



the garden city's weekend bounty

missoula farmers market
a summertime tradition
in western montana

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY GORDON SULLIVAN

It's a summer Saturday morning in Missoula, and you're walking downtown. Soon you're not alone, but part of a stream of people headed toward the old Northern Pacific depot. People pass you carrying backpacks brimming with giant-leaved chard and spikes of gladiola. Gently, the stream deposits you where adjacent streets come together. Instead of cars, there are lots of people—strolling, surveying, greeting, trading—and tables. Tables with rows of carrots, beans, and potatoes, tubs of garlic and zucchini, boxes of raspberries and apples, piles of mustard greens and bok choy. You smell dill. Your stomach rumbles.

Welcome to the Missoula Farmers Market. "We've been here 37 years," says Mel Parker, who oversees the market. "It's a tradition. People say, 'We're going up to the lake today' or 'to the Griz game, but we're going to the farmers market first.'" The market wasn't always an institution. Its first season, in 1972, ran for just six Saturdays in July and August. The "vendors" were friends and neighbors begged by Mavis McKelvey and Chinwon Reinhardt to strip their gardens. "It was over in about 20 minutes," Reinhardt's husband, Howard, recalls. Writers Greg and Dorothy Patent were newcomers from ▶



Mai, left and Amy Shoua Vang count money during a Missoula Farmers Market.

California in 1972. That first market, Greg remembers, was “pathetic.”

But McKelvey and Reinhardt were determined. The wives of University of Montana math professors, they had experienced farmers markets in other cities. Reinhardt grew up with them in Seoul. “Markets in Korea were chaotic,” she says. “At first, supermarkets here were wonderful. Then I missed buying from farmers directly.” Reinhardt had arrived in Missoula in 1957; McKelvey in 1970. Both sought healthy food for their young families. Instead, McKelvey noticed how far food in local grocery stores had traveled. “Everything comes in by stage,” she quipped to out-of-state friends.

The women approached Mayor George Turman, who gave them his blessing. The city council proved harder. “One member said, ‘We’ve worked so hard to get food off the street, and you want to put it back? Think of the germs!’” says McKelvey. “We got scientists from the [Rocky Mountain] lab in Hamilton to swear it wouldn’t spread disease—that in fact, local food has fewer germs than food shipped long distances.” Fortunately, downtown businesses saw the market as an opportunity and paid for insurance and advertising. McKelvey, Reinhardt and others distributed flyers and placed brochures in motels.

But the market needed vendors. The two women drove around the Bitterroot Valley. “Farmers were skeptical,”

Reinhardt remembers. “They said, ‘First have a market, and we’ll see.’” After those first cobbled-together markets, the farmers came.

Since then, the market has bloomed and evolved. On Saturdays it runs four hours—May through October—plus some Tuesday nights. At first, vendors paid a percentage of earnings, but Reinhardt says the market made too much money. “We were interested in social engineering, not money.” Today, vendors pay flat, low fees. Food must be grown or gathered in western Montana, so there are no Idahoans, whose produce would be ready sooner, or Hutterite growers from east of the Divide. After experimenting with crafts, the market decided to stick by its original focus: food. Butterfly Herbs was the first to sell cups of coffee, followed by others. The market figured out how to incorporate the WIC program, food stamps and recently, credit cards.

In the early 1980s, Hmong immigrants began selling at the market. Reinhardt met Missoula’s community of former American allies from Vietnam and Laos through tutoring. Noting their phenomenal gardens, she invited them to sell. With help, they learned to prepare and display their produce. Now their skill inspires others. In the mid-1990s, Byelorussian newcomers appeared at card tables with their specialties: cucumbers, beets and herbs.

The market reflects—and celebrates—the cycles of summer. Says Mel Parker, market master, “It starts in May with

bedding plants.”

Mavis McKelvey: “The Hmongs have lettuce and bok choy. Morels are early; it depends on the season. Last season we had peaches and nectarines from Paradise. Spring comes earlier there.”

Parker: “In July, it’s cherries.”

McKelvey: “Corn hits mid-August. The huckleberries come at the same time as the raspberries.”

Greg Patent: “I go through the entire market and see whose huckleberries are smallest. I ask for a taste. Then I buy my five-pound bag.”

McKelvey: “Melons are August. Pumpkins; September, October. Winter squash too. And apples.”

“There’s a sense of abundance,” Dorothy Patent says. “There aren’t just potatoes, there are purple, white, and red potatoes, artfully arranged. You feel like nature’s so giving, and these people work so hard to provide us this food.”

For 30 years, noted bear expert Chuck Jonkel has observed the market from the small table where he makes and sells Montana versions of Hawaiian leis—blue bachelor buttons alternating with orange marigolds. “The market keeps people happy and visiting with each other. You see folks you haven’t seen all winter. It’s powerful,” he says.

The market attracts characters, too, some famous (Mel Parker fondly remembers actress Lindsay Wagner, the Bionic Woman), some infamous (Hell’s Angels and bums), and some in between (topless dancers, also fondly remembered by Parker; UM drama students posing as visiting African dignitaries).

Missoula attorney Joan Jonkel, Chuck’s wife, says McKelvey and Reinhardt were pioneers. “People talk about local food now, but that was their goal at the beginning.” The Missoula market has spawned markets in Kalispell, Bozeman, Great Falls, Wyoming—and Missoula. A second market, the Clark Fork River Market, now thrives beneath the Higgins Avenue bridge. “It’s great,” Joan Jonkel says. “People stroll between the two.”

McKelvey and Reinhardt remain involved. McKelvey can’t stop seeing into the future. “Real food is even more important now. In a national emergency, could our community be self-sufficient? What are our basic needs? We’ve lost a lot of knowledge—making food go farther, canning, nutrition. There’s so much overweight, signs of diabetes. Medical bills are so high!”

Meanwhile, Reinhardt bustles through the market, whisking trash

from Railroad Avenue’s old bricks, exchanging greetings with a vendor whose children she’s watched grow up and go to college.

It’s Saturday morning at the Missoula Farmers Market. The vegetables are piled high. People stroll and chat.

Who knew revolution would smell of huckleberries, coffee and basil? ■

Beth Judy is a frequent contributor to Montana Magazine.

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- **SUMMERFAIR:** July 18-19, artmuseum.org
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