

# To Market, To Market

*Vermont's premier farmers' market is almost four decades old and still going strong.*

Story and photos by Anthony Reczek



**T**HE BA-SIL IS FRESH AND THE ATTITUDE'S GO-OD..."

Howard Prussack has just launched into a song about the Brattleboro Area Farmers' Market (BAFM) to the tune of Petula Clark's "Downtown."

*"Just listen to the lemonade, when the ice begins to jiggle..."*

It is quite impressive for an impromptu performance: in tune and with rhymes clever enough for a smack-down with Weird Al. Customers at his High Meadows Farm booth are amused. For a moment this is the Borscht Belt, not a flower and vegetable stand, but what's a farmers' market if not a place to be entertained? And this one ranks

among the finest in all of Vermont.

Howard happens to be the co-founder of the BAFM and a vendor since the market's original approval by the town's board of selectmen some 39 years ago. From humble origins in an abandoned loft in downtown Brattleboro, it has become a bustling marketplace with upwards of 60 vendors and more than \$600,000 in total annual sales. And for almost every regional and national media outlet recommending a Brattleboro getaway, it is a must-do activity.

The vendors at the primary market site in western Brattleboro are arranged along the shaded periphery of the area, leaving a spacious semi-shaded

"commons" in the center. Their goods fall loosely into three main categories: agriculture, prepared foods, and crafts.

At least 40 percent of the space is reserved for agricultural vendors who produce everything they sell. What they bring—vegetables, flowers, fruit, honey, eggs, meat, and cheeses—make for some of the more colorful displays at the market.

It has been a long time since "prepared foods" consisted mostly of baked beans, pickles, and "haymaker's switchel" (an old-time recipe of cider vinegar, water, honey, and a dash of cayenne pepper). Now there is an abundance of scrumptious choices throughout the day, from locally roasted coffee and



The market is a veritable smorgasbord of veggies and handcrafted items from local farms, a throwback to the days when all sorts of trading went on (although horse-trading is no longer part of the picture!).



**Jerry Smith of Deer Ridge Farm and Farm Camp in Guilford wraps a purchase for a customer. He has been a fixture at the market for the past 30 years and first met his wife Lisa when she came to his stand “looking for some herbs for a tea garden.”**



Howard Prussack and his son, Courtney, are regular vendors at the market. Their High Meadows Farm booth is where Howard launched into impromptu song for the photographer, and was also hawking his signature Walla Walla sweet onions.



Marion Major and Becca Dixon with the award-winning cheeses of Vermont Shepherd Farm in Westminister West. The 250-acre farm has become famous for its award-winning sheep and mixed-milk cheeses, made in small, 10- to 30-wheel batches.

baked goods to cuisine from around the globe. Toward noon the commons can look like one large outdoor restaurant.

And for handmade goods that can be enjoyed long after the market day ends, the “crafts” vendors offer wonderful soaps, pottery, jewelry, and handspun wool products.

Behind the scenes for nearly four decades, the BAFM has developed a casual but effective volunteer governance, with a board of directors and currently, 13 different committees. All vendors are expected to serve on at least two committees.

What visitors to the market can experience is essentially the fruit of that cumulative effort: a comfortable and engaging place that will draw them back, again and again.

And come back they do, from places near and far.

Lisa Rachmuth, her husband Carl, and their children Samantha and Max live in New York City but have a second home in the area. They have been coming to the Saturday market nearly every weekend for the last five years.

Lisa is quick to sing the praises of the market. “We love it here. It’s a special

place for us.” She warms to the subject and explains over the next few minutes. “This is our Saturday retreat. No matter what time we get in on Friday, Saturday we are here. My kids love it here; they walk in and go straight to what they want to do. We probably know half the vendors here ... my daughter Samantha goes to camp with the kids from the flower stand over there. We’re so connected to this place.”

She proudly describes how her son Max created a unit for his first grade class on farmers’ markets, with an emphasis on the BAFM. The presentation, she says,



Among many repeat visitors to the market are Lisa and Carl Rachmuth, together with their children, Samantha and Max. They have attended the farmers' market on Saturdays nearly every weekend it has been held for the last five years.

elicited questions on the variety of goods available, and in particular, a curiosity about the presence of prepared foods.

Howard reflects on how the market has grown to incorporate all different kinds of vendors, despite intermittent calls to keep it purely agricultural. "Historically, farmers' markets were all of that. There was horse-trading, pigs, chickens. This is a throwback to the original market day, and that's why it's so successful. There really is all of this horse trading going on, making connections ... it's where you meet people and romances start and all kinds of stuff goes on here." Then reverting back to his entertainer schtick, he starts laughing and says, "You have no idea what goes on here ... things go on...."

Chris Morrill grew up in Saxtons River, a town north of Brattleboro, and after a stint in Los Angeles in the entertainment industry, went back there to live. He comes to the market regularly, on his BMW motorcycle. He says these visits are a way to relax "and a great release ... it's a good vibe here, you can almost say it's a spiritual place." Asked to elaborate, he says, "There's a harmony here ... [it is] serene and positive and sharing." He looks around, at the children playing in the sandbox, the full picnic tables, and the relaxed faces, and then speculates that people are drawn to the sense of community in the place.

Indeed, everywhere you look there are conversations—some quiet, others

animated, many appearing soulful and heartfelt. The back and forth is probably about all the usual things: one's health, gardens, romances, family members, and politics near and far. And it is between people of all ages: toddlers, their parents, adolescents, their friends, and younger and older adults.

New generations are emerging now in the vendor community. Howard's son Courtney has taken over the operation of the High Meadows Farm stand over the past five years, he says, after "coming down to this market my whole life." Truly his father's son, he jokes that his dad now has time to "kick back and drink tequila," before offering that it frees up valuable time for Howard to concentrate on the family farm.

Little 7-year-old Max Rachmuth runs back to his mom. She asks, "What's your favorite part of this place?" He thinks about it for a few seconds and then says, "everything!" His 12-year-old sister Samantha has the same exact response five minutes later.

Perhaps they are feeling what Petula Clark was singing about in her 1964 pop hit "Downtown."

As in, just...go downtown; things'll be great when you're downtown. 🎵

**Anthony Reczek, a photographer and writer, was born and raised in Vermont and now lives in exile in Connecticut. His New England photoblog is at [anthonyreczek.com](http://anthonyreczek.com).**



Zach Page of Wild Shepherd Farm in Athens makes a sales pitch to a shopper for his garlic, a specialty. The farm grows 30,000 heads of garlic in seven varieties yearly and also raises grass-fed lamb, beef, and pastured pork.



Steve Spensley takes a break from performing to share some basics of fiddle playing with a young fan. Performing musicians have been part of the market since its early days.

## Just the facts

### Brattleboro Area Farmers' Market

May through October

Saturdays 9:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m.

Route 9 near the covered bridge

Wednesdays 10:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m.

Gibson-Aiken Center

207 Main Street

Call (802) 254-8885 or visit

[brattleborofarmersmarket.com](http://brattleborofarmersmarket.com).

