



FARMERS MARKET FRENZY SAN LUIS OBISPO COMES ALIVE FOR THURSDAY EVENT.(Travel)

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Daily News Byline: Story by Eric Noland Travel Editor

SAN LUIS OBISPO - It's a frontal assault on the senses.

Wood smoke from an open grill wafts down the street, carrying the scent of charred tri-tip, then gives way to a burst of tropical perfume from a bouquet of tuberose flowers. A rock band strikes up, thumping along with tunes derivative of Elvis Costello. A slice of O'Henry peach, grown in nearby See Canyon and watered only by rain and fog, is proffered, and it explodes on the tongue with succulent flavor. A sign catches the eye: "Tomatoes, \$1.20/lb.; soft and ugly ones, 80 cents."

No wonder San Luis Obispo's Thursday-night market - equal parts street festival and produce bazaar - has been such a success as it prepares to celebrate its 20th birthday next year.

These days, every California burg of 20,000 people seems to have a farmers market, but San Luis Obispo was one of the first to launch this nighttime block party and deliver it on a weekly basis. It now draws upward of 15,000 visitors on a summer evening, about half that (still a robust turnout) in winter, and the model has been widely imitated.

Every week of the year - except Thanksgiving or when it rains - a five-block, one-third-mile stretch of Higuera Street downtown is magically transformed for three hours.

Restaurants drag grills outside and cook up racks of ribs, ears of corn, even calzones. Street entertainment spills from intersections. Farmers from nearby spreads, many still wearing their dusty work clothes, park their pickup trucks perpendicular to the curb and sell their wares off the tailgates. Information booths spring up, giving you an opportunity to field a pitch from the Lyndon LaRouche crowd, test your Bible IQ or hear what rodeo calf roping does to the little critter's neck.

It's a nonstop hoot.

On a Thursday night in August, a grower proudly held aloft an avocado as big as a football. "It should be soft in about 10 days," he told a cluster of shoppers.

A farmer standing over some enormous tomatoes was asked his secret. "Tender, loving care," he said. When quizzed as to whether fertilizer might have had something to do with it, this farmer, who'd clearly just been shoveling some, replied sheepishly, "Well ... yeah."

Another grower was asked about a peculiar-looking melon. "It's a charlyn," he said. "The taste is kind of tropical, like a cross between a cantaloupe and a honeydew." A friend of mine - a farmers market aficionado in L.A. - asked if she could have a sample

taste, a customary practice at the renowned Hollywood and Santa Monica markets. "No," he replied flatly. "I'm by myself, and it's just too much trouble to do that." We bought the melon, solely on his recommendation, and tried it the next day. Fabulous.

According to a brochure put out by the San Luis Obispo Downtown Association, which hosts the event, entertainment and the sale of prepared food is to commence at 6 p.m., the produce market at 6:30. But on two visits this summer, we noticed that it's a little more free-form than that - everybody starts selling their stuff as soon as they can get set up.

The market has a distinct rhythm to it. People head for the grills first, get a hearty plateful and sit on a curb or a city bench to eat this casual dinner. Then it's on to the produce market to snatch up the hard-to-find items - yellow pear tomatoes, for example - before they disappear. As the evening progresses toward the market's 9 p.m. conclusion, the entertainment and information booths get more attention, and families thin out to make way for roving teens and college kids.

Early in the evening, we couldn't help but notice a long line snaking away from the F. McLintock's barbecue site. It didn't take long to appreciate the popularity.

The local western restaurant puts on quite a floor show around the grills, shouting out commands and special chants, all the while banging utensils on steel bowls for emphasis. An 8-year-old girl in our group meekly ordered a hot dog, and it was like an alarm had gone off at the firehouse.

"Hot dog!" the order-taker called out, and the cooks took turns with the mantra: "Long as a train! Big as a mountain! No lips, snouts, hearts or spleens! It's a giant ugly hot dog, that's what it is. If it had legs, it would chase you off the line!"

Later, the restaurant's owner, Tunny Ortali, said, "It goes back to carny barkers. We're having fun back there. For two hours, we're gunnin'. We get to going back and forth with people. ... We've been known to put an ear of corn on a bun and sell it as corn bread."

A number of factors combine to augment this festive atmosphere at the market. Music and other street entertainment, for example. Performers audition for the privilege of paying to perform on a Thursday night. They're assigned to the side streets - Broad, Garden, Chorro, Morro - and are spaced just far enough apart so that the sounds of one don't bleed into the next (the throngs of people undoubtedly provide an acoustical buffer).

As you walk up Higuera, you might first hear, as we did, the County/40th Infantry Band belting out "El Capitan" in all its John Philip Sousa bombast. A few steps later, as the brass notes fade, you get the guitars and drums of JND, a local rock band that was inspiring little kids into frenzied dancing among the manhole covers. A little farther on, Jeffrey Peters was picking out gentle Spanish music on an acoustic guitar.

At the next intersection, puppeteer Don Wallis was eliciting squeals from an infant audience as he provided falsetto voice for his puppets from behind a black curtain. At the show's conclusion, his voice was more like that of Pinocchio's Stromboli as he set out plastic buckets and said gruffly, "Fill 'em up. A dollar, two dollars each would be good."

The information booths can provide considerable amusement, too. In order to prevent downtown merchants from being undermined by outside purveyors, booths are set up on an information-only basis. It creates quite a babble bazaar, especially since positions on

the street are assigned randomly depending on when the organizations sign up for the market.

