



# Farmers' Market Field Guide:

Shop with Confidence

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# Pro Tips

## Get Acquainted

Before attending a new farmers' market, explore their website and/or social media pages to learn about their mission and vendor list. If they have a mailing list, subscribe and stay up-to-date on who and what will be at the market each week.

## Bring Re-usable Bags

Re-usable bags avoid waste and disposable plastic. Consider cloth insulated totes, baskets, and/or a mini wheeled cart. A wagon or stroller may be useful for large heavy purchases, such as pumpkins and garden plants, but tricky to navigate. Instead, consider setting your items aside with the vendor and returning with your car for pick up. My preferred method is a backpack for layering sturdy heavy items such as potatoes, onions, or carrots, and a couple of smaller shoulder bags for light delicate items like greens, tomatoes, and fruit.

Use small **cloth produce bags** instead of accepting plastic. (Let's all put an end to plastic!) Get to know the empty weight of your bags ("Tare weight") so you only pay for the weight of what you purchase.

## Bring Cash

Bring small bills and coins. On a busy market day you and vendors will welcome easeful transactions. Most vendors happily accept credit cards, however cash is always preferred and avoids transaction fees.





## BEST TIME TO GO?

Early or Late! Both early and late market goers avoid the crowds. Go early to get the best selections or go late to enjoy end-of-market deals.



## GIFT GIVING WITH PIZZAZ

Farmers' markets can be a great place to buy unique food and hand-crafted items for gifts, making your recipients feel extra special.



## HUNGRY?

Most markets have local vendors who serve delicious homemade snacks to enjoy while you shop.

## Use SNAP/WIC-FMNP/EBT

Many farmers' markets are equipped to accept government assistance programs for purchases. Inquire at the market info booth, online ahead of time, or via the link in "References".

## Be Curious

...and ask questions! A friendly attitude goes a long way so don't feel intimidated. You want to purchase fresh seasonal food and vendors want to sell it to you. It's their role to make sure you feel informed about what you're buying, and it's your role to help them do that by asking questions.

## Consider Advanced/Bulk Orders

When you find something you love ask the vendor about advanced or bulk orders. For example, will they set aside your favorite eggs which tend to sell out quickly, or offer bulk pricing on tomatoes for canning. Vendors are usually happy to do this and it helps them meet your needs.

## Preserve the Harvest

If you enjoy "putting by" (canning, freezing, or drying) surplus fruits and veggies, it's okay to respectfully ask a farmer if they have "seconds" or "blemished" produce they'd be willing to sell at a discount. We've been conditioned to believe that produce should be beautiful and uniform. Nature doesn't work that way. Ugly produce gets a bad rap and is often just as tasty and nutritious as its more attractive cohorts. This is a perfect way to enjoy delicious, healthful food all year round and minimize waste!

## Love It or Leave It

You have the right to ask questions and you have the right to walk away if you don't like what you see, hear, taste, smell, or feel.



## Avoid Hagging

A farmer may offer you a special deal at the end of the market or if you buy multiple items. Practice respectful inquiry and leave the final deal making up to them. Farmers set their prices fairly to compensate appropriately for their hard work and input. This isn't a flea market; it's their livelihood and they're providing an incredibly valuable service to us, our communities and the planet. Left over produce often gets donated to food pantries so it doesn't go to waste.

## Plan Ahead

Go prepared with a shopping list. Farmers' markets are meant for grocery shopping so make this your first stop before heading to your local brick-and-mortar store. Be sure to also give yourself room to be inspired by what you discover!

## Be Gentle

Don't squeeze the Charmin...oops, I mean produce! Sustainably grown, heirloom variety, picked-at-its-prime produce is delicate and fragile. Though it's beautiful and tempting, please avoid handling produce unless you intend to purchase it. And even then, when selecting just the right tomato for your late summer heirloom Caprese salad, look first and be gentle when assessing.



# Build Relationships and Ask Questions



Be friendly and curious. Asking open ended questions will always result in more fruitful information. Be mindful of busy market times; save longer or multiple questions for a slower time or connect with the vendor online.

Personal contact with the producers of our food is what makes farmers' markets so vital and so special. Take advantage of this opportunity, be friendly and be curious.

## Questions to Consider

1. I'd love to know more about your farm. Where is it located?
2. How long have you been farming?
3. Is all of what you're selling from your farm?
4. What's your favorite way to prepare this?
5. Tell me more about your (cows, chickens, pigs, goats):
  - a) How do they live?
  - b) Where/what do they eat? Is their feed organic or non-GMO?
  - c) Are they given supplements, antibiotics, or hormones? Are your cattle fed grain? If so, how much and when?
6. How do you manage pests or diseases on your farm?
  - a) Do you use chemicals or fertilizers? If so, when are the fruits/vegetables treated?
7. Does your farm have any special certifications like Organic, Bio-Dynamic, non-GMO, Certified Humane?

