



2016 Old Town Farmers' Market Blogs

by Jane Hess Collins



May 28, 2016

Spring Valley Farm and Orchard – Picture Perfect Produce

If you want Spring Valley Farm and Orchard's strawberries, get to their Old Town Farmer's Market stand early. Last week at 9:00 a.m. their display table was laden with dozens of cartons of plump, red, tempting strawberries. When I returned to the market at 11:00 a.m. to buy them, the strawberries were all gone. Even the table

was gone. Alexandria shoppers know a good thing when they see it, or taste it in this case.

Dakota Janowitz knows it too. At 20 years old he is one of two farm managers of Spring Valley Farm and Orchard, a 455-acre farm and orchard in Romney, West Virginia. Owned by Eli and Misty Cook since 1993, Spring Valley is open year-round and employs between 15 and 80 staff, depending on the time of year. They tend 130 acres of vegetables, 170 acres of fruit orchards (the remaining 155 acres are woods), 12 greenhouses and resale operations at eight area farmer's markets, Grandy Farm Market in North Carolina, several produce companies and a roadside stand.

As farm managers, Janowitz and Joe Heishman oversee all soil preparation, a year-round job of plowing, tilling and planting. Janowitz is also the farm market leader, driving crops and crew to the market sites, setting up and tearing down the displays and ensuring the produce is ready for display.

Hard work, time, experimentation and skill are the keys to Spring Valley's success, Janowitz says. And, of course, good weather.

"All year long [weather is] a challenge," Janowitz told me. Weather affects everything from soil conditions to saving a crop to the number of farmer's market customers. Although skill can sometimes combat Mother Nature, he added, many times "it's all one big gamble."

Spring Valley's stand, located at the northeast corner of the Old Town Farmer's Market, is bursting with any combination of salad greens, spinach, Swiss chard, kale, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, squash, zucchini, pluots, pears and many varieties of peaches and apples. Right now they are promoting their strawberries, all perfectly placed in their green cardboard cartons.



Actually, all of Spring Valley's produce is perfectly placed, week after week, and that is not an accident. Every carrot, every pear is handled gently.

"From the time we put it in the ground to the time it goes in the customer's hands, we care for it as gently and as best as we possibly can," Janowitz says of his vegetables and fruit. Apples are carefully placed into baskets after picking. Salad greens are packed, but not smashed, into their cartons. Potatoes are handpicked. "And," added Janowitz, "we wash everything. We take pride in what we do."



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May 2016

Lopez Farms – A Family Affair

Carla Lopez may be the youngest vendor at the Old Town Farmers' Market. At the ripe age of nine, she spends her Saturday mornings helping out at the family Lopez Farms stand located at the southeast corner of Market Square. Carla has been part of the family's Saturday morning presence at the market "since I was little," she said, when her father sat her under the produce tables. Now she assists

the customers, handles money and occasionally translates for her father, Lionel, who is always just a few steps away.

Lopez wanted to own a farming business after working on another farm in Clinton, Maryland, for 10 years. Ultimately he bought 20 acres in Northern Neck, Virginia, in 1999 and Lopez Farms was born. Lopez and his wife run the operation, assisted by three seasonal workers. His daughters sometimes help after school and occasionally his two-year-old son, Lionel, Jr., pulls a bean plant or two.

Lopez prides himself on the freshness of his produce. "We like to bring fresh food to the customer," Lopez says. His favorite part of his business starts with planting seeds, both outside and in his hothouse. "We see everything we are growing."

It is not an easy profession. "Farming is hard, I can tell you that," Lionel says. "We don't pick anything by machine. Only by hand. You are bending all day picking squash, tomatoes, beans. Sometimes we start at 5:00 a.m. and work until 6 or 7 o'clock." Customers want hand-picked vegetables, he told me, adding, "If it is picked by machine they don't come to you."

He beams proudly as Carla and her younger sister, Elizabeth, 8, sell broccoli, potatoes, tomatoes, beets and other produce to their loyal Saturday customers.

