



Farmer's Market

JENIFER KUNTZ & MELANIE CISSONE

ON ANY GIVEN SATURDAY, THE SEASIDE FARMER'S MARKET seamlessly encircles the perimeter of the town's amphitheater. Farmers and artisans set up stands to sell what they grow, raise and make by hand. Locals and visitors buy free-range chickens and duck eggs, fresh milk, local honey, breads and the most coveted arugula available on Florida's Northern Gulf Coast. Approaching its fifth anniversary in May 2013, Seaside Farmers Market has grown into a profound part of the local food culture along the 18-mile stretch of paradise called County Highway 30A.

The market had simple beginnings as a roadside-stand-cum-open-air-market in 1981. With the first two houses in Seaside under construction, Daryl Davis, wife of Seaside founder Robert Davis, had undertaken community building through creative marketing. Davis drew on her travels to Europe where open-air markets that were inviting to the eye and curious to the palate abound. Davis displayed fresh, ripe and beautiful produce, colorful flowers, French baguettes from a local bakery, local shrimp that was used in shrimp boils and gumbos available for purchase, fine cotton clothing, beautiful linen tableware, funky t-shirts and ceramics from Italy. The bookstand had a variety of carefully chosen books that served to entertain in downtime the mix of locals, carpenters, builders, architects, planners, service people and passersby. By exposing the area to a market-based cultural experience

with fresh local food and fine, unique goods—all beautifully displayed—Davis was creating a brand. The marketplace was a representative glimpse of what the look and feel of Seaside would become.

Over time, Davis partnered with Mary Patton to open a boutique called Perspicacity. In market stalls, each with a vignette, these friends sold personally selected women's and children's clothing, accessories, gifts and house- and tableware. At the same time, both Robert and Daryl Davis began inviting specific retailers to open operations in Seaside. By 1989, food provisions, prepared dishes and sundries were being sold at Modica Market, local shrimp at Bud and Alley's, books at Sundog Books, home goods at Pizitz and t-shirts at the Seaside Store. In those early days, while urban planners were designing and developing a town, Daryl Davis had begun to give it a soul.

Twenty-one years later, Raw & Juicy purveyor, Jenifer Kuntz, invited Robert Davis to lunch to discuss the possibility of a farmers market in Seaside. Since such a market had always been part of the town vision and once before existed as a vegetable stand, he offered the amphitheater as a location. In 2008, the Seaside Farmers Market began with three vendors whose stands were erected next to Raw & Juicy Organic Juice Bar and Café. By locating the stands next to her business, Kuntz could manage both the market vendors and her own customers buying healthful juice creations from her inviting Airstream. It was a convivial atmosphere.



Previous Spread:
Sampling of fresh organic produce sold on any given Saturday in Seaside. All photographs courtesy of Eric Marcus.

Opposite:
The Seaside Farmer's Market had a modest start with just three vendors in 2008. By 2012 vendor stalls wrap around the Town Center. Photographs courtesy of Eric Marcus.

Left:
The Seaside Farmer's Market begins at the southeast corner of the Town Center, adjacent to Raw & Juicy Organic Juice Bar and Café. It has the distinction of being the only year-round market in the panhandle of Florida. Photographs by Dhiru Thadani.



As summer came to a close that first year and vacationers went home it was challenging to keep vendors committed to the market. With foot traffic on the wane and reduced interest in the few remaining vendors, Kuntz initiated a breakfast event each Saturday morning to draw people to visit regularly. Each week she invited a different member of the community to prepare his or her most popular breakfast dish. A Seaside homeowner might make Tortilla Español one week and the following week the sound technician from the Repertory Theatre might prepare Potato Black Bean Sauté. Everyone loved it. People came just to see who was cooking and what was on the menu. The entertainment value was precious but magic happened after the breakfast event; people who stopped to see “the show” stayed to shop at the market. By 2010 the Seaside Farmers Market was the only year-round market in the Florida Panhandle.

Seaside Farmers Market has strict participation rules, a challenge that resulted initially in limited vendors and moderate growth. Steady growth came when Kuntz

encouraged already passionate vendors to keep producing the high quality products they were delivering and to consider what possibilities lay ahead. Kuntz became allies with vendors wanting to do more, do something different or bring something new to market. Today, the market is a haven for small farmers and food artisans perfecting their craft. Several vendors have developed their businesses to the point that they also supply local restaurants and food retailers, and a few vendors have even opened storefronts.

The Seaside Farmers Market has become an incubator for individuals and small farms looking to localize and make unique the food landscape in the southeast. It has also transformed itself into a vibrant and thriving Saturday morning gathering spot. What once started as a simple veggie stand is and will continue to be a market that rivals any well-established farmers markets elsewhere in the country. It seems impossible to imagine Saturdays in Seaside without it.