



Owen Sound's Historic Fair

Written & Photographed by Kelly Babcock

It's early on a Saturday morning. Though it's June, a night chill hangs in the air. The eastern horizon begins to bleed dark indigo into the black night sky. The coming sunrise promises the perfect backdrop for history to be made. Not history with a capital "H" – just history.

Trucks, vans, cars and trailers start to arrive at the market building. There's a quiet din of organized confusion. By the time the sun climbs atop city hall, friendly greetings are being exchanged between vendors



One of the delights of farmers' markets like the one in Owen Sound is sampling fresh, local food products before you buy.

of existence prior to 1868, the year its vendors moved into the ground floor of the new town hall. By 1946, both the market and the city administration had grown, so something had to give. An old building between the town hall and the Sydenham River was renovated and the farmers' market was moved to this historic site, where it remains to this day.

For more than 145 years, there has been a farmers' market in Owen Sound. Each week that finds it still operating is another week of history, the quiet kind of history that is created from ne-

cessity and maintained by civic pride.

It would be wrong to suggest that nothing has changed at the market over the last century and a half, but there is an old market character here. Poultry, beef, pork and fish can all be purchased, and vegetables can be bought from people who pulled their produce from the ground or picked it off stalks, bushes or trees within 24 hours of coming to market. Baked goods that may run the range from grandma's recipes to gluten-free and multi-grain fare fill the air with the aroma of farm kitchens.



Beth Woods, Penny Howell and Meaghan Lisle of Howell's Fish booth stop and smile for the camera.

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and shoppers. The Owen Sound Farmers' Market, arguably the longest operating market in Ontario, opens for business.

Maryann Thomas, owner and operator of The Ginger Press Café on Second Ave., can be found at

the market at 7:04 a.m., looking for signatures and accents for her café's daily fare. She describes her commitment to agriculture as "local and seasonal."

Some claim the market was established in 1845. There is proof

The original purpose of the Owen Sound Market Building is a misty mystery, but it's solidly ensconced in the city's heritage.





Colin Miners of Miners' Maple Products selling locally made maple syrup



Pottery is available from several artisans at the Owen Sound Farmers' market, among other artistic offerings.



The more traditional fare of a farmers' market is well represented at the Owen Sound Market. It's never smart to turn down an invitation to a market goer's Saturday evening meal.

Wayne Dewsbury, a resident of Owen Sound, goes to the market every Saturday that he can. Asked what he likes about it, he hesitates only a second before saying "The atmosphere of it, an old building, fresh products, people coming and going ... good stuff." He also says he finds the rapaciousness of the vendors to be a positive attraction.

Now, however, interspersed among the traditional meats, vegetables, preserves, knitting and textiles, one can find crafts, books and pottery. These changes, and the dedication of the vendors and consumers, have helped it survive. They've kept it from be-

coming a footnote, folded into the middle pages of some obscure local history book. The Owen Sound Farmers' Market has become a destination for locals and visitors alike. To walk among its stalls is, actually, to stroll through history.

Fairly new to Owen Sound, Jennifer Miller and her son Jacob find their way to market regularly. "The market provides the garnish to an already flavourful city," she says. "You get to taste what the earnest farmers, butchers, bakers and candlestick makers work so hard to share with the community. The values of Owen Sound are steeped

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Tom Pink, market manager, keeps in the thick of market culture by operating his own stall. Kettle corn is popular with children and adults alike ... don't tell the kids they're eating vegetables ...



Vendors whose products can withstand the elements sell outdoors under the market's walkway roof.

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in the vendors represented, particularly respect for nature and value of things handmade." She adds if you're going to market, you should ... "Go early, get coffee, have a Canadian bacon sandwich, wander and enjoy." Jennifer's son, six, knows what he wants at market, Kettle Corn. "Jake knows exactly where the stall is that he wants and

goes straight there to get his bag of popcorn. Then we just sit and watch the world go by and eat the entire thing."

The market's future hasn't always been so bright. In the late '60s and early '70s the market building was under threat of being demolished. At that time the city got out of running the market and an association of vendors was formed to take over, becom-



Willard Haehn comes to market from Hanover to sell the wide variety of handiwork he produces.



Bakers and candlestick makers sell side by side at the Owen Sound Farmers' Market.

ing a not-for-profit organization around the year 2000.

Throughout the '70s, the relationship between the city and the market could be characterized as indifferent at the best of times, but still the market continued. When Tom Pink became market manager, he felt passionate about the restoration of the relationship with the city.

"I would argue, at least for the last 15 years, or slightly longer, the relationship with the city is great," he says. "We truly have a partnership between the two organizations and we work together, continually, in different ways to try and keep the market going."

Now city and market work together, maintaining the cultural impact and upgrading the facilities. Currently, the two groups are pooling funds and resources to do work on the triple-bricked edifice that was once a municipal shed but whose origins are obscured in the mists of the past.

And still there is the market, whose benefits go both ways according to Thomas. She says "Without the market, the relationship between the grower and the eater would be lost." She explains that the growers benefit

from hearing first hand from the consumers what they're looking for in produce, and the consumers get the lowdown on the produce they buy. Suggestions for serving, advice on storing, even information on how long a certain product will be available based on the season and the current growing conditions, is freely offered to shoppers by the producers. A line of communication, lost when there's a supermarket in between, profits both parties.

If you're looking for a destination with colour and history, the Owen Sound Farmers' Market offers just that, along with a healthy helping of foods, crafts and fun. If you want to make history with your family, come see one of the longest running farmers' market in Ontario.

For more information see owensoundtourism.ca or call 1-888-675-5555. **EV**

Kelly Babcock came home to Grey County at the age of four where six generations of his family had paved the way for him to settle in as a permanent fixture. His last article for Escarpment Views was "At Risk: Black Bears of the Bruce Peninsula," Winter 2010

For other farmers' markets features in *Escarpment Views*, see:

"More Than Fruits & Veg! Local Food Products Abound at Farmers' Markets" by Gloria Hildebrandt, photographs by Mike Davis, Summer 2011.

"Fresh, Local Farmers' Markets" by Paul Glendenning and Gloria Hildebrandt, photographs by Mike Davis, Summer 2010.

"Market Foraging" by Deborah Palmer, photographs by Mike Davis and Kim Falls, Summer 2008.