**Formulate your own questions about what matters most to you!**

“We are what we eat and the same applies to the precious animals and plants we consume. A clean sustainable diet/lifestyle for them translates to a clean sustainable diet/lifestyle for us.”

- Alyssa Clare



# Animals Are What They Eat



We are what we eat, and so are the animals who are raised for our nourishment. Cultivating a deeper respect for our food means extending that respect to the land and the animals involved in the process. All animals deserve to live as they were intended: outside with access to shelter; room to roam, forage, graze, and peck; raise their young; and have fresh water, sunlight, and socialization. If you choose to eat animal protein, it's important to remember that their health transmits to us. The quality of their food and lives matters.

## Natural Diet Primer

**Cows, Sheep, Goats:** Ruminants are herbivores with multi-chambered stomachs ideal for breaking down fresh or dried grasses. They love to roam and graze, eating some cereals and root crops, but are not equipped to digest certain grains like corn and soy.

**Poultry:** These omnivores eat grasses, grains, grit, insects, worms, and garden scraps. They love to scratch, hunt, and peck.

**Pigs:** These omnivores love to root and forage. They eat grains, root crops, food scraps, dairy, nuts, grasses, and insects.

**Fish:** This is an evolving and controversial subject as our waterways and fish populations are at significant risk. Wild sourced fish is generally better than farmed. Fish eat what is naturally found in their environment, which means eating the plants, algae, and organisms found in the wild makes for a more healthful diet.

# How You Benefit

## 1. Support your local economy

Money paid to small local farmers (just like small local businesses) goes directly back into our communities rather than into the pockets of large corporations.

## 2. Vote with your dollars

Making our voices heard happens outside of the voting booth every time we spend our hard earned money. What we say “yes” to with our money speaks volumes to corporate America about our values. In a consumer driven economy our demand dictates the supply.

## 3. Support small, local, sustainable farming

Large industrial scale conventional farms tend to support a broken food system that overproduces monoculture crops (e.g., corn and soy), drives down income for farm workers, endangers farm workers and livestock, destroys our environment, and pollutes our bodies. By supporting small sustainably minded farms, we keep them in business, regenerate the soil, build local economies, restore our planet, improve the quality of our food, and support our own health and well-being.

## 4. Eat the way nature intended

Sustainable producer-focused\* farmers' markets provide you with the freshest seasonal food available and takes the guesswork out of shopping and meal planning. Eating with the seasons supports a healthful and flavorful diet. (\* see page 11)





## 5. Eat good, clean, and fair

Local sustainably produced food tastes better and often is more nutrient rich. It also reduces your carbon footprint since it doesn't require harsh chemicals, major storage, or long distance shipping to get it from the farm to your table. Good and fair mean people growing your food are treated well, earning a fair wage in safe conditions, and the animals involved are humanely raised; all things you can't discern when shopping at grocery stores.

## 6. Build trust, community, and relationships

By fostering a relationship with the people who grow your food, you build trust in your food system. The more people who do this, the more vibrant and healthy our communities.

## 5. Enjoy better flavor

Seasonal produce tastes better and is more fun to eat! Re-train your palate to appreciate produce when it's in season, thus decreasing your desire to buy produce out of season (which is hard on the planet and our bodies).

## 6. Have fun and feel good

There's just no denying that this is what happens when you shop at a farmers' market. If it's a market in your neighborhood, there's a good chance you'll run into friends and neighbors, hear some local music, or get inspired to try something new! All of which fosters a deeper sense of community and joy.





# Potential Pitfalls



- 1. Not all farmers' markets are created equal.** Be careful about making assumptions regarding quality, source, production practices, seasonality, or sustainability just because it's a farmers' market. If you are just getting to know a market or new vendor, peruse the market or vendor's website and ask lots of questions.
- 2. Not all farmers' markets are producer-only markets.** A producer-only market means the person who produced the goods being sold is also the person standing behind the table selling the goods. They are the farmer/grower/artisan/producer who created whatever product they are selling and are the experts in answering your questions. Producer-only markets often have rules about vendors selling only what they themselves produced. This is what makes the Dane County Farmers' Market the largest producer-only market in the U.S.! These markets are the best to seek out.
- 3. Not all farmers' markets sell in-season or local products.** Many farmers' markets across the country don't have strict rules about what can be sold and by whom. Some vendors may import produce from other places to sell at their stands or even buy items wholesale elsewhere to mark up and sell as their own. Ask questions and get to know your climate and food seasonality. If you see produce that's out of season from a local producer, ask them how they're doing it. Old traditions and new technology make it possible for small farmers to extend the growing season and store crops for later consumption. Be discerning. Just because something is wrapped in a pretty handcrafted package doesn't necessarily mean it is local, artisanal, handcrafted, seasonal or sustainably produced.

