



Local Farmer's Market turns Main Street into a business incubator

Main Streets across America serve as great place to start a small business, so it should come as no surprise a Farmer's Market on Main Street would do the same. Every Saturday morning, between May and September, downtown Ames

turns into a hub of activity and business transactions. The Ames Main Street Farmer's Market is part of a national fundamental shift in the way people access their food and interact with their community. But, this event also does two very important things for Ames: It gets people used to coming downtown to shop and dine and it serves as a business incubator for its vendors.

Three very popular vendors from last year's market can tell you this first-hand. Local Yocal's, a family owned business that got its start three years ago at the Ames Farmer's Market, won't be back this year. It's not because business was bad, it's because business on Main Street was great! Starting in April, Local Yocal's will have a permanent location in the Partnership Building in downtown Des Moines. Little Woods: Herbs and Teas will be opening at 136 Main Street this spring after just one season at the Farmers' Market.

"Last summer I took the leap and became a vendor selling hand-blended artisan teas," said Kristin Roach, Little Woods: Herbs and Teas owner. "The feedback and support I received from doing the market directly enabled me to pursue opening an actual retail space."

Another popular family owned business at last year's Farmer's Market, now gone brick and mortar, is the Salt & Pretzel Company, now located in the Ames Sommerset area. Salt & Pretzel got its start on Main Street last year, and while the business now has a permanent location, they also plan to be back downtown this year.

"We never had plans to open a retail business," said Tammy Crowe, part owner of Salt & Pretzel. "But the response in downtown Ames was so overwhelming; we saw the demand was there."

Crowe and her husband are food scientists by trade. Their son, Alex, is a recent graduate of Iowa State University. He now runs the business day-to-day. Crowe says part of the success of the Ames Main Street Market is due to its location.

"We saw so many first-time visitors to Ames, people from much bigger places, who said what a great market this is," Crowe said. "It is in a beautiful setting, with live music, and that helps make it a great event."

The mission of the Ames Main Street Cultural District is to *advance and promote the district as the heart of the community*. The Main Street Farmer's Market, which is operated by the Ames

Chamber of Commerce, does that and more. It attracted upwards of 78,000 visitors to the 300 and 400 blocks of Main Street last season, and promises to be even bigger this year. A survey last year showed many of the “regulars” come from ten different communities, other than Ames. But there are also visitors to the market from all over the country. They are people who are here to visit their students enrolled at Iowa State University and looking for something to do on a Saturday morning. After visiting the market they can be seen strolling the streets of downtown Ames shopping and dining.

The owner of the wine bar downtown says she plans to set up tables on the sidewalk outside her business this year for market patrons, and the owner of another Main Street brick and mortar business says she saw such an increase in business last year, she expanded her hours to match the market hours this year.

Paul Ovrom with the Iowa Department of Agriculture says he is not surprised by what is happening in downtown Ames.

“It’s an economic engine,” Ovrom said. “It fosters a good local economy and people are more and more aware of the benefits of buying locally.”

And like Crowe and the owners of Local Yocal’s, more and more people are also capitalizing on the power of local food to provide a new economic stimulus. The Main Street Farmer’s Market offers a unique business structure that features low overhead costs and direct contact with a local customer base. If a would-be entrepreneur is able to find the right product for consumer demand, they can develop a sound business, create new jobs, and grow successfully in downtown Ames.