

Food

# Farmers' Markets Are Crisis Lifelines to U.S. Growers and Shoppers

The coronavirus pandemic forces small farmers to rely on the internet and consumers to make up for lost restaurant sales.

By [Larissa Zimmeroff](#)

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A customer buys apples at a farmers' market in San Francisco on March 25. *Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg*

California farmers are well versed in extreme conditions. In recent years, they've been forced to navigate everything from droughts to wildfires. But Covid-19 is something very different.

This month, Governor Gavin Newsom ordered first the Bay Area, and then the entire state of California to "shelter in place." But he agreed with both the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) and county health officials that farmers' markets, which small growers rely on to supplement their restaurant sales, were an "essential business." And it seems consumers agreed.

Fearful of close-quarters in packed supermarkets marked by empty shelves, many shoppers have descended on farmers' markets they rarely visited in the past. For the growers who supply the markets, this new-found popularity comes just in time since Newsom also ordered the statewide closure of most restaurants, often the biggest customers for local farms.

"I was really worried for a minute that they were going to shut us down," says Adriana Silva, co-owner of Tomatero Organic Farm, a 200-acre operation in Watsonville, some 85 miles south of San Francisco. She sells almost exclusively at 12 farmers' markets across the Bay Area. "There should be no question that farmers' markets are part of the food system."

But the markets aren't enough to make up for their sudden shortfall in revenue. So farmers are racing to embrace online sales, too—updating their websites to accept online orders and assembling farm boxes for delivery. Andy Naja-Riese, whose Agricultural Institute of Marin operates eight markets in the Bay Area, is working with app-maker What'sGood to help his farmers ramp up mobile transactions. And at the San Francisco ferry plaza farmers' market, farm boxes are being set up for curbside pick-up.

As with so many other parts of the economy, the pandemic may remake how Californians get their food—perhaps for the better.



Across the U.S., state policy on farmers' markets is a patchwork. Some cities have deemed them non-essential. *Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg*

Secretary Karen Ross of the CDFA, which certifies farmers' markets, said guaranteeing robust access to healthy food sources was a critical consideration in Newsom's declaration. Across the country, however, state policy on farmers' markets is a patchwork. Some cities have deemed them non-essential, while others have yet to make a decision. In Seattle, they're all closed. Ditto Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Durham, North Carolina.

But in Beaverton, Oregon, a farmers' market there is offering a drive-thru option. In New York, most markets are open except for a few commuter locations that no longer have foot traffic. For Michael Hurwitz, GrowNYC's director of food access and agriculture, this week's to-do list included how to improve social distancing at each of the 26 markets his organization operates across the city's five boroughs.

In 2018, food spending in the U.S. totaled \$1.71 trillion, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. More than one-third of that was spent on eating out. Newsom's decision to close California restaurants was a body blow to the state's hospitality business, and a challenge for farmers who are now relying on "eaters," as some growers call consumers, to tide them over.

"Our business has significantly dropped," said Silva, "but the people have come out."

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Some chefs who have resorted to delivery or take-out are still coming, too—though buying less. "Instead of two cases of kale, they'll get 12 bunches," Silva said. Luckily for her, only about 30% of her business was restaurant-related.

Chef David Nayfeld of Che Fico in San Francisco said he used to spend up to \$7,000 a week on farmer produce from four Bay Area markets. Nate Norris, chef de cuisine of Zuni Café, said he used to spend \$2,500. But no more. Norris said he briefly sold meals for take-out via his restaurant's Instagram account, but decided the infection risk to customers and staff was too great to justify it.

"We are very worried that, without strong, direct government intervention at the state and federal level, immense harm will be done to these small businesses," said Norris. "Farms operate on fragile economics, frequently running on debt during their slow seasons and making up for it during peak periods."





Losses at regional farmers' markets could range from 10% to 25% in annual sales, or more than \$500 million annually. *Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg*

Even with a new group of customers, U.S. farmers' markets will take a big hit from the coronavirus. In a report by Local Food Economics using data from the USDA, losses at regional markets could range from 10% to 25% in annual sales, or more than \$500 million.

As the U.S. leader in agricultural production, California farmers are arguably too big to fail. Over one-third of the nation's vegetables and two-thirds of its fruit and nuts are grown in the Golden State. In 2018, California's crops accounted for \$50 billion in sales, according to the CDFA. While smaller in scale, farmers' markets bring in about \$2.4 billion nationally. In California, that number is helped along by roughly 2,700 producers who sell at about 750 locations across the state.

"People prefer to buy from farmers' markets," said Ben Feldman, executive director of the Farmers Market Coalition, a national organization with a membership of 12,000 operators. These days that may be especially true, since it's easier to keep six-feet apart in a parking lot than in a supermarket produce aisle.

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But even with an uptick in customers, it may not be enough.

Jesse Kuhn, co-owner of Marin Roots Farms, grows specialty greens 35 miles north of San Francisco. “All of our restaurant accounts closed,” Kuhn said. “We went from two to three dozen [accounts] to zero. It’s kind of shocking.”

Kuhn is already rethinking his spring planting so that he can grow varieties for big chains like Whole Foods. Instead of chef-focused niche items like edible flowers or microgreens, which have a very short shelf-life, he may shift to easier grown items like dandelion greens.

Moreover, the crisis—even if it recedes in the coming weeks or months—could have a long tail for both growers and consumers.

“The thing we’re all concerned with is how will the lack of customers now affect the planting of summer and fall harvest?” said Christine Farren, interim director of the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture, (CUESA), which operates the San Francisco ferry plaza farmers’ market. Farren said the longer restaurants aren’t buying, the worse it will be: fewer profits mean farmers won’t be able to afford as much hiring for planting, which means less crops to sell and higher prices for consumers.

Right now, farmers who are unable to sell all of their produce are putting some in cold storage, or making canned goods that will keep, like sauces and pickles. Others are donating their unsold harvest to food pantries.





Farmers worry that when the pandemic recedes and shutdowns are lifted, it will be too late for some restaurants they rely on for business. *Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg*

Producers of meat and fish are having a somewhat easier time of it. Stemple Creek Ranch in Tomales, California, which sells beef and lamb, has seen demand double at the two weekly markets it sells at, while online sales have tripled. Restaurant sales that were 11% of its business, however, are now zero. “We hope and pray that our restaurants bounce back,” said Loren Poncia, who owns Stemple Creek with his wife Lisa.

“There are restaurants that are suffering, there are people that are getting laid off,” said Gary Root of StoneRoot Field & Sea, a seller of both meat and fish in Fairfield, about 50 miles northeast of San Francisco. Root said that while his business has also doubled in the last two weeks, future restaurant demand is uncertain.

Meanwhile, Kitty Dolcini of Dolcini Red Hill Ranch in Petaluma said her biggest problem is keeping up with demand. She raises chickens and sells their eggs at two farmers markets and several local stores in the Bay Area.

“We sold out Thursday at noon, and we’ll probably sell out shortly here,” she said last Sunday at the Marin Civic Center farmer’s market. “The market is such a huge benefit,” she said. “I sell directly to customers and my profit is way more than selling to the stores.”

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