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Time is ripe for farmers markets

Local producers bring their wares to town in bid to make a buck and bring freshness to the city

By BRANDON JOHANSSON
The Aurora Sentinel

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AURORA | Alan Mazzotti sifted through the large box of bright red cherries, carefully picking out the bad ones.

"These are getting a little ripe from sitting out in the sun," he said as he plopped the good cherries in a weathered wooden basket.

The cherries were just one of a few dozen fruits and vegetables that populated Mazzotti's tables Tuesday morning at the Aurora Farmers Market.

The market, which opened last week in the parking lot of the old Fan Fare building at East 4th Avenue and Havana Street, is one of two farmer's markets open in Aurora this year. The other is at Southlands Mall and is open every Thursday until fall.

Mazzotti, who runs Mazzotti Farms in Hudson and organizes the market, said the Aurora market has been at the Fan Fare location for the past three years. Before that, the market was at the old Buckingham Square Mall for about seven years.

The market is one of seven that make up the Denver Metro Farmers Markets, which rotate among seven different locations around the metro area every day of the week.

The Aurora market opens for business at 10:30 a.m. on Tuesdays.

Last week's opening day wasn't particularly busy, but Mazzotti said he expects business to pick up.

"It wasn't bad," he said. "But the best advertising is to be here."

Shoppers who flock to the markets tend to come there because they like the freshness of the produce, he said.

"Ninety percent of the stuff is fresh, local and picked no more than the day before. That's probably the biggest draw," he said.

A few tents to the south of Mazzotti's is that of Ray Domenico Farms.

The farm in Welby, which grows a variety of organic produce, including lettuce, spinach and beets, has been active at farmers markets around the metro area for more than 30 years.

Christina Marchese, who was working at the Domenico tent Tuesday, said her grandmother started taking the farm's products to farmers markets in 1978.

The Aurora market isn't as busy as markets at Southwest Plaza Mall or at the Aspen Grove Shopping center, but the crowd is decent, she said.

People at the markets like that the food there comes straight from area farms, she said.

"It comes direct from the farmer, you don't have to go through the grocery store," she said.

The market has more than just produce, with a few booths hawking breads, spices and salsas.

At the Styria Bakery tent, Stephanie Giles worked Tuesday setting out baskets of various breads.

Styria, which is based in Frederick, doesn't have a store front from which to sell its breads and instead relies on farmers



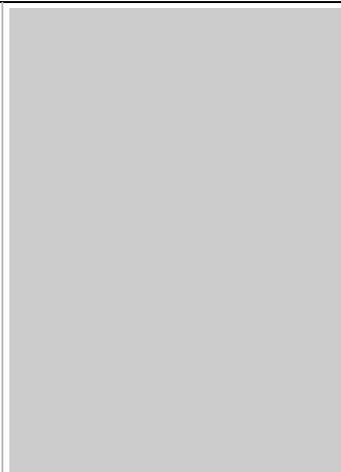
Mischel Mosbey picks out flowers at the Mazzotti Farms tent June 30 at a Farmers Market near East 4th Avenue and Havana Street in Aurora. (Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel)

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markets and home and garden shows to sell their products, Giles said.

"We have a lot of regulars that keep coming back," she said of the Aurora market. "I think they just love it."

The customers aren't the only people who like having the market open on Havana Street.

Gayle Jetchick, executive director of the Havana Business Improvement District, said it was nice to have the market near the Fan Fare building for a few months out of the year.

The building has sat empty and fenced off for years as city officials try to find out what to do with it. Area business owners have long complained that the massive white building with the bulbous roof is an eye sore.

"It's something positive in that otherwise desolate area up there," she said of the market.

For area farmers, markets like those in Aurora are especially important.

Mazzotti, who has been farming for all of his 59 years and coming to markets for 32 years, said being able to sell their products directly to customers has helped keep some family farms going.

"When we started these way back, it kept a lot of people farming who would probably be out today because they weren't big enough to sell to the chain stores," he said.

Mazzotti said his great grandfather started the farm 29 years ago after he immigrated from Italy. The market doesn't do business with the chain stores, so farmers markets are a central part of the family business, he said.

"You're dealing with the ma' and pa' stores," he said. "Just the farmers."

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