



Farmer's Markets and Wild Foods

This extension note discusses how foraged products, like mushrooms and berries, are marketed to urban consumers at farmers' markets as "wild food." Farmers' markets are growing in popularity across Canada and North America, because they are thought to offer healthy, tasty and just alternatives to the industrial food system and its products. This trend is part of broader movements calling for more natural, organic and now local foods, in response to concerns over the use of chemicals in agriculture, and the exploitation of land, farmers and labourers by agricultural corporations.

Overview

The latest, ultimate alternative of this sort is wild food, thought of as the most natural food there could possibly be, "more organic than organic." Because many imagine the wilderness it comes from as a place untouched by humans, many think that wild food must by definition be free from the pollution, unnatural manipulation and even unfair trade relationships they associate with the modern food industry. In sum, wild food is thought of as food untainted by industrialization.

This note discusses how four general types of consumers of wild foods—health-seekers, adventurers, traditionalists and gourmets—value these foods for different reasons, linked to the conceptions of today's alternative food movements. This demonstrates how these conceptions and values can be used to successfully market foraged products to urban consumers at farmers' markets.

Health-Seekers

Health-seekers are interested in wild foods in one of two related ways. Some see them as the purest foods possible, thinking of the wild as far from human habitation, development and industry, and therefore more-or-less unpolluted. They figure that, since wild foods are by definition uncultivated, then they must also be free from fertilizers, pesticides or any additional, possibly harmful, compounds. Similarly, they conceive of harvesting as taking place by hand or other low-technology means. Machinery can harm the product, its nutrients or the environment by rough handling, exposure to high heat or pressure, or the depositing of lubricants, exhausts and other pollutants. Many health-seekers also demand products packaged in glass, paper or other non-plastic containers, and will strongly contest, even refuse to purchase, products packaged in plastic.

The second way health-seekers often conceive of wild foods is as especially nutritious superfoods. Superfoods combine the excitement of rare and



“newly discovered” food products with scientific explanations about the presence of seemingly rare, powerful and newly discovered nutrient compounds like antioxidants (Image 1). Because wild foods are often unknown in broad markets, and because the wild is imagined in North American mythology as a place full of unknown and powerful forces, wild foods fit handily into this way of thinking. It also ties into long-standing marketing of animal and plant products like elk velvet, shark fin and various herbal compounds as both natural and especially powerful medicines. Reading up on nutritional information and scientific studies about your most popular products can pay off, as can having a small selection of books or papers related to your products displayed on your market table. But be careful about making health claims. Although you can use anecdotes about your own or others’ experiences, making specific claims to cure or prevent disease will draw unwanted attention from regulators.

To successfully market foraged products to health-seekers, it is essential to pay attention to all of these dimensions. Be aware of the places where you forage, avoiding developed or managed areas that are possibly polluted. Be able to identify and discuss their wilderness features, such as remoteness from large urban centres or major roadways. Sensitivity to packaging materials and design can help avoid associations with industrial production, and amplify associations with naturalness: a “rustic” paper bag may be the best thing going. Finally, take care in harvest, handling and storage to keep product fresh and unpolluted. Avoid plastic bags in favour of materials like baskets that offer air circulation, and try to keep product cool or refrigerated during storage and transport.

Adventurers

A wide variety of people come to wild food stalls at farmers’ markets to tell stories of their own experiences foraging and being in the woods. Let’s call them adventurers, because whether they in fact know a lot or a little, they are

interested in wild foods because of a desire to experience and understand the power of nature. Unlike health-seekers, these consumers may not be particularly opposed to industrial food. At the same time, they often believe that wild foraged products are more nutritious and flavourful because they have not been weakened by domestication. Many of them are men in their late 30s and up, and, fitting a “Survivorman” stereotype, they relish the challenge of mastering the wild at full strength: knowing about it and being able to survive in and exploit it (Image 2). Like a fisherman with a story of a prize fish, they also want others to validate this image by recognizing their knowledge and skills.



While they’ll want to hear your stories, too, above all they’ll want you to listen to theirs, to feel that you are interested in what they have to say, and that you respect them as a fellow forager. They may have a romantic image of foraging, seeing it as a sort of leisure occupation or hobby, or a side-benefit of spending a day in the woods, rather than as a difficult and tiring job. And they might not be interested in buying too much at first, since they “just found some last week” themselves. But if you can show them how much time, effort and uncertainty they’ll save with value-added, pre-processed products like pickled vegetation, dried mushrooms or jams and jellies, they might come around. Adventurers are especially open to buying these sorts of items as gifts for friends and family. This is a way for them to share their interest with people who might be a little suspicious of eating something



“Dad found in the forest,” but can be tempted to try a professionally prepared and packaged product.

