

Ethnography of Little Rock Culture

River Market Farmer's Market

Y. Hope Osborn

It all started with a list of fruits and vegetables. It was the late in the morning on Saturday, September 17, 2011, and I had a project on Little Rock culture. Those circumstances led me on an excursion to the River Market.

The River Market's Farmer's Market began in 1974 in downtown Little Rock. It is a place where people from all over the state can come to sell their homemade or wholesale bought wares and homegrown and imported produce to the diverse population of Little Rock. Some of the sellers have been coming since the market opened and have passed their trade down a generation. Some are children yet, perhaps experiencing the sights, smells, and sounds of the River Market's Farmer's Market for the first time.

The Farmer's Market is open Tuesdays and Saturdays from 7am to 3pm, meaning an early morning for those setting up shop. I had no need to arrive early, so I arrived at the Farmer's Market a little after 11am. The area was teeming with people both walking and driving. Parking along the street was impossible because of the lack of parking spaces, so I drove down to the end of the River Market district to a parking lot under the I30 bridge to North Little Rock.

Fortunately, this morning, unlike other mornings I have gone, there were plenty of spaces. I had to walk a little ways to get to the Farmer's Market, but it was a beautiful, sunny day, not too cold or hot, with just enough moisture in the air to remind me of the previous day's rain. As I walk to the Farmer's Market, I noticed people carrying bags of produce, and I am thankful that I have come prepared with my own tote.

Upon arrival at the east end of the Farmer's Market, I first encountered covered booths of people selling their wares. I drew closer to inspect the nearest booth and was met by a

gentleman probably in his 40s or 50s. He said he is local and he makes all the things he was selling. My eyes were met with feathers, flowers, stones, and glass of a variety of colors and shapes, mostly in the form of jewelry. He is even marketing “healing stones.” He was in a prime location - his booth by the bustling street.

Next to him was a black man busily and thoroughly polishing a wood carving of an animal. He was polishing it for someone who had just purchased it, showing the pride he has in his work. All the carved animals on the booth tables were created by him. The animals were mostly fish, with a giraffe and dolphin or two thrown in. He had detailed the fish right down to their scales, and he had combined various woods of different colors in each piece. When I asked him about his carving, he told me learned from a friend from Jamaica.

Other booths close by contained homemade crocheted hats, shirts, head bands, hats, and decorative flowers, made from bamboo, alpaca, and acrylic yarn in a variety of colors; bamboo planters; feather jewelry; and even sunglasses that reflected the sun’s rays. Jewelry seemed to be a prominent theme among the craft sellers.

For some time, I had been aware of what sounded like a live band playing music nearby. When I came upon the band, I was surprised to find four young girls playing an accordion, penny whistle, harmonica, and my most beloved instrument, the violin. I noticed, as I put some money in, that their water jug is full of cash. Their sign said they are Real Entertaining, and they were, in the true sense of the words. I stood by a while listening to them play military theme songs and Celtic pieces. They looked professional in their matching black slacks and white shirts, but they seemed relaxed and casual in their attitude. They were at home playing for people. I found out they are from Jacksonville, Arkansas, and they are sisters. Besides playing at the Farmer’s Market on Saturdays, they also play at birthday parties.

One interesting booth featured skeins of a variety of different colored yards. When I asked the lady tending the table of goods if she spins the obviously homespun skeins, she told me she trades with people in Argentina for the silk cotton yarn and with local farmers for the wool yarn. I told her that I grew up on a farm on which we raised sheep and angora goats and rabbits to spin the wool and hair. She instantly asked if we were still in business, seeking another source for goods.

As I continued through the market, I wove through a continuous stream of black, white, and Asian people, old to the very young. The voices of so many people filled the air, making it noisy. I passed more booths of handcrafted and resale products. Then, there was a popsicle stand with delightful flavors advertised, such as salted caramel, peach, pineapple cilantro, and Vietnamese coffee. Even Old Mill Bread from Markham in West Little Rock had set up shop.

Finally, I reached the produce stalls which were filled with green beans, melons, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, herbs, zucchini, peppers, Chinese squash, looking like elongated sage green Chinese lanterns, and other assorted fruits and vegetables, all of which had the freshly picked vine-ripened brightness of color that makes you want to buy some of everything. I still had my list, but I was not ready to purchase anything until I had viewed all the wares and compared prices and quality.

