring farms and farmers' markets (Bellows). The benefits of having locally grown foods in the schools is so that kids can gain key nutrients in the body, limit fats, and boost energy which allows them to concentrate in school and perform better.

The YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market will be sustained with the rise of farmers markets across the U.S. The world is rapidly advancing and trying to sustain the billions of people on the planet. People are becoming more aware of their impact on the planet and are moving to more sustainable means, including energy efficient cars, solar paneled homes, community gardens, and farmers markets. Many are adapting passionate values and holding higher expectations of food quality to live a healthier lifestyle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, during my time working with the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market, I gained invaluable experiences that have furthered my knowledge and passion about farmers markets and the benefits they hold for the community and the people involved. I have become a more confident and professional person through the interactions and responsibilities expected of me. Through the winter market I was able to share my knowledge of my academic courses and grew a greater respect for my educational opportunity.

It was a joy interacting with the people at the farmers market and wonderful to see regulars. The YMCA farmers market was a contagiously happy environment that I looked forward to each week. By working with the YMCA, it has allowed me to make more connections with people and has opened my mind to working with a nonprofit organization as beneficial to the community and the people as the YMCA. Working alongside influential people such as Diane Saccone and Kasey Telfer I saw their passion in the work they do and am inspired by them.

The YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market was able to succeed in its goals of connecting the community to farmers, educating consumers on Locavorism, and increasing awareness about the importance of nutrition, the individuals' connection with food, and public health. It is my hope that the implementation of the market manual, created from a full winter season of work, will be used to advance future winter markets. Thanks to the commitment from the farmers, passionate customers, and a positive energetic environment the YMCA Indoor Winter Tailgate Market has the community support to be sustained for years to come.

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