



# Laytonville Farmers' Market Case Study

## A Rural Community Market

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March, 2000

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Agricultural Sustainability Institute at University of California, Davis

Part of a Study on Retail Farmers' Markets and Rural Development in  
conjunction with researchers at Cornell University and Iowa State  
University

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Funded by the Fund for Rural America, USDA

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## Introduction

Every Sunday afternoon, from June through October, a half dozen or more local farmers gather in the parking lot of Laytonville, California's Natural Foods Store to sell what they grow and to share their ideas and visions for future projects in their community. This is the Laytonville Certified Farmers' Market (LCFM); just off State Highway 101, in the heart of Mendocino County.

Laytonville, a rural community with a population of about 1500 persons, is located 150 miles north of San Francisco in the cool coastal mountains of California's redwood country. The depletion of local timber resources and increased awareness of the environmental degradation associated with logging has encouraged the development alternative sources of income and industry. The Laytonville Certified Farmers' Market provides a number of opportunities for people in rural Mendocino County to develop new businesses. In addition to making direct consumer sales, the vendors benefit from the market's function as a meeting place and forum for discussion. The market is an important community event where business contacts are made and public projects, such as student programs that enhance education at local schools and a community kitchen, are born. Although the Laytonville market is a very local event, with most vendors traveling less than 20 miles to reach it, customers include tourists from as far away as Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon. This broad customer base provides vendors with the opportunity to expand their businesses through mail order sales. Examples of these benefits are

demonstrated by many of the market's successful vendors as well as other community members involved with the market.

## **Local Farmers and Community Members Start a Market**

Sometime in 1991, a group of Laytonville residents with a common interest in farmers' markets began planning for a market in their own town. Several of the people involved were already producing fruits and vegetables for sale either through wholesale outlets or at other farmers' markets in the area; some had hopes of starting a business through the market, and others saw it as a potential educational resource. The group approached the Mendocino County Farmers' Market Association (formerly Redwood Empire) for sponsorship. The association was already sponsoring several other markets in Mendocino County and offered the reduced cost of group insurance coverage and the publicity an established farmers' market association offers. Nine years later, everyone seems very satisfied with the support the association continues to provide.

"They are very active and supportive of vendors" says Glo Plitt-Croom, manager and vendor for over six years at Laytonville, "Each market has the same rules, but Laytonville has an option to offer reduced stall fees."

This provides an important incentive to vendors, especially new vendors, at a seasonal market with a relatively small customer base. Weekly gross sales at the LCFM for 1997 averaged just over \$300, compared to the \$3,383 average for California markets in communities of under 10,000 persons (Feenstra and Lewis, 1999). Despite its small size, the market maintains a group of very loyal vendors and customers who benefit in many different ways, making the LCFM a successful market that continues to grow.

Glo farms on an eighth of an acre she calls Glo's Glee Garden, two miles from the farmers' market. Her primary occupation is substitute teaching, but six years ago, she decided to try selling extra produce and herbs from her garden at the newly formed Laytonville Certified Farmers' Market. The extra income from the market sales helped support her real passion; goats. Glo has been breeding goats for show and homesteading since 1982, when she traded a dozen ducks for her first doe. In 1996, Glo made her first batch of 100 percent pure goat milk soap. The soap was a great hit at the market, and what started out as family Christmas presents quickly expanded into a significant agricultural craft business. Glo currently markets her soaps

and salves through the LCFM, at craft fairs and through mail order. She took over management of the market about six years ago and has helped guide it toward its success.

## Turning Tourists into Customers

The market's location right on Highway 101 makes it a prime stop for the constant stream of tourists bound for the North Coast and the Napa and Sonoma wine regions. People visiting the area are often interested in taking some of the local color and flavor with them. In addition to fresh produce – "So fresh it could kiss you!" is the market's slogan – many of the vendors at Laytonville have discovered the profitability of value-added products and crafts. That explains why this market has seen an increase in value-added products over the past three years as well as why 20 percent of the vendors have added a craft enterprise to their farming business.

Artisans also have taken on agricultural enterprises. Dana Eker is both a watercolor artist and an aquaculturist. Upon the encouragement of friends, she brought her paintings of farmers' market scenes and antique trucks to the LCFM. The brightly colored paintings with their local themes quickly attracted passing tourists who bought all the artist's work and supplemented the sales of other vendors. Dana's introduction to the agricultural side of direct marketing came in 1993, when she took over a salad sprout business from her son and daughter-in-law. Dana had been cultivating water plants for her own garden and began to bring some of them along to the local farmers' markets where she sold sprouts. The water plants sold well, and also brought her into contact with others interested in aquaculture, including research experts and business owners from as far away as Japan. Gradually, she became knowledgeable enough and gained the confidence she needed to begin consulting.

