

Sociability, Farmers' Markets, and COVID-19

APRIL 12, 2020: CORNWALL, VERMONT

I live on a small farm in western Vermont. Or, to be more precise, behind my old farmhouse there lies a small fruit orchard that sits on an east-facing slope that gradually becomes the corn or hay field of a neighboring dairy farmer. This fruit orchard—about two hundred trees with over a hundred varieties of apples, pears, cherries, and plums—produces enough fruit to sell apples, fresh cider, hard cider, perry (pear cider), and ice cider to local restaurants, at two farmers' markets, and in our basement tasting room. We have been doing so for over a decade. The orchard has been in place for fifty years.

To produce these goods requires the yeoman's work of a small farm but also relies on numerous social networks to thrive. The past month, as the bulletins and announcements have come across our computer and TV screens about the types of distancing necessary to protect the public health of Vermonters, here at Windfall Orchard we have had firsthand experience of their chaotic quality. Our shared social memories of this time will surely include the recounting of the various dispatches from the state government. First, the focus was on personal hygiene, washing your hands a lot and cleaning all your counters and other surfaces. Second, the directives concerned the need to maintain social distance: "don't get too close to people, stay home, then do that *and* keep washing your hands but also wear a mask." But for small farmers and artisan producers in Vermont the dispatches also seemed like a constant unraveling of a (hard-won) cultural fabric around a commitment to the value of farm-to-table in our food system. Food, of course, is an essential service, for we must eat to live. But food (and drink) that is embedded in social networks and champions such connections, in the age of COVID-19, is a vector for other hazards.

So, while we are able to easily get outside and prune the trees and pick up the sticks and generally not feel housebound (or afraid for next year's harvest, since the virus does not damage trees or fruit), we are not so easily able to share the products of our labor. All of the Burlington restaurants where servers will

cheerfully explain about the resurgent craft cider movement in Vermont and beyond are closed. Or only serving takeout with curbside pickup. It's hard to create a sustained narrative through online order forms and Square charges. We cannot open our tasting room, and anyway, who is able to take a leisurely drive around Addison County, stopping in at the small cideries, wineries, and cheese shops? But hardest of all is the decision by the state of Vermont that farmers' markets do not serve an essential function, although grocery stores do. The reasons for this decision are complicated but crucial to it are the larger *social* functions served by farmers' markets here in Vermont. Anson Tebbetts, the current secretary of agriculture, food and markets, was quoted as saying on Vermont Public Radio: "Outdoor markets would likely attract large gatherings that would congregate close together," concluding that "there is risk of person-to-person contact when exchanging goods."

The same relentlessness as the new notifications as to why we cannot come together ultimately arrived at farmers' markets. They *are* places where people congregate. Usually (or until this season) music is played. People come to run into friends and chat over a coffee or a meal purchased by a local vendor. And sometimes, but not often, to purchase the majority of the food needed in a household for the coming week. So, the very social benefits created by the community feel of the farmers' market creates perceived risks that put these markets in jeopardy.

In fact, the social nature of the Vermont's farmers' markets is written into the statute:

"a 'farmers' market' shall mean an event or series of events at which two or more vendors of agricultural products, as defined in 11 V.S.A. § 991, gather for purposes of offering for sale to the public their agricultural products. (Vermont Statutes, tit. 6, ch. 216, § 5001).

The premise has always been about thriving social networks that support the local farmers and artisans—complex events, not static places. And we have been good citizens in that regard. Vermont consistently purchases, per capita, the highest percentage of local foods of any state in the nation. But

because the greater food system has moved to a more anonymous and even sterile method of linking producers and consumers, in a moment where social interactions are to be kept to a minimum, what is the purpose of a farmers' market? The calculus has shifted. We *want* the farmers' market, but do we *need* the farmers' market to physiologically survive?

No one can quite figure this out. Thus, the official pronouncements have shifted over the weeks. In our town, a farmers' market was convened early on in the crisis. This was held outside in a parking lot so all physical interactions were minimized, but at that moment no guidelines or rules had been created and enforced. Then, all farmers' markets were closed. But there was still product to sell. So, here at Windfall Orchard, we just hosted a nonsocially interactive pickup site in front of our barn. People came and looked in three coolers of soups and stews and boxes with hard cider. No hands touched hands. Occasionally I would go out and chat—at a six-foot distance—with our neighbors and friends who stopped by to stock up for the week. We will do this until the farmers' markets are allowed to reopen, at least in some manner (hopefully by the time this issue of *Gastronomica* is published!).

A grocery store, with wide aisles and systems for moving lots of products with speed and standard procedures for cleanliness, can seem state of the art, perfect for this moment. I applaud the crucial work of all involved in providing for our needs and wants in this topsy-turvy moment in human history. And maybe distance along the supply chain is inevitable and the price we pay for the way we live now. We gave up geographic proximity to our food supply centuries ago and perhaps our yearning for social proximity is just that, a desire for a type of connection that no longer fits our times. But I don't know. This is a *novel* virus. COVID-19 is extraordinary and extraordinarily dangerous but not singular. There are so many pathogens that get into our distributed and globalized food supply that impact human health every day—*salmonella*, *listeria*, *E. coli*, *norovirus*. We have to mingle with many micro-organisms all the time as we seek to nourish ourselves and survive as a species. So, my hope is that we do not make this experience with the new threat a cause for ending the social networks and social settings that bring meaning to our lives, like the farmers' markets where each week we hug our friends, share tastes of our hard cider with tourists, and fill bags of heirloom apples and hand them to our regulars. 