



Fresh from the ground

Charlotte Francis visits Mulgrave Farmers Market and discovers a vibrant community hub of social, environmental and gastronomic activity.

IMAGE COURTESY OF TOURISM NSW

Just over one year old, Melbourne's Mulgrave Farmers Market is so popular that it pays to get there early – not only to secure a parking spot but also to ensure you're there before the most popular produce sells out.

Held in the grounds of The Body Shop headquarters, the market is a profit-for-purpose enterprise funded and organised by the Wise Foundation, which was set up in 2008 by The Body Shop Australia's owner Graeme Wise. Mirroring The Body Shop's philosophy, the family-run Wise Foundation aims to strengthen communities and create positive social change through economic innovation.

"The Foundation identified a need to help local and regional farmers by providing a weekly market with regular income-earning opportunities instead of the traditional monthly market," says market manager Sue Brown. "The market is also a way for us to create more of a community hub within the Monash area."

Since May 2009, more than 60,000 shoppers have visited the market, spending more than three million dollars and supporting 148-odd stallholders from all over Victoria. The atmosphere on any given Sunday is vibrant – there's even background music – as shoppers and families mix and mingle over cups of Fair Trade coffee, sampling speciality sausages, Turkish breads, Baltic ▶



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pastries, handmade cheeses and spice-infused chai, as well as seasonal produce such as oranges from the Murray, freshly roasted chestnuts and strawberries grown in the Dandenong Ranges.

And that’s what makes shopping at the market such a delight: it’s a conversation between grower and buyer, and an opportunity to learn about the provenance of the food. “We aim to enlighten, educate and excite shoppers,” says Sue, talking about the weekly cooking and horticultural demonstrations. With programs ranging from cooking with chilli to growing your own herbs and starting a worm farm, there’s something for everyone.

With a strong family focus, there’s plenty to amuse children while parents do their weekly shop. One week it may be face-painting or pony rides, and another, farm animals or a reptile petting zoo. The Community Cupcake Challenge held last November proved popular with all ages and had the added benefit of providing on-the-job training for local TAFE students. On six-week secondment, the students visited local childcare centres, playgroups and kindergartens to create awareness of

healthy eating and the importance of cooking together as a family. The competition involved cooking and decorating cupcakes, which were judged by John Savage, executive chef at the Sofitel Melbourne.

Ask any market-goer what attracts them to markets and the answer is almost invariably the abundance of freshly harvested, seasonal local produce that’s organic, free-range or chemical-free.

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Bruno of Delgrosso’s Apples & Cherry Orchard in Red Hill picks the apples from his Mornington Peninsula orchard fresh for the market. “Apples have got such a bad name nowadays. No-one picks them with a honey core anymore,” he says, handing me a freshly picked tree-ripened apple sliced open to reveal the golden-coloured core.

Roberto and Susanna from Amici Bakery ▶



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Café are members of the Victorian Farmers Market Association and the Regional Farmers Markets network and enjoy chatting with their customers. Hard at work baking the night before a market – Amici also attends other regional and inner-city markets – they offer a mouth-watering array of artisan breads, savouries and pastries.

There's normally a run on strawberries at Benny's Berries. "People refuse to buy from supermarkets and come back every week in the season," says Maria D'Angelo, whose father has been growing strawberries at Mooroolbark on the edge of the Dandenongs for more than 30 years.

Family-run businesses are common. Erkan Kilic was in the fashion industry but now sells cheese for his cousins, Andriy and Taras Kogut of Blue Bay Cheese on the Mornington Peninsula. Handing out samples of delectable brie, goat's and other cheeses, Erkan explains that his Ukrainian grandmother made cheese in caves while living in her home country many years ago. Sheffield-born Paul Joseph of Hill Top Farms offers a range of gourmet meats with a distinct British twist: pork pie, Scotch eggs, gammon and English sausages, and a range of cakes and



pastries including a classic British Bakewell tart.

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The Foundation has also assisted fire-affected communities in the Yarra Ranges and Murrindindi region by purchasing a fully serviceable fire-truck unit. There is a monthly raffle to raise community funds, and the market also runs regular community awareness events themed around fire safety, water saving, the benefits of exercise and basic first aid.

It's a busy, bustling and vibrant market and you're sure to work up an appetite as you shop – and of course you'll be tempted by all the incredible aromas as you walk around. Try the Dutch pancakes – made with Swampy's (so-called because his family name is Marsh) organic eggs and milk, tuck into one of La Citta's beautifully decorated cupcakes or, for something more hearty, treat yourself to a plate of paella cooked by Chilean-born Jessica Alvarez. ■



The Mulgrave Farmers Market is held in the grounds of the Body Shop Headquarters on the corner of Jacksons and Wellington Roads in Mulgrave, Melbourne (28km from the CBD). www.mulgravefarmersmarket.com.au