Lopez Farms sells their produce, and occasionally produce from nearby small farms, to the Old Town Farmers Market from March until November. I left the interview with a bag bulging with fresh, hand-picked kale, zucchini, carrots and asparagus. Dinner was never so good.





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April 2016

Kiwi Kuisine, Alexandria, Virginia

“Food and rugby are my passion,” said Bertie Todd, owner and founder of Kiwi Kuisine. Actually Todd prefers to go by the name “Ram” although he admits that these days, “I’m more of a lamb than I am a ram.”

A New Zealander Maori, Ram started playing rugby when he was six years old and eventually landed with the Washington Irish RFC. The United States was great, he said, but he was sick of eating hot dogs and desperately missed his native meat pies.

Ram decided to move back to New Zealand to learn the meat pie business. He knew the basics of cooking from his mother, a chef, and he asked a friend who owned a bakery to teach him the pastry business. Ram returned to the United States and started creating his meat and vegetable-filled pies, keeping them in the Maryland Exiles RFC fraternity house freezer to eat after practice. When the other players kept eating them, Ram knew he had a business.

Kiwi Kuisine debuted in 2003, featuring meat pies filled with chicken, steak or lamb with vegetables, as well as sausage rolls, spinach rolls and other hearty meals. Four years later he began selling at Old Town Farmers' Market and other area markets. Today he sells at ten markets, Whole Foods, Balducci's and nearly 50 other grocery stores. He guarantees everything he sells, including the cold vegetable/fruit juices he makes using produce from other farmers' market vendors.

Ram's talents don't end with pie. Somewhat of a Maori Renaissance man, he is a Frank Sinatra impersonator and is the founder/president of Alexandria Rugby, a sports program for kids and adults that he started in 2006.

Ram's pies are better than the New Zealand original, he told me. The meat he uses is free of trans fat, steroids and antibiotics, and the pies are bursting with meat, unlike gravy-filled commercial pot pies. I tried the Curry Chicken pie and my husband had the Steak Guinness and they were amazing. No wonder Kiwi Kuisine sells out of its pies every Saturday.



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March 2016



Neopol Savory Smokery – Smoked Goodness at the Market

The beauty of a farmers' market is that the produce is local. It's not unusual to buy fruits and vegetables that were still in the ground or on a tree 24 hours ago. Sometimes, though, a vendor carries a product that cannot be sourced locally, and it's so incredibly good that we welcome them with open arms and shopping baskets.

[Neopol Savory Smokery](#) is that vendor. Each Saturday morning they sell out of their expertly smoked salmon, smoked salmon salad, whitefish, mussels, hummus (yes, they smoke their chickpeas) tofu and chicken, sustainably

sourced from all over the world. Salmon, Neopol's signature product, comes directly from a coastal inlet in Scotland's North Highland from a salmon farm that is nearly three miles long and part of the salmon's natural migratory track.

Barbara Lahnstein, a German immigrant who founded Neopol 20 years ago, chose this salmon farm because of its sustainable practices, and uses the same standards to select the greenback mussels from New Zealand, rainbow trout from North Carolina, shrimp from the Gulf of Mexico and local chicken and eggs from farms in northern Baltimore County.

"She travels far and wide to find really sustainable producers," Andy Karnes told me. A part-time art professor at the [Maryland Institute College of Art](#), Karnes began working at their Old Town Farmer's Market stand about a year ago, as a favor to his friend and Barbara's son Dorian.

Procuring world-class ingredients is half of the equation to their success. The other half lies in their smoking technique. The fish, chicken and other foods are hot smoked, meaning that they are cooked while they are placed on a smoking rack in a smoker for 8-10 hours with cherry, apple and peach wood. As they cook they absorb the smoked flavor of the fruitwoods.

With its origins at the Belvedere Square Market in Baltimore, Neopol arrived at the Old Town Farmer's Market about 18 months ago and already has a following of regulars who stop and shop with them faithfully each Saturday. The smoked salmon salad and salmon filets are the top sellers (and delicious. Yes, I took home a few samples).