

LIFESTYLE

WATERLOO CHRONICLE

THINGS TO DO IN WATERLOO



'Festive atmosphere' brings shoppers to market

BY JENNIFER ORMSTON
Chronicle Staff

It's hard to miss the imposing farmers' market as you drive along King Street North into the Village of St. Jacobs.

And for the 25,000 shoppers who visit the market each week in the summer, they wouldn't want to.

With more than 500 vendors, the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market keeps people coming back for more of its locally farmed produce and plants, cheese and baked goods.

The butchers are also in high demand, with summer sausage being one of the most popular sellers.

"It all depends on what's in season," said Sheila Shantz, the director of market operations.

But the market offers much more than food.

Clothes, high-end furniture and flea-market trinkets are only a few of the other items that bring people out in droves.

"I think part of the fun of what the market is all about is never quite knowing what to expect because a lot of the vendors here are small, independent businesses," Shantz said.

And because there's a daily rate for outdoor vendors, new sellers can show up at any time.

"Walking down the aisles, you never know what you're going to see from one market day to the next."

And a trip to the market — which is open Thursdays and Saturdays year-round from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and Tuesdays in the summer — isn't complete without a sampling of some of the fast food options, which include apple fritters, Greek salad and sausage on a bun.

The market moved to St. Jacobs from Victoria Street's K-W Stockyards in the mid-1970s.

"It continued to run, I think,

similar to what it had been there for quite a few years," said Shantz.

And since then, it's done nothing but grow.

In the late 1980s, the two-level farmers' market building was built, and that's when it began to "soar." When the sun is shining, the market expands out of the main building, and shoppers can wander through rows of outdoor vendors.

"Customer traffic increased and it also opened on Saturdays. Before that it was just a Thursday market, which tied in with the livestock exchange," she said.

Around that time an oak and pine furniture store also opened on the site.

In the year's since, Peddlar's Village craft and flea market was established beside the market building.

There's also a Sunday market — which is also open on Saturdays year-round from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. — across Weber Street from the main building.

The majority of the market's regular customers are locals — who have supported it well over the years, Shantz said.

The number of tourists, in contrast, has dropped because of the SARS outbreak and Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"All of that hit us really hard and we lost a lot of the American travellers, but I don't think we've necessarily hit a downturn because locals, or Canadians travelling, have kept our numbers up," she said.

And many regular shoppers drive longer distances, from as far away as Toronto, to shop there. Shantz attributes their willingness to commute to the market to the atmosphere that exists there.

"It's the experience, interacting with people who maybe produced what they're selling," she said. "It's that interaction, the festive atmosphere."

Recently, Grimsby-native Pat



Pat Lowther of Grimsby shops for cherries at the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market recently. For more information on the market, go to www.stjacobs.com.

Lowther stumbled upon the main market by chance en route to St. Jacobs.

"I'll be back," she said as she filled a plastic bag with cherries from one of the market's many produce vendors.

"It's fantastic."

She predicted her husband would have to make several trips to the car that day to drop off her purchases, which had included a bracelet, tomatoes and potatoes soon after the couple arrived.

Sixteen-year-old Jessica Oosterhof, who works at the Dutchie's produce stand, likes talking to customers, like Lowther.

"It's a good environment," she said. "It's pretty busy. I think it's one of the biggest farmers' markets in Canada."

Stephanie Van Wyk, meanwhile, prefers selling flowers than produce.

The Floral Express offers seasonal cut flowers and potted plants, such as sunflowers and gladioli in the summer and garden mums in the fall.

And the shoppers who spend their day weaving through the busy market are generally friendly.

"The people are really happy with the flowers," said the 21-year-old. "I've worked in produce before too, but it's different."

"There they're like, yeah, I have to go and buy food, but here they're like, let's buy some flowers."

Todd Burnside, the market's manager, advises people planning a trip to the market to head there

"as early as possible" to get a good parking spot.

"Tuesdays are kind of a nice day to come out in the summertime as well; it's not crazy busy," he said.

"Sundays are a great day to shop too," Shantz added about their newest market day.

Plus, it's a fun family outing, complete with buskers, a petting zoo and farm atmosphere.

"A lot of people will make an event of it. They'll come out, they'll have a coffee and breakfast, they'll wander in and out," Shantz said.

And Burnside hears nothing but positive feedback about the market.

"Every time someone asks me where I work and I tell them, I've never not heard 'Oh, that's awesome, I love that place.'"

JENNIFER ORMSTON PHOTO

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