

Farmers market a gem to many

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About midway through the farmers market season, vendors and patrons alike are all smiles. They say this year's market is busier and better than ever before.

"I love the farmers market. It's all fresh," said Chris Podest, a Beloit-based electrician who has been a regular visitor to the downtown market for about two decades. "It gets bigger and bigger every year."

On Saturday morning, more than 90 vendors lined the sunbaked streets of downtown Beloit, as throngs of shoppers scoped out herbs, produce, flowers, bakery, jewelry and more. The crowd was large, but moved leisurely through most areas. Certain corridors along Grand Ave. were more tightly packed.

Emily LaLoggia, of Rockford, and Jordan Hatch, of South Beloit, said they came with the intent of buying honey, but ended up purchasing basil, mozzarella and cherry tomatoes as well — ingredients for the day's lunch.

"It's a good start to my Saturday morning," Hatch said.

"I enjoy seeing the families, the beauty of the flowers and vegetables," LaLoggia added. "Everything seems better, and everyone's so nice down here."

Among the market's friendliest is face paint artist Shoe the Pixie, who does not charge flat rates, but instead asks for tips.

"A lot of it is just being social," she said. "I like kids and I like art."

Shoe's designs range from floral patterns to Batman masks for boys and it only takes about one or two minutes to complete. By the end of the day, she estimated she would paint about 30 faces.

After a short time in Shoe's chair, 9-year-old Destanee Mowdy beamed a big smile and said, "You do a very good job."

Another unique vendor was Sister Marie Pierre of Fraternite Notre Dame. The French-born Pierre wore full religious dress and had a steady stream of customers lining up for pastry, baguettes and tarts.

Proceeds go to her order's Chicago-based soup kitchen, which feeds about 250 homeless people daily, she said.

A majority of vendors are based closer to the Rock County and Stateline Area. Though markets exist in neighboring towns and cities, for many, the Beloit event has become the market of choice.

“This is one market we love and we won’t give up,” said Bill Erickson, a leather craftsman from Janesville.

Now in his third year as a Beloit market vendor, he said business was much better than it was in his hometown.

“We tried that one, it just didn’t pan out like this one,” he said.

Erickson’s business, operated with the help of his wife, Tammy, sells items including belt buckles, key pouches and customized dog harnesses.

Mike Reilly, owner of Toubl Game Bird Farms, said he had finally found the spare time and energy to join the vendor ranks this season.

“Usually I’ve been busy coaching baseball during this time of summer,” he said.

The market has proven a valuable addition to his permanent business, located at 8716 W. Saint Lawrence Road, Reilly said. His pheasant meat snack sticks are also available at Woodman’s, he added.

Wendy Zell is a more seasoned market veteran. Now in her sixth year of operation, her dog and cat products — treats, leashes and toys — are selling at record pace.

“We do great business here,” she said. “We’ve got a walking dog show,” she said as several families walked by with dogs in tow.

Zell lives in Janesville and runs the business with her daughter. She’s formed relationships with nearby vendors, who provide leftover spinach and apples for her dog foods.

“It’s stuff people are going to throw out,” she said. “We put them to good use.”

The market attracts people from all over and all walks of life. City council member Mark Spreitzer said he tries to make it every weekend.

“This is one of the best summers we’ve had while I’ve been here,” he said. “I come down and buy whatever grabs me.”

