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Food Awakening

By Jennifer Pullinger

Walk into any garden-variety grocery store today and you'll likely find a specially aisle or two loaded with shelf-fuls of organic meat, milk, and fruits and vegetables. Even though your local Kroger and Ukrop's are jumping on the farm fresh food bandwagon by offering organically-grown food, the neighborhood farmers market is still where you can get the freshest produce around.

Sales of organically grown food are up substantially nationwide. In early May, the Organic Trade Association released statistics that show sales of organic foods grew by 22.1 percent and represented approximately three percent of all U.S. retail food and beverage sales in 2006. The origins of that upward trend can be found at farmers markets across the country.

In Richmond, the newest farmers market to crop up is the Byrd House Market, located at the William Byrd Community House on the corner of South Linden Street and Idlewood Avenue in Oregon Hill. Operating every Tuesday from 3:30pm to 7pm through October, Byrd House Market offers a bevy of locally grown food and handmade arts and crafts. Manager Stacey Moulds says the main goal is to support local farmers, crafters, and artisans by giving them a place to sell. Plus, it gives local residents a place to buy fresh food since the neighborhood is without a conveniently accessible grocery store.

The farmers market also functions as a "community building mechanism," Moulds says, and nearby Grace Arents Community Garden is part of that effort. Local residents can sign up for a garden plot, and grow their own strawberries and rutabagas, then sell them at the market if desired. Meanwhile, you get to know your neighbors. "It's just amazing the friendships that develop and the chance conversations that take place. I think barriers break down over the topics of food and gardening," Moulds says.

The Byrd House Market, which launched in May, already has a "country fair" atmosphere, Moulds says. In the midst of all of the produce-vending, kids activities, live music, tastings and talks that are taking place, groups such as the Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners are dispensing gardening advice.

The past few weeks have featured acoustic folk artist Pam McCarthy, flute-player Bobby Crockin, and a group that plays old-timey, bluegrass jams. Most vendors come from within an hour's drive, which ensures the produce is as fresh off the vine as possible.

A handful of vendors sell eggs and pastured, or grass-fed, pork and chicken, such as CCL Farms of Keysville, Va. and Faith Farm Foods of Green Bay, Va. Brenda Lawler, co-owner of Faith Farm with her husband Paul, said her experience with the Byrd House Market has been a positive one, especially because people are in tuned into what's happening in the organic food industry.

"This is the right time to be doing this because people are really disgusted with the way animals are being grown and the way food is being processed," Lawler says. The Lawlers practice sustainable farming, which means they don't use antibiotics or hormones on their livestock. "We have clean, pure meat and we don't use any kind of drugs on our animals or chemicals on our pastures," she says.

You can also find vendors selling fresh cut flowers such as The Grower's Exchange out of Charles City and Dinwiddie's Hidden Knolls, which is owned by SueAnn Karp, who says buying local means her produce and flowers are just picked.

"I pick my flowers the morning of the farmer's market and I'll be doing—time permitting—the same with the vegetables. As more things come in, I'll be doing it the night before, but you can't go to a supermarket or a florist and get it that fresh," she says.

Along with all of the radishes, spring onions, and garden peas you can eat, the Byrd House Market also has non-produce items including baked breads from Mark Vanatter's Bread for the People. "He



At a recent Byrd House Market, shoppers Susan Venson and Lilly (18 months) browse the local wares. Photo by Jay Paul.

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makes something called a chocolate cheese schneck, which is a really yummy, breakfast-y dessert," Moulds says.

They even have a coffee vendor, Koralee's Coffee House, for those who need to pair their vegetables with caffeine. "They bring hot and iced coffee and they also sell it by the bag," Moulds adds. It's hard to name the most distinctive item that can be found at the Byrd House Market, Moulds says, but Conicville Ostrich Farm, who sell ostrich meat, is at the top of the list.

"Everybody that comes has such great time. It's just a happy place. We have kids running around and meeting their friends," Moulds says. "Every day is like a mini-festival. There is always something happening."

READ MORE HERE: www.byrdhousemarket.blogspot.com

Published June 7, 2007

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