





GROWING CONCERNS

Wellingtonians love their weekend food markets, but do they realise that much of their fruit and veg comes not from the stallholders' own soil but from a warehouse in Johnsonville?

Article by Max Rashbrooke | Photography by Antony Kitchener

{ Carrots from Southland; garlic from Marlborough; tomatoes from Ohaupo }

{ Swedes from Ohakune; cucumber from Pukekohe, and from Papakura too }

It's a clear, sharp-edged morning at Harbourside Market, where, in the shadow of Te Papa, the fruit and veg stallholders are doing a brisk trade in cauliflowers, capsicums, oranges and broccoli. This is, supposedly, one of the more intimate ways to buy food: outdoors, away from the sterile air of the supermarket, and with a vendor who has some kind of personal connection with their wares.

And yet, at Harbourside, as little as one piece of fruit in five will have been grown by the person selling it; the rest is bought midweek from the wholesalers in Grenada North - and that food can come from anywhere in the country, or indeed the world. Not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that. But it does raise the question of just what we think we're getting when we reach our hand into that basket of broccoli.

Wellington city has four main weekend markets for fruit and vegetables. The first, and most recent, is at Hill Street, by the new St Paul's Cathedral. It is a straightforward farmers' market, the only one in town, operating within strict limits on distance and stringent demands of intimacy. All the food must be produced within 350 kilometres of Wellington - a limit that allows the market to include one vendor from the Hawke's Bay, although the rest are from the Horowhenua and the Wairarapa. The stallholder must also have grown the food.

Their produce is correspondingly fresh, having been harvested on either Friday night or very early Saturday morning, and conveyed to the market by 7am Saturday. It's all part of a venture that aims, in the words of market founder Jo Freeman, "to educate people about where produce comes from".



The second market, the City Market in the old Herd Street post office building, is full of boutique and specialist stalls, and “loosely follows” the farmer’s market guidelines, says founder Rachel Taulelei, who also runs fish supplier Yellow Brick Road. In general, stallholders must either sell produce grown in the greater Wellington region – which includes Horowhenua and the Wairarapa – or manufacture their product in the region, even if the food comes from further afield.

The other two markets, Harbourside and Victoria Street, are a slightly different case of cauliflowers as it were, and their stallholders have an altogether more complicated route to market. At Harbourside, which is at pains not to claim to be a ‘farmers’ market’ as such, the 11 big truck-owning fruit and veg stallholders are all from up the Horowhenua coast – Levin, Otaki, Ohau – apart from one, who hails from Palmerston North. They are all growers, and they produce the sorts of plants you might expect to find in the lower North Island: cauliflowers, cabbages, spinach, Chinese vegetables. But the rest – the other vegetables, and almost all the fruit – they buy wholesale.

These growers’ road to the market begins early in the week in a series of vast warehouses in Grenada North, just east of State Highway 1 opposite the Tawa turn-off. These warehouses hold the four growers’ markets, or wholesale markets, or growers’ agents, depending on your terminology: Turners & Growers, Market Gardeners, Fresh Max and Fresh Direct. These firms buy food direct from growers all over New Zealand and freight it to Grenada North,

where it arrives in the evening and is then snapped up the next day by purchasers from across the food world: supermarkets, caterers, suppliers to restaurants and cafés, and the market stallholders.

The stallholders generally stop by early in the week to pick up the ‘hard’ lines that will keep for several days: onions, parsnips and the like. They drive them back to the Horowhenua and put them in a chiller to keep them fresh. On a Thursday or Friday, usually around 5.30–8.30 in the morning, they will be back in Grenada North to haggle for more sensitive fruit and vegetables, which are also taken back home and chilled.

The growers then harvest their own greens on Friday, and usually drive down to Wellington on Saturday morning to hawk their wares at one of the Saturday markets in Newtown, Lower Hutt or Porirua. They may then head back home to harvest more greens, before driving down again for the Sunday market at Harbourside, or they may stay in town.

The upshot of all this activity, according to Harbourside manager Fraser Ebbett, is that 15–20 percent of the produce sold is from the grower’s own soil; the rest they have bought. At Victoria Street, though the proportions are different – manager Graham Hamilton says eight of the market’s 19 stallholders are growers, while the rest sell produce they buy wholesale – the story is much the same. It doesn’t claim to be a farmers’ market, although it is often labelled one. The greens there are grown by their vendors; the other vegetables – tomatoes, avocados, eggplants and the like – and the fruit are generally

bought wholesale. Some vendors, like David Wang (pictured), run a fruit and veg store during the week, and buy in all their produce.

Aside from the origin of the food, there is also the question of its quality. Wholesalers like Turners & Growers have a ferociously strict system for grading their fresh produce, sorting every piece of food into three categories: tag one, tag two and tag three. Tag one tomatoes, for instance, are allowed no more than 0.25 square centimetres of blemishes per piece.

The market stallholders are not, however, buying tag one: that produce goes to the supermarkets, among others. The stallholders tend instead to buy tag two and tag three fruit. Turners & Growers’ central region manager, John Crowther, picking his words carefully, says: “What’s sold at the [Sunday] markets is product that wouldn’t be sold in the supermarket. It’s always cheaper at the [Sunday] markets. Well, there’s a reason for that.”

Kiwifruit from the Bay of Plenty; onions and tomatoes from Pukekohe; parsnips from the South Island, now that Ohakune has finished

Exactly what Sunday morning shoppers understand they are getting is a disputed matter. Tony Jung, a stallholder at Harbourside, insists people ultimately buy food “by the eye”: if it’s no good, they spot it. He also thinks it’s obvious where the food comes from. “People know it,” he says, grinning broadly into the morning sun. “It’s many years we are here [selling fruit and veg]. So people know what you are growing.”