

Super market – central city’s main source of fresh food

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recruit. But Nello told him, “I’ll do it if you pay me as much as I make working on the farm.”

Nello, 55, is married and with five kids. One, in school clothes, is unloading boxes near Nello’s longtime vegetable and flower stall at the west end of the market. Nello dresses in black. With his thick, drooping mustache, steady eyes and wide-brimmed black hat, he looks like he’s right off the “Lonesome Dove” cowboy movie set.

He looks straight ahead, his hands at the waist-high row of open boxes, fingers rolling lazily over potatoes like a man hustling his pocket change. Multiple inspections by the city and state Agriculture Department add up, he says. Some state inspections cost \$65 an hour.

“Their money is guaranteed, ours isn’t. So costs are way up, but business is pretty good.”

The city charges farmers \$153 quarterly to park during market days on Hyde Street and a \$20 increase is set to kick in soon. And for state market inspectors looking for fraud (selling something the farmer has not registered with the state to sell), their charge of 60 cents per farmer per unannounced inspection is proposed to go to up \$4.

Unlike city health inspectors who drop in on restaurants to check hygiene at no cost, state ag inspectors rake in revenue for checking farmers’ stalls.

On the market’s first day Al Halluna trucked in 10 tons of squash, onions, peppers, Napa cabbage — his best seller — melons and cucumbers. He nearly sold out.

“It was wall to wall people,” he says with a grin. “It’s not as good now as it was — it will never be — but it’s a good market and it holds its own. I told my wife, ‘We’ll do it one year.’



Certified organic almond and fruit grower Francesca Cipponeri, with daughter Anna, says people bought greater amounts of produce 25 years ago.

PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Ha! Here I am!” three decades later.

Halluna is a few feet from his stand, greeting customers while his son-in-law and two grandchildren weigh produce and tend the till. His parents started farming in 1946 on 5 acres outside of Merced, then expanded to 60 acres, plowing with horse and mule. It still amazes

him they were that “tough.” He has 70 acres and uses a tractor.

“Customers have changed,” he says. “It used to be families from all over San Francisco, but not so much now. It’s mostly workers from the neighborhood. But they’re starting to come back and so is the market — it’s kickin’, it’ll be fun, a family thing.”

In the early ‘80s the market added Wednesdays and by mid decade added Fridays. But two years after Christine Adams became market manager in 1987, she saw that Fridays were “unprofitable” because the neighborhood was “oversaturated,” and cut Fridays.

John Garrone started the summer of ‘82, driving in a VW van loaded with white mushrooms only — little, big and open caps (which don’t last as long as closed but have more flavor). The big crowds were mainly SoMa Filipinos and Tenderloin residents, especially Southeast Asians and Chinese.

“The Greyhound station was still on Seventh then,” Garrone, wearing a pink button-down dress shirt and jeans, says from behind his Far West Fungi counter filled with a dozens types of mushrooms from Moss Landing. “Market Street had skid row on one side and the Tenderloin on the other with an emerging Southeast Asian population and no grocery stores,” he says. “But outdoor markets, everyone knows. They’re worldwide. People were practically waiting for us to open. Times were good.”

Garrone’s parents were Santa Clara County farmers but he was a San Francisco police dispatcher in 1981. Then, a retired Balboa High School music teacher advised him to get into mushrooms. So he and his schoolteacher wife, Toby, took the plunge. They rented a Hunters Point warehouse for a dime a square foot after the Navy pulled out. Sawdust, which is what the mushrooms grow in, was free for the taking.

Now, Garrone fungi-farms 60,000 square feet. He sells shitake, king trumpets, morel, porcini, lion’s mane, white and yellow tree oysters and maitake — specialty mushrooms — in addition to white button, crimini and portabella, all in most supermarkets but seldom as fresh. Sawdust costs him \$600 a week, to be certified organic is \$4,000 a year, and he has hefty electric bills from controlling temperature, humidity and air circulation, all unusual operating costs.