When I finally made my way through all of the produce stands, it was time to make my purchases. I bought a lovely bunch of basil for a dollar. I bought four ears of sage green, husked corn at 75 cents each from a farmer from Grady, Arkansas who both grows and purchases their produce. Further down, I bought a pint of bright red, plump cherry tomatoes – the only ones I found in the market. The cherry tomatoes were from a family who has been coming for thirty-two years, since the son was just a kid. They come every Tuesday and Saturday.

I sampled a cantaloupe from someone with Carpenter Produce who has been coming to the market for forty-one years. The cantaloupe was juicy and sweet, and I decided that will be my fruit for the week. The man who offered the sample tells me they grow everything that is at their stand, but this year they have had to purchase tomatoes wholesale from Tennessee. He didn't know what happened, but their tomato plants grew, matured, and produced flowers, but no tomatoes, reminding me of the delicate balance of life on which these farmers depend.

At one place, I found several of my items, but I had a bit of a problem. First, I was pleased to get the four of the best and brightest and most perfect green bell peppers in the market for the 75 cents everyone else is charging instead of the dollar asking price. I didn't learn the power of bargaining in farmer's markets for nothing. To that I added one golden yellow onion and a lusciously green zucchini. The onion and zucchini was priced by the pound. The woman collecting and weighing the produce gave me a price of \$7.40 for the lot. I told her that doesn't sound right, because that would make the onion and zucchini together \$4.40. She seemed a bit miffed, but she refigured and came back with a price of \$4.25. I walked away, and a little after, a man I recognized from the table where I had just bought my vegetables walked up to me with a bag. With my hands full of produce, purse, notepad, and pen I had managed to leave my latest purchase at the booth. The man apologized for the mistake with the price. He told me that his mother sometimes helps with the booth, but she has Alzheimers and makes mistakes. I was not upset and we parted on good terms, me thinking how kind he was to find me and to apologize.

I love flowers, and after I finished buying my produce, I was tempted by a stand of flowers advertised as from Wye Mt. Flower Farm. I found out the owner is Beth Eggers and she had freshly picked zinnias – two bunches for \$5 that are calling to me in colors of coral, pink, red, and orange. Beth was friendly and told me that she had been coming for fourteen years from May to October. I piled my two bunches of zinnias on my bag of produce and moved on, spying some more flowers. The Asian lady told me the pinkish-purple flowers were chicken

flowers, and I recognized them as cockscomb. Together with the zinnias, I had a beautiful bouquet of fresh flowers for \$8, something that would have cost me \$10-12 in a store where the flowers aren't so fresh and perfect.



After I finished my marketing, what better way to end the expedition was there than to go into the neighboring Ottenheimer Market Hall and obtain lunch from a selection of BBQ, Thai, deli, Middle East, or smoothie stands. Tropical Smoothie is not necessarily of local origin, but the fruity flavors were reminiscent of the Farmer's Market next door.

Unfortunately, I still had a shopping list of things I couldn't find at the Farmer's Market, so I made my way to Kroger where I am struck by the difference from where I had just come. The fruits and vegetables paled by comparison, lacked the variety, and I knew from previous experience lacked the flavor. Whereas I enjoyed sauntering through the Farmer's Market and its variety of wares and people, I hurriedly made my purchases at Kroger eager to be finished.

I arrived home well satisfied with my look into Little Rock culture at the River Market's Farmer's Market and with my bunch of purchases. I was all set to make my Grilled Corn Pasta Salad (see following for recipe) and Spicy Stuffed Peppers, knowing I would be well nourished that week by the fresh produce.

Grilled Corn Pasta Salad

4 lg ears sweet corn in husks
1-1/2 c. uncooked penne pasta
2 c cherry tomatoes
1 med zucchini, thinly sliced
1 2 ¼ oz can sliced ripe olives, drained
1/3 c white or red wine vinegar
2 T olive oil
1 T minced fresh basil or 1 t dried basil
1 t sugar
1 t salt
½ t ground mustard
¼ t garlic powder
¼ t pepper

Carefully peel back corn husks to within 1 in. of bottom; remove silk. Rewrap corn in husks and secure with kitchen string. Place in a stockpot: cover with cold water. Soak for 20 mins.; drain. Grill corn, covered, over medium heat for 25-30 mins. or until tender, turning often. (Variation: Wrap unhusked corn in foil and bake at 400 degrees for 25 mins.

Meanwhile, cook pasta according to package directions; drain and rinse in cold water. When corn is cool enough to handle, remove kernels from cobs and place in a large bowl. Add the pasta, tomatoes, zucchini and olives.

In a small bowl, whisk the remaining ingredients. Pour over salad and toss gently to coat. Cover and refrigerate until serving.