Traditionalists

Traditionalists are interested in wild foods because they evoke nostalgia for an imagined past, when traditional practices, stronger social ties and an innate harmony with nature made for better quality products, and a more ethical and enjoyable life. This takes a few forms. First, these foods can awaken fond memories of customer’s own familial and cultural traditions, like foraging with a parent or grandparent, perhaps in a country of origin other than Canada. Second, the same logic is often applied to other cultures, as when wild foods are promoted as a way to revitalize the traditions and traditional foods of Canadian aboriginals threatened by colonialism. Finally, these forms of nostalgia can become a general sense that “things were better back then,” in a time imagined as before rampant industrialization and its negative impacts on society and environment. To traditionalists, wild foods are important because they seem to

IS WILD FOOD ORGANIC?

Farmers’ market customers and managers often ask if items are organic. Some markets require vendors sell only certified organic products. However, certifying wild-foraged foods is difficult. They are often collected from a wide variety of remote areas, with multiple uses and users: hard to monitor. But this remoteness of the wild is also what suggests it is untouched by humans, making wild foods in principle the most natural, organic foods imaginable. Customers and managers will agree with this logic—if they feel they can trust your honesty and judgement, something you might have to prove over time. For processed items like pickled spruce tips or salal berry jelly, using ingredients like certified organic vinegar or sugar will help.

capture and preserve the best qualities of ways of life threatened by modernity.

Traditionalists are easy to spot: they’ll ask questions about the cultural and historical uses of your products, or they’ll start telling you about their own. One great way to make a sale is by encouraging them to feel and share their nostalgia in these ways. Another is to develop some knowledge of your own around such traditions and add it to the conversation. The “made by hand” processing and packaging that attracts health-seekers will resonate with traditionalists, too, if for slightly different reasons. They have an interest in traditional, hand-crafted, do-it-yourself ways of doing things, believing them to produce better quality through a more authentic connection to the work and the results. For instance, if you hand-slice your mushrooms before drying them, with a knife you inherited from your own foraging grandfather, tell them about it. If you can explain the methods you use and why you use them, it will add a dose of tradition into your product in a physical sense. More importantly, by showing customers you share the same values, you’ll encourage them to support and enjoy your efforts to keep these important traditions alive.

Gourmets

Gourmets are interested in wild foods as something rare and novel that promises a new, exciting taste. They’re willing to pay high prices for something they haven’t tried before, something they can be the first to “discover.” They’re also willing to pay a lot for something everyone is talking about but they haven’t tasted. Prestige, quality and refinement are all important to gourmets, though some of them are also excited by the idea of discovering a new “hole in the wall” and would appreciate insider tips on the more “authentic,” less over-sophisticated ways everyday people eat what you have to sell.

Gourmets fit into the alternative scene of farmers’ markets because they think that



products that are good for health, society and environment are also better quality: more delicious. And although gourmets can be more interested in showing off than doing good, they're also concerned to be seen as responsible and ethical consumers. You could turn off some of the other types of customers by focusing on the things that this market segment responds to: complex packaging, luxury branding and a sense of distinction. Unless you want to focus on this, it may be better to satisfy gourmets by helping them feel like insiders. Direct them to your most special and hard-to-find items in inventory, or offer to set aside newly arriving product for them.



photo by Wendy Cocksedge

You might also want to be prepared to share recipe suggestions, and be able to discuss the flavours of your products in terms of other foods they pair well with. This can be especially powerful if you can relate the ways especially statusful products, like matsutake (pine) or morel mushrooms, are used in high status European or Asian cuisines and restaurants. Offering product tastings can also be an irresistible strategy. Finally, be aware that gourmets will evangelize for a product they really enjoy, and so can be a powerful source of word of mouth marketing.

Conclusion

Marketing foraged products to urban consumers

at farmers' markets is a bit of a balancing act. Often you'll find all four of these customer types intermingled in the same person in various ratios, and it's up to you to determine what motivates them most and how to address it. There's also a fifth type of customer: the totally surprised one. They've never heard of any of these foods, and so aren't motivated by health, adventure, tradition or taste. At least, not yet. You'll have to educate them and, based on your initial intuition, build upon the sorts of values that they seem to bring to your table.

Useful Links

Vancouver Farmers Markets

<http://www.eatlocal.org>

Vancouver Farmers Markets organizes and manages farmers' markets in the urban Vancouver area. Their site includes a list of markets and vendors, as well as tips and guidelines for selling at them.

Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market Homepage

<http://dufferinpark.ca/market/wiki/wiki.php>

Toronto's Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market is a major year-round market. Their site offers a list of vendors and guidelines for prospective marketers.

Forbes Wild Foods Homepage

<http://www.wildfoods.ca/>

An Ontario company offering a wide variety of wild food and mushroom products both online and at farmers' markets across Toronto.

Jardins Sauvages Homepage

<http://jardins Sauvages.com/>

Jardins Sauvages is a Québec company that sources wild foods from across the province and sells them at Montreal's Jean Talon Market.

The Wild Chef

<http://www.foodnetwork.ca/ontv/shows/the->



wild-chef/show.html?titleid=120384

The Wild Chef is a Canadian Food Network TV series that follows Québécois chef Martin Picard as he hunts for and prepares foods from the Canadian wild.

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