“But I’ve kept pricing pretty much the same,” he says. “I’m old-fashioned — less than retail, more than wholesale.”

The Wednesday crowds he sees now are largely local workers and neighborhood residents; Sundays are an after-church young crowd and families, “probably with a good representation from Hayes Valley, the Mission and SoMa.”

Twenty-five years ago “people bought bigger,” says Francesca Cipponeri, who farms 45 acres in almonds and fruit in Hughson (between Modesto and Turlock) with husband Vince, who stays in the field working with his son Vince Jr., and grandson, Ryan. They’ve been at the market since 1986. “Several pounds. Now they pick exactly, maybe a piece or two more. They were making jelly and jam. Now it’s easier to buy it in a store.”

She’s one of five organic farmers at the Wednesday market. She was 16 and living in Italy when she married Vince, and they came to Northern California to begin a farm life. They started at Heart of the City in 1986. Years later, she realized the family operation had to go organic when she had to warn her grandson not to eat fruit off the tree without washing it. Her husband agreed. Three years later, in 2003, they were certified.

“We’ve been very happy since,” she says. “I don’t contribute to people getting sick and we’re helping save the environment.”

Her prices are high — \$10 for the cheapest pound of almonds — but the quality has a fine reputation, her record number of customers now, by her count, attest. She wishes she

could lower prices but farming organic is a lot more work. Every year she and her husband think they’ll do better financially, but “it’s the same, maybe a little more. But not enough to change our lifestyle.”

Customers are better educated now “and choose wisely,” she says.

Across the way, Grace Teresi, from San Juan Bautista, has a different take. She’s standing barefoot in jeans and work shirt next to her flatbed truck, multitasking and enjoying it. She orders her help around, chats with customers and this reporter, while haggling over her shoulder with a restaurateur who wants a \$3 break on a \$15 flat of strawberries until he finally gets it.

“People know the difference between good food and bad,” Teresi says, “but the practice isn’t there. They get scared, overwhelmed by information and don’t know what to do half the time. I’m sort of sad, but what are you supposed to do?”

Teresi first came to the market in 1982, a “23-year-old greenhorn,” to work in her mother’s space, after having a tough time selling to restaurants the specialty items she grew: baby carrots, French beans and miniature squash with flowers. “When Reagan ended the three-martini lunch and (corporate) people couldn’t spend more than \$100 a month, it put the kibosh on me.”

Times aren’t so hot now, either. “Crappy,” she says. “Ask any farmer. When the economy is good, business is good — we went from dot com to dot bust.”

Teresi says even though food prices are adjusted for inflation they are so cheap they’re “disgusting.” She “can’t get \$1.50 for a head of lettuce” while costs climb. She holds up an empty, thick cardboard box and says it cost her \$2.40.

Compounding the economic downturn is the lack of competition. In 1982, she says there were eight shippers in the Castroville area, Monterey County. Now there’s one.

“All went bankrupt or were swallowed up,” she says. “Salinas is in the same boat, consolidated. How can that be any good for someone selling produce? That tells the story.”

Meanwhile, big grocers are stocking shelves with produce from Mexico, she says.

“When are people going to wake up and buy local-grown? It’s all coming from Mexico and it’s consolidated into one distributor, one firm. Shippers are getting bigger and the small guys are gone. That’s why the farmers’ market is important. We’ll go out of business unless the customers come to us. Everywhere, it’s the same problem.”

Standing under a noonday sun, she seems

oblivious to the milling crowd and the serenades from a Chinese violinist at one end of the market, a boogie woogie pianist at the other, and a flutist in the middle, near her stall, playing over a recorded Andean music background. “Exclusivity is gone,” Teresi says, and she sees herself struggling now in worldwide competition, even with snow peas.

“It’s harder now than when I started,” she says. “I’d like to see the farmers’ market where it should be — for that, we need to train young people how to eat.” ■



by Heidi Swillinger

What did you buy at the Farmers’ Market today?

