

From Friends of T.O.M.A.T.O. to Number One



BY JOHN LOVAAS ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY THUY DONG

From the first crisp greens and juicy strawberries of early May to the crunchy, sweet Honeycrisp and tart Cortland apples in October, the Reston Farmers Market is where people come for fresh and healthy produce and to catch up with friends and their favorite farmers. It is NoVa's Number One farmers market.

But its beginnings were humble. It began with a group calling themselves the Friends of T.O.M.A.T.O. (The Organic Market At Tall Oaks) coming to the Reston Association to ask for help to create a Reston Farmers Market. It was 1997. Friends' leader Debbie Shprentz explained they had planned to start the market in the Tall Oaks Center, but Giant Food, Inc. vetoed the idea. So, they wanted to set up at Lake Anne, Reston's historic first village center which sorely needed the energy and traffic a market might bring.

The Fairfax County Park Authority would sponsor the new market, and it would be a producers-only market, for products grown or made within 125 miles of Fairfax County. Fresh and local was the theme. What was needed was a Market Master to manage it and RA to help to promote the new startup. At the time, Robert Simon was on the Board and I was its VP. We agreed the Friends had a great idea. In fact, it sounded so good that I volunteered to be its Market Master.

Delegate Ken Plum and Mr.

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Simon helped to officially open the Reston Farmers Market in May 1998. Both are still regular customers. Leo Brubaker, an experienced Market Master, assigned to train me, was there, too. There were just 12 farmer-vendors that first day. They got an enthusiastic welcome from the community, a welcome that grows stronger every year.

A lot has changed in 17 years. Besides growing from 12 vendors to 28 in 2014, the number of products and varieties available in the Market has multiplied many times over. For example, in 1998 there were perhaps 4 or 5 varieties of tomatoes; now you'll find as many as 30 varieties, including many heirlooms. Instead of maybe a dozen varieties of peppers, now there are 30 or more. Sweet corn was silver queen; today we have more than 10 varieties, some so sweet you can eat it right off the stalk. The same is true of fruits and berries. In 1998 there were probably six or eight kinds of



Market Opens from May 2 through November 14, 2015
Saturday, 8 a.m. - Noon, Lake Anne Village

apples for sale, for example. Last year, I lost count somewhere over 40. And, you may have noticed that farmers need more space, bigger tents to display their greater selection.

At first, the County permitted only fresh vegetables and fruits, live plants and cut flowers. A few years later dairy products — milk, cheese and ice cream — were added. Since then, fresh meat was added. In fact, you'll find beef, bison, pork, poultry, goat and an occasional rabbit, plus sausages in your Reston Farmers Market. In 2013, we added seafood — which must originate in Chesapeake Bay or its tributaries. See www.restonfarmersmarket.com

for a complete list of products.

The Market also provides unique community services. Cornerstones volunteers collect unsold fruits and vegetables from cooperating vendors for the Cornerstones food pantry and Embury Rucker Shelter. Fairfax Master Gardeners offer free advice for your home gardens. In 2014, we welcomed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, (SNAP) run by Cornerstones, enabling low-income shoppers to add fresh and nutritious local foods to their family diets.

What makes the Reston Farmers Market special? It's the people who make it go, including: Mary Olien, the Park Authority manager



overseeing all county-sponsored markets. She is a leader and friend with vision and support when needed. Community volunteers are the heart and soul of the RFM. In addition to my fabulous co-Market Master, Fran Lovaas, the people who've assisted and given the Market its gusto include: Nedra Agnew, Barbara Burselon, Alfredo Melendez, John Piper, Donna Shaffer, Keith and Anne Strange, and Susan Williams. And, we have specialized volunteers: Sue Merk created www.restonfarmersmarket.com, our website, and is the RFM webmaster; Sarah Gerould, the RFM Official Artist, created original art work for RFM hats, shirts, bags; and, Thuy Dong, the RFM Official

Photographer takes first-rate photos for this article, the website and more.

Today, the Reston Farmers Market is widely recognized as a top market in the Washington Metro region and Northern Virginia. This recognition comes in a much larger universe of markets than existed in 1998.

Looking ahead, Lake Anne will soon be redeveloped. The developer, Lake Anne Development Partners has announced that its plans include a central location for an expanded Reston Farmers Market in the heart of its proposed extended Plaza. During construction (est. 2017), the RFM will be relocated temporarily to a parking lot across North Shore Drive where there is

currently a gas station.

'Til then, the Reston Farmers Market will open at the same time and same place from May 2, 2015 through November 14, 2015. Hope to see you there.



Mr. Lovaas is a retired AID Senior Foreign Service Officer and lives at Lake Anne with Fran, the Co-Market Master and his wife of nearly 50 years.

