



Selling to Ethnic Groups

An interview with Steve Salts, truck farmer and author of *Around the World at Farmers' Market: A Handbook for Small-scale Grower-Marketers of Ethnic and Heirloom Vegetables, Fruits, and Herbs*. [See Resources, Chapter 2]

Q: Aren't ethnic groups generally a lower-priced market compared to the Anglo-American customer? Aren't they used to buying at open-air markets at comparatively low prices?

Salts: Yes and no. It's certainly not a top dollar market like selling to trendy yuppies, but it's definitely not bottom either. You've just got to be prepared to haggle. Most American farmers don't like haggling — it runs against most Americans' grain. Yet most ethnic groups just don't like having a set price. I usually set a price at high-middle, and I'm willing to dicker down to middle or low-middle.

I tried an experiment at a farmers' market once. I set a price ridiculously low on some cucumbers and yard-long beans, almost giving them away. Some ethnic customers still wouldn't buy it, because I wouldn't dicker! The next week I set the price high, and they dickered down and ended up paying twice what they would have gotten it for the week before! It's not so much the price they get it for, it just runs against their cultural grain to pay the asking price.

Q: What are some of the advantages of selling to ethnic customers?

Salts: Customer loyalty, volume, and consistency. Once ethnic customers find that you've got what they want, and that you are nice to them and cater to their culture, they will come back week after week, and year after year. Selling to ethnic folks may not be for everyone. You have to enjoy dealing with peoples from other cultures.

I've found ethnic groups to be a great niche market for me because there's very little competition. I may not be getting the price that some other sellers are getting selling to the yuppies, but my ethnic customers are a lot more stable. Yuppies can be very trendy, but the Chinese, the Indians, the Arabs and the Vietnamese have been buying the same vegetables for thousands of years. Ethnic customers aren't so much into food preservation, like canning — but many do make preserves such as kimchee or pesto or chutneys or pickles that take large quantities of produce and herbs. They also eat a lot more fruits and vegetables and they're a lot more accustomed to cooking from scratch. Even college students from other countries cook from scratch, believe it or not — it's not all phoned-in pizza. And then there are traditional banquets for holidays and weddings and the like that take LOTS of traditional veggies.

The tradition in their countries is shopping at open-air markets. They don't want their produce all wrapped up in plastic.

Q: What's most important in selling to ethnic groups?

Salts: You not only need to grow the crops the peoples are used to, but to cater to their cultures. The social part is VERY important. You're selling a service and experience — not just veggies. It's the ultimate relationship marketing. We try to offer a social experience to our ethnic customers — greeting them in their native languages, asking their advice on ethnic cuisine, learning something of the geography and customs of their homelands, etc. I try to find out what their holidays are and have special items in stock when their holidays are coming.

Basically, just talk with them: "Are you from India? What part of India?" They're usually surprised anyone is asking them such a question, but they might say, "Andhra Pradesh." And I say, "Hyderabad?" And they just about fall on the ground: "Oh, you used to live in India?" Well no ... but it all boils down to showing an interest in their culture.

A supermarket COULD try to compete with us on the product front — but can you see them doing it better on the social front? We have such an advantage! Small market grower-marketers can stop grip-

ing about unfair competition from factory farms. We just have to connect with customers who want to buy the “goods” in which we have a great comparative advantage. And those goods are not only great products but service and relationships.

Q: Yuppies are getting to be a difficult market to sell to. They purchase small amounts, and they want everything prepared. I’ve heard that ethnic peoples are the future of farmers’ markets.

Salts: Well, we do sell to so-called yuppies also, and value their patronage, though it’s true that they rarely buy much quantity. They like exotic produce but usually buy one of this and can you give me just a pinch of that. We find that so-called ethnic customers buy and use fresh veggies greatly in excess of their percentage of the total farmers’ market customers — and patronize farmers’ markets more than do Anglo-Americans. Perhaps 50-60% of our current farmers’ market customers are ethnic, and the proportion of ethnics in the population is growing rapidly. If present trends continue, the Census Bureau projects that non-Hispanic European Americans will be a minority by the year 2050, with the nation 25% Hispanic, 10-12% Asian-Pacific Islander and 16% black.

Q: So your book gets into some of the basic ethnic languages a farmers’ market seller might learn?



Customers are 80% Asian and 10% Indian in Milpitas, CA.

Salts: Yes. I will have a glossary in about 20 languages for elementary farmers’ market terms such as greetings, “yes,” “no,” numbers, etc. It doesn’t include all 2500 languages of the world, but some of the basic ones like Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese.

Q: Could you tell us a little about your own market mix?

Salts: Our marketing is approximately 50-60% farmers’ markets, 20-25% ethnic and vegetarian restaurants, 15-20% CSA, 5-10% on-farm sales, booths at festivals, etc. Our product mix is perhaps 25-30% “standard” veggies (even Chinese like sweet corn); 25-35% “heirloom” old-fashioned varieties (tomatoes, sweet sorghum, wild blackberries, etc.), and 50% ethnic veggies, mostly Oriental but with generous and increasing dashes of Middle Eastern, Italian, East European, Asian Indian, Southeast Asian, Mexican, etc.

We try to offer both products and services that the Super Megamarkets and Fast Food International can’t. We offer very fresh,

carefully harvested, great-tasting, old-fashioned or ethnic produce, often with “weird” appearance or short shelf lives, served up with a generous side-dish of advice, multicultural socializing, and just plain old personal friendship.

Our heirloom veggies tend to draw a lot of vegetarians, gourmet hobby cooks, older people (“Why my grandma used to grow that in her garden! I haven’t seen that in years!”), and curious passers-by (“What IS that!”). Actually, heirloom veggies could be considered just another sort of “ethnic” veggies — the veggies of our own fast-vanishing traditional American culture.

People are often loathe to buy “weird” veggies at first, so we give away a lot of free samples, plus recipes or suggestions for use. We are building a steadily growing clientele of “addicts.” “Why you WERE right! That crazy fuzzy tomato / red okra / guinea bean / (or whatever!) tasted great! Can I get three pounds this week?” ✨