The Atheists United booth was smack next to the booth of the Shoreline Calvary Chapel Bible College of Morro Bay. When the fresh-faced fellow under the Shoreline sign was asked if he'd requested the juxtapositioning, he smiled and said, "No, it's all God's providence."

Other booths included Animal Emancipation (close enough to the SLO Brewing Co. grill to smell the ribs cooking), the Libertarian Party and the San Luis Obispo High football team. A passer-by thrust a leaflet into my hands, saying, "Good time to refinance."

Farmers market purists might be put off by this street-festival ambience, or be surprised that only the region's produce is on display (my market-maven friend was disappointed not to find local cheese, eggs, meat or seafood).

But this is only one of 13 farmers markets in the county, said Linda Jankay, business manager of the local farmers market association. The sale of agricultural products on Thursday night is only part of a much bigger equation.

All of this took shape in 1983. The downtown district for years had been a ghost town after dark. Merchants stayed open late on Thursday nights, but they found that Higuera was becoming a cruising and drag-racing strip for local teens, and adults were staying away.

The street was closed off as a pedestrian way, but prospective patrons, frustrated by the inability to park in front of the stores, still stayed home. In hopes of luring them back, restaurants and merchants began conducting business out on the sidewalk, and as summer neared, local farmers were invited in.

As the event burgeoned, officialdom dealt it two remarkably boring names. First it was called Thursday Night Activities, but the acronym TNA resulted in smirks from anyone who'd ever seen an Aaron Spelling TV show. That gave way to Thursday Night Promotions. But so many locals and visitors simply refer to it as the Farmers Market that it has gained proper-name status, even in promotional brochures.

A number of factors contribute to its success. San Luis Obispo is surrounded by agricultural land, and a lot of small-time growers who don't want to make the haul to the major urban farmers' markets instead find their way here. The relative isolation of the town - roughly equidistant between Los Angeles and San Francisco - also helps. California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, meanwhile, lends college-town energy.

City slickers might be astonished by the quality of the farmers' products - great heads of lettuce, basil with giant leaves, juicy melons and grapes - while noting that the prices are much lower than those found in the L.A. farmers markets (up to a dollar less per pound on some items).

But perhaps the biggest treat is its small-town simplicity and charm.

Ruth Scovell of Atascadero was selling walnuts and dried love-in-the-mist flowers from a folding card table. "I planted black walnut trees at my place 40 years ago, when my kids were just tots," she said. "I dry these flowers under the trees for about a week."

Next to a nonorganic produce stand manned by Cal Poly's Crop Science Program, a renegade contingent of students touted their organic produce from a campus experimental farm. "It was started 10 years ago by a bunch of old hippies," said student Victor Kowalenko.

At another booth, Vincent McNamara was serving up delicious chunks of apples and peaches that are dry-farmed in See Canyon, a coastal-mountain cleft west of town. Dry-farmed? "No irrigation," he said. "We usually get a lot of rain, but this year has been pretty dry. Fortunately, the fog has been so thick, it's almost like rain."

The market was wrapping up. You didn't need to check your watch. It was evident from the grill show at F. McLintock's. "Only four ears of corn left!" hollered a cook. "The last four left in the world!"

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: San Luis Obispo is about 200 miles north of Los Angeles via U.S. 101.

FARMERS MARKET: It is held every Thursday evening except Thanksgiving (and when it rains) on Higuera Street, between Osos and Nipomo streets. It runs from 6 to 9 p.m.

PARKING: There are some municipal lots just west of the market, but when we tried to reach a big one at Palm and Chorro streets, we were thwarted by street closures and construction. We found it more expedient to park along a side street just northwest of the market, off Monterey Street - which parallels Higuera. The spaces are metered, but only until 6 p.m. (when the market starts), so a couple of quarters will cover you for the night.

TRAVELER TIPS: Even on warm days, the temperatures drop quickly after sunset on the Central Coast. Be sure to bring along a jacket or sweater. ... Carry cash. You won't find many electronic cash registers at this market. In fact, many of the participants conduct business out of a plastic bucket stuffed with bills and coins. Even most of the grill stands are cash-only. ... Portable toilets are set up on two side streets: Morro and Broad. ... No alcohol is sold at the market. If you want a beer or a glass of wine with dinner, head into any of the dining establishments along or just off Higuera. ... The market is a seven-block walk from the San Luis Obispo Amtrak station.

INFORMATION: Farmers Market information is available from the San Luis Obispo Downtown Association: (805) 541-0286; www.downtownslo.com. Lodging and other visitor information is available from the Chamber of Commerce: (805) 781-2777; www.visitslo.com.

CAPTION(S):

9 photos, box, map

Photo:

(1 -- 3 -- color) On Thursday nights, the San Luis Obispo Farmers Market draws mobs, top. Visitors enjoy the grill fare at SLO Brewing Co., above middle, and such quirky sights as Theresa Hutchings' pet parrot munching corn from the cob, above.

(4 -- 5 -- color) The sights and sounds are widely varied at the San Luis Obispo market. Above, Jessica Wilkins, 6, breathes in the scent of fresh flowers while perched on the

shoulders of her dad, John. Left, Robert Hayashi hands out a bunch of celery.

(6 -- color) no caption (peaches)

(7 -- 8) Fresh flowers, top, and even fresher dance moves, right, are both part of San Luis Obispo's weekly Farmers Market.

(9) Clay Moze sings with his band, Life at the Top, during the Thursday market, where everything from fresh produce to political tracts.

Tina Burch/Staff Photographer

Box:

IF YOU GO (see text)

Map:

SAN LUIS OBISPO

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