

MARKET BOOM

FARMERS' MARKETS IN VICTORIA HAVE SURGED IN RECENT YEARS, BUT MARKETS IN CASEY-CARDINIA, SUCH AS PEARCEDALE, ARE STRUGGLING TO ATTRACT THE SAME NUMBERS AS THOSE IN MELBOURNE'S INNER SUBURBS. SAM BOLITHO SPOKE TO STALLHOLDERS TO FIND OUT WHY.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUKE PLUMMER



CHEESEMAKER ANDRIY KOGUT

VEGETABLE GROWER AMBER CRAWFORD



FLORIST ESMERALDA BELFOIRE



It's not all about the money for florist Esmeralda Belfoire. Each month, she takes her flowers and seeds to sell at Pearcedale Recreation Reserve, driven by the sense of community offered by the farmers' market.

"I've made a lot of friends. When people come back and say their plants are doing well, it makes me feel good. Financially, it's give and take. I make a few dollars along the way and as long as I can pay the bills, I'm happy."

Regional Farmers Markets Victoria estimates that more than 80 farmers' markets have popped up around Victoria in the last decade.

But this surge has not necessarily been good for business, as Ms Belfiore has discovered.

"There's too many markets now. People can go to markets wherever they want. Every suburb has one now."

Consequently, fewer people are going to Pearcedale market, the Devon Meadows grower said.

When the market first started three years ago, there were up to 40 stalls. Today, you are lucky if you see 10.

Regional Farmers Markets Victoria director Peter Arnold said it was time for organisers to try a different approach. He said one way to increase numbers would be to host the market on a Sunday instead of a Saturday.

"You'll get a different type of people. On Sunday you get people from Melbourne out for a drive. You'll get more families and it's not going to cost you nothing."

Mr Arnold said it was important for patrons to realise that farmers' markets were dependent on them. "We need to educate the public and say look, 'If you want this farmers' market you can't just turn up on nice days and when you feel like it.' The farmers are turning up rain hail or shine."

He said it was the interaction between producer and shopper that makes farmers' markets successful.

"It gives what we eat a whole new meaning.

"We are told by the farmer how it is grown, how many days ago it was picked, how to store it and what to use it for."

Mornington cheese maker and Pearcedale regular Andriy Kogut agreed. "It is a lifestyle. People love to go to the market and chat with the producer and they know where the product comes from. People love to know what's involved."

Andriy Kogut first brought his goat and cow cheese to Pearcedale farmers' market three years ago.

Mr Kogut started making cheese with his brother Taras in 2005 after the pair migrated from the Ukraine.

The two brothers maintain a loyal following for their Blue Bay cheese, which they produce daily from their Mornington factory.

Mr Kogut said the market started well. "Three years ago there was a lot of advertising and publicity – it was really good."

But a lack of publicity this year, coupled with a cold, wet winter, has led to a fall in the number of people attending, he said. Mr Kogut's arguments are supported by a state parliamentary inquiry into farmers' markets, which was tabled last month.

The report found that without clever planning and funding for promotion, many farmers' markets outside inner Melbourne were unlikely to thrive.

Casey-Cardinia's three farmers' markets – in Berwick, Pakenham and Pearcedale – were attracting an average of 20-40 stallholders, compared to an average of 50-70 in inner Melbourne.

In contrast to the large inner-urban markets – which were in busy precincts and had more customers – rural markets had more difficulty attracting stallholders, the report stated.

Suzanne Carter-Madej managed the market when it was at its peak. She said the downturn was just part of "the normal way a market develops".

She said the dramatic increase in the number of markets in the area had had a "huge impact".

"Markets start very large and over 12 months they can get smaller; Pearcedale went through that cycle."

Whatever the reason for the decline, both Ms Belfiore and Mr Kogut said they had no plans to stop going to the market. "I've been a loyal person, taken the good with the bad," Ms Belfiore said.

Mr Kogut said the market was still the best way to promote his cheese.

"I haven't missed a market since it started." It is a record he plans to keep.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

PEARCEDALE FARMERS' MARKET

Pearcedale Farm, 710 Baxter-Tooradin Road
Third Saturday of the month, 8am-1pm

BERWICK-CASEY FARMERS' MARKET

Old Cheese Factory, 34 Homestead Road,
Berwick
Fourth Saturday of the month, 8am-12.30pm
Details: 9769 4459

BERWICK CASEY FARMERS' TWILIGHT MARKET

December 23, 4-8pm

PAKENHAM CARDINIA RANGES FARMERS' MARKET

Pakenham Racecourse, Racecourse Road
Second Saturday of the month, 8am-noon
Details: 0427 057 908