**4. Shift your mindset.** Culturally we've been seduced into believing that all food should be cheap, consistent, and available year round. We've lost our connection with the soil, the cycles of nature, and the art of sustainable food production. Through the first half of the 1900's a household's budget for food averaged 43%. After 1950, and the advancement of industry and technology, it began to slowly decline. Since 2003, a household's budget for food has averaged just 13%. These patterns illuminate a slow and insidious shift in our values around food. The destructive economic and health implications of corporate farming, global food distribution, and our demands for cheap food are vast. In general, prices at farmers' markets are determined by the investment of time, labor, and resources; as well as, product popularity, location, and seasonal supply. Small scale, clean, seasonal food grown with respect for the environment, animals, and farmers requires more resources to produce. Clean whole foods consistently have a lower cost per serving as compared to pre-packaged meals, and a significantly lower impact on the environment and our health. It's that simple, and it's money well invested in what matters most.

**5. Read labels.** Like at the grocery store, read the product labels of anything processed. Just because something is at a farmers' market doesn't mean it's clean and healthy.

**6. Use your intuition.** As in any industry there are a few bad apples (pun intended). If anything about a potential purchase feels out of sorts, just say thank you and walk away.





# Decode Food Marketing Terms



**Natural:** Not formally defined or regulated so always dig deeper.

**Local:** Not formally defined or regulated so always dig deeper. Local usually describes food grown close to where it is sold (typically a radius of 100 miles). Decide for yourself what local means to you.

**Whole:** Not formally defined or regulated. It's often used to describe foods which are unprocessed and in their natural state. For example, true "whole grain" is grain that has not been ground into flour.

**Organic:** This is formally defined and regulated. Certified organic is an expensive, time and labor intensive process. Before "organic" became regulated it was a philosophy and farming style which paid deep respect to the soil, planet, and creatures involved. There are many farmers who use 100% organic practices but are not certified due to the required cost, labor, and time, so it's important to ask questions. The only way to be certain however, is if the goods are Certified Organic.

As defined by the USDA, organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals which are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic plant foods are produced without using conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering or ionizing radiation. A government-approved certifier must inspect the farm to ensure these standards are met. Organic does not mean "chemical-free". The USDA outlines approved chemical treatment options for managing pests and disease. In addition to organic farming, there are USDA standards for organic handling and processing.



## There are three levels of organic claims for food:

- 1. 100-Percent Organic:** Products that are completely organic or made of only organic ingredients qualify for this claim and a USDA Organic seal.
- 2. Organic:** Products in which at least 95 percent of their ingredients are organic qualify for this claim and a USDA Organic seal.
- 3. Made with Organic Ingredients:** Products in which at least 70 percent of ingredients are certified organic. The USDA organic seal cannot be used but "made with organic ingredients" may appear on its packaging.

**Non-GMO:** GMO (Genetically Modified Organism) is a plant, animal, microorganism or other organism whose genetic makeup has been modified using recombinant DNA methods (also called gene splicing), gene modification or transgenic technology. Most often this is used to make crops able to withstand the application of toxic pesticides or to artificially induce other disease resistant traits. GMO is used in the production of commodity and other crops (e.g. corn, soy, sugar beets, canola, cotton, zucchini, yellow squash, alfalfa, and papaya) which wind up in nearly all food flavorings, preservatives, and feed for animals. There is limited long-term information of effects on health, but preliminary evidence shows they are detrimental to our bodies, the planet, and the purity of our food system. Certified Organic includes non-GMO.





**Cage-Free:** Loosely defined and regulated, and does not ensure the health and well-being of the hens. It simply implies that chickens were not kept in cages. Industrial chickens are raised and kept in cages barely bigger than the hen which prevents them from moving or walking. Cage-Free is better than “caged”, but often these birds are still housed in overcrowded hen houses which leads to tremendous stress and poor health.

**Free-Range:** Loosely defined and regulated so always dig deeper and ask questions. It implies the animal (often chickens) has access to the outdoors at some point during the day. It's a step up from Cage-Free, but again, not insurance for the wellbeing of the animal. Animals/poultry are creatures of habit and just because they may have access to the outdoors (a concrete patio qualifies) it doesn't mean they will go. Having a door open for just a few minutes each day qualifies a farm to say it's “Free-Range”.