"Actually it was farmers' markets that started my pond business." says Dana, who found that farmers' markets provided her with both the advertising and exposure as well as the practice and experience she needed to develop her pond maintenance business. Dana still paints and hopes to become involved with agriculture education at the high school. Her vision is to link a student greenhouse project with the farmers' market.

## Mail Order Opportunities

In addition to direct sales, tourists provide an opportunity for vendors to develop and expand mail order businesses. Consumers who purchased products from the farmers' market while traveling often later seek those same products through mail order to give as gifts, or for their

own consumption. Several vendors offer special packaging for gifts and provide brochures and order forms which help to promote this kind of trade. Furthermore, the market has a printed directory with a brief description of each vendor's products and services. The directory gives traveling consumers the opportunity to continue to patronize the vendors' businesses even after they have returned home.

"At first, vendors were resistant, but when they saw the benefits gained at the Fort Bragg market from a similar directory, they were all for it." says Glo about the market directory.

Several vendors say they have made mail order sales through peoples' use of the directory and also find it useful for promoting their businesses locally. Glo developed the directory through a course taught by Kris Shelton at the Community Computer Lab. That class and the computer lab are projects of the North Coast Rural Challenge Network (NCRCN), a collaborative of rural school districts developed in part by another member of the LCFM, Binet Payne.

## Educational Resources

Binet also joined the LCFM seven years ago. She teaches science at the Laytonville Middle School and her reason for joining the market was two-fold. First, she hoped it would provide networking opportunities that would strengthen her garden science projects at the Laytonville Middle School (LMS). Also, she wanted the opportunity to get exposure for her and her husband's future exotic begonia business. The begonias have taken a back burner to Binet's work teaching at LMS and as a district coordinator at the NCRCN, though they did begin production at their nursery in 1998. Binet's education efforts include applied science projects in worm composting, a student-run mushroom cultivation business and the Earth Stewards and Garden Project that promotes sustainability and solutions to environmental issues through organic gardening and native plant landscaping. All these projects are administrated through the NCRCN.

The NCRCN is in its third year and receives funding from a variety of sources, including the Center for Ecoliteracy, the USDA, Cal-Serv and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation. While the NCRCN's connection to the Laytonville Farmers' Market may only be tangential, it has both supported the market, through Glo's use of the Community Computer Lab as well as used the market as an educational resource for experience in sustainable agriculture and gardening. The NCRCN promotes this involvement between area schools, businesses and the community with the goal of improving education and creating stronger communities.

Marian Franklin is another vendor at the LCFM who recognizes the educational resource potential farmers' markets provide. Marian started her Plants and Planters nursery business at the LCFM eight years ago. In addition to the cacti, succulents and other plants she cultivates in her nursery, Marian grows a wide variety of produce for sale at the Fort Bragg and Ukiah Farmers' markets in her 1/3 acre biointensive market garden. Marian sees farmers' markets as "teaching vehicles" for both consumers and vendors. She enjoys the direct contact she gets with her customers and uses the opportunity to educate people about sustainable growing practices for both the garden and production farm. Outside of the market, she teaches courses in biointensive gardening: a system of sustainable production practices developed largely by another Mendocino County organization, Ecology Action.

Marian and several other vendors from the LCFM have found that in addition to providing consumer education, the market also acts as a training ground for new vendors. This function becomes less effective, though, as the larger markets fill up. "It's a way to start but you need to move on to wholesale or retail to make a living," says Marian, who would like to see people move up or "graduate" from markets after they have been there awhile to make room for new vendors just getting established.

## **Community Code Kitchen: Pesto, Apple Sauce and Cookie Dough**

Another project underway in Laytonville that has benefited from the networking provided by the farmers' market is the development of a community code kitchen. It will serve as a place for vendors to add value to their produce through processing and for students to experience hands-on learning in cooking, nutrition and the food processing and service industry. Irene Engber, one of the founding vendors at the LCFM, sits on the committee to develop the community code kitchen. "The community kitchen will really help this market grow," says Irene, who also feels "value-added is where it's at!"

Irene and her husband Evan are members of the Hog Farm Collective, a group of people who own and manage the 600-acre Black Oak Ranch, five miles out of town. Evan runs a landscape restoration business and Irene grows organic produce on one acre at Black Oak Ranch. Though the growing season is short here, Irene is able to provide fresh produce to Wavy Gravy's Camp Winnarainbow, a children's performing arts summer camp for kids, as well as for two farmers' markets a week throughout the summer. Irene, like many of the other vendors at the LCFM,

wants to add value to her produce to increase her income from a small space. She had been making pesto for sale at farmers' markets in the code kitchen at Black Oak Ranch until about two years ago, but found it too difficult to schedule since the kitchen was simultaneously being used by the summer camp. The community code kitchen should provide her with better access to the facilities she needs, and the opportunity to expand her business significantly.

