

The Chef and the Farmers' Market

{ Recipes From *Market Vegetarian* }

Photos by Richard Jung, from *Market Vegetarian: Easy Organic Recipes for Every Occasion* by Ross Dobson, Ryland Peters & Small, www.rylandpeters.com

IF YOU'RE NOT ALREADY A DEVOTEE of farmers' markets, Ross Dobson will convert you. It's not that he preaches about farmers' markets, but the Australian chef-turned-writer is as passionate about them as he is about food. It's a twin enthusiasm that's as evident in page after page of his second cookbook, *Market Vegetarian: Easy Organic Recipes for Every Occasion*, as it was in his standout cookbook debut, *Kitchen Seasons*.

So lavishly does Dobson praise fresh fruits and veggies and with such zeal does he make them his key, if not sole, ingredient, that you may guess he's a vegetarian. But you'd be wrong.

How did a carnivore come to put so much of his creative focus on produce? "I really enjoy eating out at many of Sydney's diverse ethnic restaurants—southeast Asian and Middle Eastern in particular. These cuisines have a very rich history of vegetarian dishes, recipes that have evolved organically, like curries, noodles, stir-fries, dips, and pizzas. These are not token vegetarian options but beautiful in their own right. I may not be a vegetarian, but this is food I love to eat."

His fascination with international cuisines wasn't sparked in culinary school or during restaurant apprenticeships. Although he picked up some skills working in cafés and restaurants in Sydney, he's a self-taught chef who was encouraged by his family to indulge his interests.

"I was lucky enough to be influenced by diverse ethnic flavors from a young age. Our neighbors on one side were from Sicily, which meant we had lots of wonderful homemade pasta and

tomato sauces. On the other side, our neighbors and dear friends were from Hong Kong, so all sorts of wonderful Cantonese treats were passed over the fence for us to enjoy," recalls Dobson.

As it turns out, these neighbors satisfied one hunger and fueled another. "I wanted to know how this food was cooked, so I would literally hang out in their kitchens all day and tag along on shopping trips to their favorite delis and specialty stores, and my parents encouraged me to cook these exotic foods," Dobson says. Along the way, he acquired a devotion to farmers' markets.

Of course, you could get many of the ingredients to make Dobson's wonderful dishes at your supermarket instead of a farmers' market, but why would you want to? Not only would the meals be a little less wonderful, but you'd miss both the practical benefits and the adventure. And yes, he says, it is an adventure!

There are the obvious reasons to haunt the farm stalls. By shopping at the source, you'll get fresher food, give a boost to the environment, and support the local economy. When you buy food that's been grown and marketed locally, you'll know it's in season, so it will taste better, Dobson says.

Fruits and vegetables that have been shipped a long distance have been picked earlier than they would have been if they'd been grown in your region, which can have a great impact on flavor. "Peaches, for example, really benefit from ripening on a tree, as they naturally become juicy, sweet, and succulent. Picking them early prevents this," Dobson notes. Keep that in mind when you make his Upside-Down Peach Cake!

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Another benefit: Encounters at a farmers' market are bound to be more personal, says Dobson, than those at a supermarket, where you merely hand over your money and walk away with groceries. "The bottom line of making as much money as possible is not always the driving force behind the hard-working farmers who grow and supply produce at these markets. Who else would want to be up before dawn in rain, hail, or shine to peddle their wares? The growers do it for the love of it. There's a definite passion needed to grow a unique heirloom tomato variety, for instance. These growers keep traditions going, which in turn means diversity, unique local varieties of foods, and therefore a wider range of foods," says Dobson.

Furthermore, time spent in farmers' markets is likely to make your meals a bit healthier and may stretch your culinary horizons. You'll not only become more aware of what you put in the pan when you cook, Dobson explains, but you'll be more likely to experiment with ingredients you've never cooked with before. "And what a perfect place to do it. The people selling you the stuff probably grew it, so ask them questions. You have the opportunity to get to know the growers; look them in the eye and ask about where the food you are going to eat comes from. This is important, but it's also fun," he adds.

Rubbing elbows with farmers is also a learning experience for your children, Dobson adds. "They can see real dirty potatoes of many colors and learn that meals do not come from the freezer," he notes.

Food shopping can be a chore, Dobson acknowledges, "so why not make it more enjoyable?" One of his favorite farmers' market experiences occurred last year at the famous Seattle markets. "I know it's very touristy, but I loved watching them throw the salmon around. This was all very new and exciting to me. We

ROSS DOBSON'S

10 TIPS FOR MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR FARMERS' MARKET

1. Post a copy of the dates and times of the nearest farmers' market on the refrigerator.
2. Have a farmers' market kit ready to go: lots of spare change (they may not take credit or debit cards), recycled bags or backpacks to carry goods, and an umbrella or a hat if it's hot or rainy.
3. For larger markets, keep a map handy so you can plan your shopping. Know where the stores are and park closest to those you will most likely visit.
4. Know your growers or store assistants. They'll give you great tips on how to use fresh produce and maybe even a recipe or two.
5. Ask for special orders if there is something you want in advance and have the store specially pack it for you.
6. Buy in bulk and in season to save money.
7. For convenience, start a collective with friends and take turns going to the market.
8. Make the most of unusual, exotic fresh produce, as these items will probably be much cheaper.
9. Take the kids and have them interact with the farmers so they'll learn where their food comes from.
10. Have a seasonal chart at home so you can plan meals, buying in-season produce and saving money.

[Australians] simply don't get all that amazing wood-smoked salmon," he says.

But Dobson doesn't have to travel halfway around the world to get that kind of satisfaction. "Closer to home, every week is a memorable farmers' market experience for me. Where I live in Sydney is close to a very old market, right in the heart of the city's exciting Chinatown. Here, much of the fresh food sold is grown locally. It's fantastic for fresh, aromatic Asian herbs and fruit. I love my weekly excursions there and feel very lucky to have this so close to my home," he says.

Dobson won't go so far as to say that shopping at a farmers' market will make you a better cook. "Maybe it won't. I'm not sure, but isn't it good to have a go?" he wonders. At the least, it will increase your respect for food. "You'll treat it less as something you take for granted and, therefore, enjoy cooking with it more," he says.

One thing he's certain about: Shopping at farmers' markets is addictive. "Once you do," insists Dobson, "there is no turning back." ♦

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