

Community Action at the Farmers Market:

THE IMPACT OF PRESENCE AND SUPPORTING LOCAL

by **EMILY FEARON** /// EAC Staff

The light through the windows of the historic building housing the Halifax Brewery Farmers Market shines on a table covered by leafy greens, bright edible flowers and purple eggplant displayed on red and white gingham. Outside, on this Saturday morning, quarts of pears, tomatoes and blueberries gleam in the sun. Everywhere, people peruse, eating samples of melon from a farm stand, breathing in the smells from food vendors.

Alison Lynes, co-op program coordinator at the Brewery Market, believes participation at the market – by both shoppers and vendors — creates “moments of magic” as people have the opportunity to meet and build common ground. In other words, presence at the market creates opportunities for positive change.

“We don’t care if you exchange money or not, you can exchange pleasantries,” she says. “Just keep showing up, that’s what makes the difference.”

This encouragement to participate in farmers markets falls within the context that Nova Scotia’s local food consumption rate sits at just 14 per cent of our diets. Lynes says with all of life’s demands and everyday burdens, she’s reluctant to tell anyone they “need to do better” or change their lives to buy local.

Because shopping at farmers markets isn’t possible for everyone, the Brewery Market team has been troubleshooting barriers that keep people away from the market. They are aiming intentionally, through training and relationship-building, to be anti-racist and decolonial in their work. Among other initiatives, they participate in the Nourishing Communities program, run through Farmers’ Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS), to give participants “market bucks” which are tokens with monetary value.

Surveys from Nourishing Communities show 95 per cent of participants feel an increased sense of community belonging, states Justin Cantafio, executive director at FMNS.

Emily (she/they) loves the abundance of summer. She is the EAC’s relationship development officer.



Fresh vegetables on display at the Warehouse Market in Kijikuktuk/Halifax. PHOTOS: Emily Fearon

A farmers market reconnects people with their community and their food system, Cantafio says. Markets are spaces where people are welcome to come and simply be, with no payment required for entry. Many hold community booths where groups, clubs and organisations share information. For these reasons, Cantafio believes farmers markets in Nova Scotia are manifestations of community action.

Vicki Madziak, former senior community food coordinator with the EAC, says she is seeing a shift in our food systems towards a food “hub” model, like the Halifax Regional Food Hub and The Station Food Hub Company in the Annapolis Valley. Hubs streamline distribution, cutting overhead, reducing supply chain steps and increasing Nova Scotians’ access to local food.

The Warehouse Market in Halifax’s North End is a great example. This market is full of local produce, supplied directly from Abundant Acres farm — open six days each week year-round. Whatever they can’t grow themselves, they source from other local producers with whom they have close relationships.

The community shows up in turn. Kelly Wilson, manager and steward of The Warehouse Market since 2017, says there has been exponential growth every year, especially in the market’s farm share boxes, their version of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.

Madziak emphasizes how CSAs are a powerful way for people to support producers. Through sign-ups for the program, farmers get funding upfront and can plan crops and harvesting. This cycle of people’s investment going straight to the farm, which returns as good food, is a type of community action Wilson says they see a lot.

Shopping local (every bit counts!), supporting community gardens and advocating for better food policy are some of the ways Cantafio suggests Nova Scotians can take action. He dwells on the impact of sharing meals together. “To eat is to commune,” he says. “Doing that together I think is the ultimate form of action.”