Helen Alfonte-Willson also hopes to expand her business through the community code kitchen. While still only in its inception stage, Helen's cookie dough business already supplies several natural food stores including Food for Thought in Petaluma and Santa Rosa, a food co-op in Eureka, and Wildberries in Arcata. Helen began her enterprise with fruit and vegetable production but pest problems pushed her to look for other marketing ideas. Cookie dough looks promising, especially in college towns like Arcata. She currently uses a local restaurant's certified kitchen and sells through a distributor who comes through Laytonville. The planned larger community kitchen facility will give her room to expand her business and to possibly add an Internet-based mail order service. Helen plans to return to the farmers' market next year and sell her cookie dough in the non-certified section.

Progress on the code kitchen is well under way. The group recently received a \$15,000 grant from the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors to conduct a feasibility study. After several rounds of surveys, the group chose the Harwood Hall Community Center as the location. The site is close to the high school, which will allow easy integration with existing education projects; it already houses the area's Healthy Start program. In addition to providing the space for vendors to add value to their produce, the Community Code Kitchen will support a mentorship program through which vendors will hire and train students from the high school interested in pursuing careers in agriculture and food processing.

John and Marbry Sipila plan to participate in the mentorship program by hiring a student to help them produce apple juice, sauce and jelly with the apples from Redtail Ranch, their four-acre CCOF certified organic orchard and farm. They have been farming for fifteen years and involved with farmers' markets for ten. They started at the nearby Willits' Certified Farmers' Market and joined the LCFM at its inception. Their product line is diverse, and includes cherries, asparagus, shitake mushrooms and honey in addition to the apples and more common vegetables they bring to market. This diversity makes them one of the LCFM's core vendors and enables them to have a wide selection of produce throughout the entire season. The opportunity to produce value-added products is an important one to John and Marbry who would otherwise have no use for the culls from their apple orchard. Juice, apple sauce and apple butter are also products

popular with tourists.

Marbry will be taking over management of the LCFM in 2000 and hopes to strengthen its vendor base by encouraging more casual and seasonal growers to participate and by bringing in a bread baker who will eventually be one of the community code kitchen's core users. Her own effort toward developing the kitchen includes grant writing and working with the West Company, a non-profit corporation in Ukiah that supports micro enterprise development through training and loans.

## Cooperative partnerships strengthen the community

At the market, vendors cooperate to strengthen their businesses by selling each other's produce from time-to-time under a second certificate. Regulations governing certified farmers' markets allow vendors to carry up to two other producer's products under a "second certificate" if certain requirements are met. This lets small-scale producers continue to market their produce at a certified farmers' market even when their production is too low to warrant their own direct participation. It also helps keep product diversity at the market. Many of the LCFM vendors use this feature to their advantage and consider it essential to their success. The vendors at the LCFM have talked about starting a more formal business co-op to market their produce wholesale but have not yet found the need.

In appreciation for the fresh, healthy produce the market provides, several other community members have contributed to the supportive environment at the LCFM by providing their services either for free or at a greatly reduced cost. Susan Shields, co-owner of the local newspaper, the Mendocino County Observer, gives the market discounted advertisement and tries to encourage younger people to participate. InTents, a local tent manufacturing business run by Dorje Bond, assists the market by maintaining their shade canopy at no cost.

Many of the successes at the LCFM and within the community itself have involved partnerships among individual vendors, small businesses and local organizations and schools. By sharing resources and ideas, projects such as those run through the North Coast Rural Challenge Network and the community code kitchen are becoming realities. The LCFM acts as a nucleation point for these partnerships in addition to supporting small businesses by providing an outlet for direct sales. It has also given many of its vendors the skills and confidence they



need to step up to the next level with their businesses and projects and given them the exposure they need to increase their customer base. All this happens in a place where competition is tempered by cooperation.

## **Resources**

### ***LAYTONVILLE CERTIFIED FARMERS' MARKET***

Marbry Sipila, Market Manager  
P O Box 55  
Laytonville, CA 95454  
(707) 984-8148

### ***MENDOCINO COUNTY FARMERS' MARKET ASSOCIATION***

Gypsy Spring  
P.O. Box 2176  
Fort Bragg, CA 95437  
(530) 937-4330

### ***NORTH COAST RURAL CHALLENGE NETWORK***

Kenneth Matheson, Superintendent  
Mendocino Unified School District  
P O Box 1154  
Mendocino, CA 95460  
(707) 937-5868  
[www.ncrcn.org](http://www.ncrcn.org)

### ***WEST COMPANY***

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