

FARMERS' MARKET INTEREST GROWING

In touch with food growers

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Market: n. fr. Latin *mercatus*. A meeting together of people for the purpose of trade. (Webster's Dictionary)

It's early afternoon at the new Duncan Farmers' Market and two lone loaves of bread grace Dodie Miller's table of baked goods, homemade jams, jellies and chutneys, sheltered from threatening black clouds by the market's wooden canopy.

If you ask, Miller will tell you the bread - the last of 150 loaves - was baked yesterday in one of two ovens in her Cobble Hill home, the fruit of a day's labor that began at 6 a.m. and didn't stop until the wee hours of Saturday morning.

Miller, who also makes socks, vests and sweaters with handspun wool, is surprisingly cheerful for someone operating on only a few hours sleep.

Maybe that's because she rarely takes home more than one or two loaves from Friday's all-day baking session; half an hour after the market's 9 a.m. opening, not one of the 50-loaf run of multi-grain bread can be had for love or money.

Like many of the market's almost 50 vendors - all members of the Cowichan Valley Smallholders, Miller has her faithful customers.

Drawn by the opportunity to buy a variety of fresh, local products, they keep coming back for a quality that's becoming more elusive everyday: human contact.

In an era of grocery stores where customers scan their own, cellophane, bar-coded wrapped items, the market serves as a unique opportunity to meet face-to-face with the producers of food.

"The atmosphere we're trying to promote for the market is a local meeting place where you can purchase direct from the producer rather than a middle man," Miller says.

"As we've become more urbanized, we've lost touch with the production of our food - it comes in packages and tins and glass jars. This way, you get a feeling of more connection with your food and the way it's grown.

"It's not only food for the body, it becomes in a way food for the soul."

With the market recently reopened after a winter hiatus, its clientele has returned to the Mound in numbers, some for the array



of bottled honeys, baking, bedding plants and arts and crafts, others just for the social life.

"A lot of people have commented in past years that they've made coming into the market a regular Saturday morning event," Miller says.

"It's almost like an outing as opposed to just going and doing your shopping."

Besides offering fresh, homemade goods to the community, markets have traditionally served as an opportunity for small-scale farmers to sell their products.

Although most of the area's smallholders rely on at least one family member's full-time job to get by, the market can be a valuable source of supplementary income.

For Miller, it allowed her to give up her job as a registered nurse three years ago to take up farming full-time.

She and husband Steve, a statistician with the provincial government, now raise free range chickens, turkeys, steers and pigs on their 10-acre Cheeke Road farm.

They grow vegetables for their own use, and bring any extra to the market.

It's a lifestyle the two former Montrealers chose deliberately more than 20 years ago, starting small with a flower bed outside their Montreal home, and later planting a full-scale backyard garden that horrified their urban Winnipeg neighbors.

You could almost say the Millers are part of a minor trend.

In the wake of recent years' decadence and conspicuous consumption, the 60s back-to-the-land

movement has generated a sympathetic ripple in the 1990s.

"On 10 acres or less, you can sustain most of your own food production and provide a reasonable amount of surplus toward feeding other people," Miller says.

"This is one way to return to simpler things that's within the grasp of most people. It doesn't take a lot of major equipment and you can pick up knowledge as you go."

Like any form of farming, smallholdings require no small degree of commitment.

As Miller puts it, "'free time' becomes a euphemism for 'do some chores.'"

But a group of dedicated members of the Cowichan Valley smallholders has managed to keep the downtown market on track despite the demands of home-based businesses.

Operated on and off for the past 100 years, the market was revived three years ago and has steadily gained in popularity.

Despite the work involved, Miller - who chairs the smallholders' farmers market committee - says she expects the tradition to endure.

"We have every intention of keeping it going for the next 100 years."

The new Duncan farmers' market is open every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. until the end of October. Stalls are available at a cost of \$150 for a full season and \$75 for a half-season, with a limited number of casual spaces for let at \$15 a day.