Harvest²Cuisine

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Understanding Farmers’ Markets

How a farmers’ market works

A farmers’ market brings multiple vendors and customers together at a recurring place or time. Markets differ in size, season, governance, and what they allow vendors to sell. A market may be run by a nonprofit, municipality, vendor group, or another operator.

Who does what?

The manager or operator establishes market rules and coordinates the site. Vendors are responsible for their own products and applicable obligations. Shoppers buy from individual sellers and can ask about the products they are considering.

A producer-only market may limit sales to goods raised or made by the seller. Other markets allow different sourcing arrangements. Read the specific market’s rules; attendance alone does not tell you how every product was grown, made, or sourced.

Different from related models

An on-farm market is located at a farm. A community supported agriculture arrangement, often called CSA, generally involves a subscription or share. A food hub may aggregate and distribute products from multiple producers. These models can overlap, but their arrangements are different.

Use the directory as a starting point

USDA’s Local Food Directories can help locate markets and other outlets. Confirm the current location, operating dates, accessibility, and payment options with the market itself.

Reference: USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, Local Food Directories: https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/food-directories-listings

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Plan a useful market visit

Before leaving

Check hours and the location. Make a short list based on meals you expect to cook, then leave room for a seasonal alternative. Take suitable bags and a way to transport perishable purchases according to current food-safety guidance.

At a stall

Ask practical questions: What is available now? How is this variety commonly used? How was this item sourced? Where can I find reliable storage guidance? Ask permission before handling produce or taking photographs.

Make comparisons thoughtfully

Compare unit sizes, quantities, condition, and the amount you can use. A larger package may suit one household and create waste in another. Product descriptions and certifications should be checked through the relevant standards or certifying source rather than assumed.

After the visit

Put purchases away promptly using appropriate guidance. Record what you bought, how you used it, and whether you would buy it again. Planning a meal around what you can use is often more practical than buying an unfamiliar quantity without a plan.

Food-safety reference: https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/4-steps-to-food-safety

A seasonal purchase I would like to try / planned use

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If you are curious about selling

Start by understanding the market's purpose and application process. A market accepting a vendor does not by itself establish that a product, process, label, or production location is approved.

Questions for the market manager

☐ Which product categories and sourcing arrangements are accepted?

☐ What are the application dates, selection rules, and attendance expectations?

☐ Which fees, equipment, insurance, or documents does the market require?

☐ What are the rules for sampling, signage, electricity, and waste?

☐ Who can explain local permits and food-production requirements?

Find the responsible authority

Describe the exact product, process, production location, and proposed sales channel to the relevant state or local food regulator. Ask which agencies have jurisdiction and what approvals apply. Do not assume a rule for another vendor or another state applies to you.

Small glossary

Vendor: a seller at a market. Stall fee: a charge for market space under the operator's terms. Producer-only: a sourcing rule defined by the particular market. Seasonality: how local growing or production cycles affect availability.

Reference: FDA, How to Start a Food Business: https://www.fda.gov/food/food-industry/how-start-food-business

Educational concepts and recordkeeping only; not an offer, business opportunity, income promise, or substitute for professional advice. Requirements depend on product, process, location, facility, and sales channel. Confirm current requirements with the responsible agencies before acting.

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Market visit and question sheet

Market / location / date / manager contact

Vendor / product	Intended use or observation	Question / follow-up

Hours, access, payment, and transport notes

Rules or requirements to verify / authoritative contact

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