**Grass-Fed:** Not officially defined and loosely regulated so always dig deeper and ask questions. There is a new agency, American Grassfed Association, which offers a certification label that is akin to “Pasture-Raised”. Grass-Fed animals are often given supplements and grain to help fatten them up for harvesting. This label refers more to what the animal ate as opposed to where.

**Pasture-Raised/Pastured:** Not officially defined and loosely regulated. This label refers more to where the animal ate and often this implies a more natural diet. The animal's diet can still be supplemented so dig deeper and ask questions. In general, this is the best descriptor to look for as it means the animal spent most of its time outdoors foraging for food in the most natural way. A diet that aligns with the way an animal was intended to eat by nature is very important for the health of the animal and the nutrient content of the product (i.e., meat, eggs, and dairy).

**Humane Certifications:** There are a variety of organizations with varying degrees of transparency and regulations. To name a few – Animal Welfare Approved\*, HFAC-Certified Humane\*, Global Animal Partnership, USDA/Organic, American Humane Certified. (\*most stringent organizations)

# References and Resources

## Find Fresh Local Food:

[Local Harvest](#) (U.S.)  
[Farm Fresh Atlas](#) (Wisconsin)  
[Dane County Farmers' Market](#) (Madison, WI)  
[Slow Food USA](#) (find your local chapter)

## Seasonal Food Guides:

[Seasonal Produce Guide](#)  
[WI Seasonal Food Guide](#)  
[West Coast Seasonal Veggie Guide](#)

## The More You Know:

[Dirty Dozen & Clean 15](#) (organic shopping guide)  
[USDA Food & Nutrition Service](#) (SNAP/WIC/EBT)  
[USDA Organic Guide for Livestock](#)  
[USDA Organic Standards](#)  
[Non-GMO Project](#)  
[Certified Humane Fact Sheets](#)  
[How Americans Spend Money](#)

## Fish & Seafood:

[Seafood Watch](#)  
[Eat Wisconsin Fish](#)  
[Sitka Salmon Shares](#)

## Books For Inspiration:

Anything by [Michael Pollan](#) (particularly *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*)  
[Animal, Vegetable, Miracle](#) by Barbara Kingsolver  
[Dishing Up The Dirt](#) by Andrea Bemis  
*From Asparagus to Zucchini and/or Farm-Fresh and Fast* by [FairShare CSA Coalition](#)

## Movies For Inspiration:

[Food, Inc](#)  
[King Corn](#)  
[Farmer's Footprint](#)





## Hi, I'm Alyssa and the author of this guide

I was born with a tender heart for the planet and the creatures who call it home. As a child of the 70's I was raised on a largely processed food diet. I lived, however, in the heartland of farming and food production and had the gift of people in my life who planted seeds of interest in gardening, cooking from scratch, and processing fresh food for later consumption. In college my passion for these interests grew and I gained an even deeper awareness of how our choices around food impact every aspect of the world we live in. The livelihoods of communities, the wellbeing of humans, and the stewardship of land, water, air, and animals are all rooted in our food choices. Since the early 90's, I've been tending and cultivating my relationships with my local and global food communities.



When people ask me where I buy my groceries, my first response is from farmers I trust at our area farmers' markets. I acknowledge that shopping this way is a privilege, on many levels. I am blessed to live in an abundant food shed with some of the best small organic farms in the nation. I realize this isn't the case for everyone and that food systems are also mired in systemic racism and other inequities. Much of what I share in this guide can be applied to perspectives and choices within our circles of influence. It is my deepest desire to inspire and educate others in becoming more aware and informed about their food choices.

As Wendell Berry brilliantly stated, "How we eat, determines how the world is used." If this guide inspires you to do one thing differently, I'd love to hear about it. Send me an email or find me on social media. These connections are what make life rich and are the ripple effect of positive change. Happy eating!

With Peas & Love ~ Alyssa

## Connect with Me

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# Gratitude

## The Honorable Harvest

"The Honorable Harvest, a practice both ancient and urgent, applies to every exchange between people and the Earth. Its protocol is not written down, but if it were, it would look something like this:

Ask permission of the ones whose lives you seek.

Abide by the answer.

Never take the first.

Never take the last.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Take only what you need and leave some for others.

Use everything that you take.

Take only that which is given to you.

Share it, as the Earth has shared with you.

Be grateful.

Reciprocate the gift.

Sustain the ones who sustain you, and the Earth will last forever."

~Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

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