Asked June 29 at Civic Center



Sal Mora, Tenderloin

I usually buy bok choy, green- or red-leaf lettuce, flowers, oranges and cherries. The oranges and cherries are for me, so I have something to nibble on, and the flowers are for the ladies at the church I go to. I have a lot of lady friends, and they love flowers! The lettuce and bok choy are for the chickens I keep at the Howard Langton Community Garden. I raised them from babies, and I’m pretty close to them.

Michelle Bouchet, Golden Gate Heights

I’m buying items for a crudities platter. They’ll be hors d’oeuvres for an event to promote the work of an artist I know. I used to shop here every Sunday when I lived in the neighborhood. This is a great farmers’ market. It doesn’t have the crush of people that the market at the Ferry Building has.



Janie N., San Francisco

I bought broccoli, chard, bell peppers and lemons. The chard I sauté with olive oil, garlic and red-wine vinegar. I do the peppers with red onions, sauté them with green bell peppers and add egg whites for a scramble in the morning. I also bought some yam leaves for a mental health program I work for — I buy all the veggies for them weekly. I bring the cook recipes I get from all the vendors here from other countries.



Michelle I., Nob Hill

I got daikon, green veggies, shrimp, fish, cherries and peaches. A lot of it is to make tempura for my family, and my mom likes a lot of boiled vegetables. We’ll also do stir-fried shrimp and garlic. I shop here often — the produce is fresh, it’s cheap, it’s good, and we’re helping out the local farmers.



Gary D. Mallin, Sunset

I bought lettuce, onions, radishes, cherries and peaches. Also some wild striper that you can’t get at other places. I’m basically making salads and eating as much raw food as I can. I shop here often — it gives me an excuse to come out this way. It’s convenient and easy. A lot of farmers’ markets are upscale. This one is proletarian, not bourgeoisie. It caters to people who are struggling to make the middle class. They didn’t come here in a Lexus, unlike the one at the Ferry Building.



Grace Teresi, right, started at her mother’s stand 30 years ago in good times. She struggles now to pay bills and says business is tougher than ever.

Market reaching out to the community

THE Heart of the City market continually evolves. A year ago, its board hired Kate Creps as operations director to begin to reach out to the community and to “re-image” the market. She has planned a number of “eating healthy” after-school sessions, culminating with the youngsters touring the market and hearing from the farmers. She has colorfully redesigned the Website, created a Facebook page and is launching a monthly email newsletter to farmers and customers. This summer there is to be a neighborhood children’s art contest — the theme is thanking the farmers. Winners will receive bags of groceries at the 30th anniversary celebration.

“It’s all about making healthy choices,” Creps says. “It’s hard in the Tenderloin to access healthy food — the corner markets are limited.”

On market days, Creps assists Christine Adams, market manager since 1987, who has cut her hours and become co-manager with her son, John Fernandez.

Part of the new market look includes alfresco lunching with tables and chairs under a large canopy. A half dozen hot food vendors, allowed into the market eight years ago to raise more money (the trucks pay \$43 a day, farmers pay \$30 for a space), will be supplemented soon by specialists. “We don’t want to duplicate anything in the neighborhood,” Creps says. “I’m looking for people who create specialties, like baked goods, to bring to the market.”

The fish concession recently moved across the plaza to where the live chickens were sold near the east side of the federal building. The chickens were a regular concession since the 1980s. But animal activists began picketing and complaining loudly about how the chickens were treated. The activists went to court, and May 27 the board banned the live chicken vendor.

“It was a painful decision,” Creps says. “The market did nothing wrong, but the legal fees were threatening us.” ■

— TOM CARTER

Heart of the City

Co-Manager Christine Adams, seated, and Kate Creps, left, operations director, staff the food stamp table where all food stamp purchases are recorded and exchanged for cash to the farmers.

