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LOCAL FARMERS MARKETS GIVE MIDTOWN MORE FRESH PRODUCE OPTIONS

By *Jaclyn Cayavec and Meaghan Habuda*

Nearly two months have passed since the Sweetbay Supermarket at 22nd Street and 18th Avenue South closed its doors to Midtown. Farmers markets have served as alternative places to buy fresh produce.

There are two market locations accessible to Midtown residents: the Gulfport Tuesday Morning Fresh Market and the Saturday Morning Market. Each market offers a variety of fruits and vegetables. The produce is grown locally and a few stands provide buyers with organic options.

Worden Farms, an 85-acre farm in Punta Gorda, has sold organic produce at the Saturday Morning Market, hosted from downtown's Al Lang Stadium parking lot, since 2004.

"Organic has to do with the way that it's grown. It's grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers," manager Dalton Tininenko said. "We work with nature in a very natural way."

Pests are controlled through crop rotation in some organic farms. The older crops are turned under right away and incorporated back into the soil, Tininenko said.

"So what that does is it breaks the insect cycle. And it's the same thing for weeds. We till them under before they flower."

Farmer Gary Parke represents Parke Family HydroFarms at the Gulfport Fresh Market, located on Beach Boulevard near 28th Street South. He said his organic produce, grown through tower hydroponics in Dover, is scientifically healthier than supermarket produce.

"But with that being said, if you can't find organic in your neighborhood and you just got a farmer that's growing traditionally, buy from him," Parke said. "Local, with pesticides on it, will always be better than organic from five or six states away."

Transportation is important to the organic produce industry because it has a direct effect on the nutrition value of fruits and vegetables. Registered dietician Sarah Krieger of St. Petersburg said organic produce becomes less nutritious once picked, packed and shipped.

"That's one of the things with the fresh market," Tininenko said. "Because once you pick a vegetable, once it's cut, you start losing nutrients immediately. It starts the decomposition process, so the sooner that you get it to your table the more nutritious it is."

However, Krieger said it is too early to tell the long term health benefits of adopting a diet rich with organic produce.

Connie Lehmer, owner of Bob & Daughter Produce of the Saturday Morning Market, said the ethylene gas process affects the taste of produce.

"Gas makes them color up and look pretty, but they actually never get ripe – that's why most of them taste like cardboard. It can be a very beautiful tomato, but it's not going to taste good," Lehmer said.

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Lehmer also warned consumers about fake organic distributors. In order to sell organic produce, distributors have to be FDA approved certified organic.

"I've run into that many times over the years—they're advertising organic and they're buying at the same place we are, because you can pump up the prices of organic produce and some people will pay it when they see that word organic," Lehmer said. "If they don't have FDA approved certified organic, check it out, because you're probably paying a high price for nothing."

Bob & Daughter Produce, is based out of Clearwater, where the open-air stand has been for almost 30 years.

"We are not growers. We get our produce from the Tampa wholesale market and Plant City," Lehmer said. "I think our pricing is very reasonable compared to the supermarkets, for the most part, 90 percent of the time."

Parke said his organic produce also comes at a fair cost. While a grocery store would charge \$4 or \$5 for an organic red pepper, Parke sells his peppers at three for \$5.

"Basically, all of my stuff you're looking at is fresh, picked daily and slightly above the price of traditional stuff in a grocery store. I'm well below the organic price," he said. "And people ask me how I do that. It's very simple math: I grow it, you eat it, we cut out about five middlemen that way."

Price alone does not influence fresh produce purchases. Another major factor is taste. And taste matters, according to Lehmer.

"People go, 'Oh my god!' They are amazed at the difference of the taste from store bought versus out here," Lehmer said. "It's Mother Nature out here. It [Produce] needs natural air to ripen, whether it's on the tree or bush. It can't sit in the cooler and ripen. It just goes against all rules and regulations of Mother Nature. Don't mess with Mother Nature."

 [farmers markets](#), [food](#), [produce](#)

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