

Farmers Markets Attract More Shoppers for Holidays

The markets in and around The Villages encourage locals to show their support and visit during their busiest time of the year.

By **RACHEL STUART**

Daily Sun Staff Writer

With the holiday season in full swing, area residents can visit their local farmers markets to show their support for small businesses and get some holiday shopping done at the same time.

At the Lady Lake Farmers Market, the cool weather and holiday lights swirling around the trees help get attendees in a festive mood while they peruse unique finds.

"It's not just a farmers market. There's also crafts and trades," said Peggy Sweet, the market manager. "It's a little bit of everything. I like the different ideas that people come up with, and they can portray all of that right here."

The market has been in existence for more than 10 years and is sponsored by the Lady Lake Area Chamber of Commerce. It consisted of only about nine vendors before Sweet took over as manager seven or eight years ago.

In the summertime, about 10 to 15 vendors make it out

to the market. But during the holiday season, Sweet has brought the number up to about 40 vendors from the tri-county area who fill the market from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Tuesday at Log Cabin Park, 106 S. U.S. Highway 27/441.

"You have close to 40 of the sweetest vendors here. When I brought them together as a group, that made a big difference," Sweet said. "I like the comfort of this market. I like being in the park and watching

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Beverly Van Schaik, of the Village of Pennecamp, tries a Key Lime sample of Uncle Ronnie's Blue Ribbon Cheesecake handed to her by Ronnie Findley, of the Village of Hillsborough, Saturday at the Brownwood Farmers Market.

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the people walking, smiling, talking and just having that close-knit feeling."

A variety of fresh produce, homemade crafts and goods are available for visitors to purchase, including afghans, to-go meals, personalized T-shirts, goat-milk soaps, peanut butter, honey, essential oils, jewelry, candles, cards and holiday decorations.

"I think that the market benefits the community by bringing local products that are farm-raised or handmade in this area," Sweet said. "I believe we should support the local people who work hard to bring their product."

Homer Hurst, of Lake Panasoffkee, has been selling customized items at the market for about three and a half years.

He takes a customer's photo and puts it on a variety of items — including T-shirts, mouse pads, coffee mugs or keychains — and makes it in about five to 10 minutes on site.

"It takes longer for the customer to find the right picture than it does for me to make it," he said. "I like bringing a smile to people's faces."

Hurst also serves as Sweet's right-hand man when it comes to opening, closing and managing the market.

"The family atmosphere is so thick at this particular market. It's really nice," he said. "It's a great place to get your Christmas shopping done."

Village Del Mar resident Robert Michael, or "Mike," has been visiting the Lady Lake Farmers Market with his wife for a few years, and he encourages other locals to stop by.

"I love the people and the farmed produce. We're very happy to support these people," he said. "We know it's hard, and we like to give them encouragement."

Although he doesn't visit the market every week, Mike said he and his wife try to stop by as often as they can.

"It's just enjoyable to come out here. It's a wonderful place," he said. "You could do all your Christmas shopping out here. There's such an assortment."

Lisa and Robert Kessler, of Lady Lake, are one of the vendor teams offering products that make great holiday gifts.

For about a year, the Kesslers have been selling homemade packages of ingredients that customers can use to make their own gourmet dips.

So customers know what their "Simply Savory Gourmet" dip will taste like, about 30 samples of already-made dips are available to try with a pretzel.

The samples' containers sit in hand-woven baskets from Mexico. They are lined with Styrofoam and filled with ice to keep the dips cool.

"We have a combo where you can get a basket and four dips for \$40. That's our best deal that we have available," Lisa said. "They make great gifts, especially during the holidays."

Lisa said she expects more visitors to stop by this time of year because traffic usually doubles during the season.

Joe Cangelosi and Katalin Cox also sell homemade food.

The couple have driven from their home in Ocala to the market in Lady Lake every Tuesday for the past nine months to sell international meals and pastries.

Cangelosi and Cox used to work at restaurants, but they decided to start "A Taste of Everywhere" to cater more to the local community.

"We needed something more neighborly," Cangelosi said. "This is quaint and has a home-town feeling. You get to know the people, and it's important to get to know your customer."

The couple caters directly to customers' needs and makes requested holiday goods as well.

"People can give us a heads up if they want us to make something special for them that they don't want to make or can't make. I have certain customers who come every Tuesday, and they expect those certain items," Cox said.

Although some vendors already have a grasp on the market atmosphere, others are just getting started.

Debbie Jordan and Nicki Pierce, of Tavares, set up their space at the market for the first time Dec. 5.

"This is our first farmers market. It's really pleasant here," Jordan said.

They started their company, "Just Bee," about two months ago and they are very passionate about their products, which include natural wildflower honey and beeswax candles.

They also have holiday baskets, which include honey, beeswax and candles.

"You can choose what you want in it," Jordan said. "We try to do little gift baskets each season."

Also new to the farmers market that day was customer Glen Gebhard, of Fruitland Park.

As a local resident who was searching for a good farmers market, Gebhard was pleased with what he stumbled upon.

"I've been down here for 17 years. I go by here all the time and had never, ever stopped," he said. "I like rummaging through places. On a nice day, you can walk around, enjoy yourself and buy a bunch of stuff."

With his hands full of chips, salsa and seafood to bring home, Gebhard said he encourages others to visit the market and see what they can find.

"They have everything here. I will definitely be back, and I'll bring my wife next time," he said. "They've got all the Christmas lights up, and it's nice. I really like it."

The Villages

Lady Lake isn't the only place to find a farmers market.

The Villages has a farmers market at Brownwood Paddock Square from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Saturday and at Spanish Springs Town Square from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Thursday.

The market at Spanish Springs only runs from October through April, but the market at Brownwood runs all year-round.

Michael Owen, marketing coordinator for The Villages Entertainment and Special Events, said the Brownwood market has been very successful, with about 70 vendors since it started five years ago. The Spanish Springs market has about 40 vendors,

and has been a steady market for at least four years.

"There's a little more variety at Brownwood, but they both have a little bit of everything," Owen said. "There's produce, honey, seafood dip, olive salad, guacamole, pie, several bread vendors and crafts."

Owen encourages locals to visit the markets, especially during the holiday season, but he said the markets really begin to pick up in January.

"We have several thousand people come to Brownwood, and between 800 and 1,500 at Spanish Springs. It about doubles for both markets in January," he said. "I wish everybody would come try them out. I think they'll enjoy what they find."

Leesburg

Like the Lady Lake Farmers Market, the Leesburg Saturday Morning Market — which was started by the Leesburg Partnership 12 years ago — also is entering its busiest season.

"We have welcomed an increase in traffic without losing the leisurely feeling of being able to stroll the market and enjoy the Towne Square with live music" around the fountain," market manager Danielle DeCaprio said. "The holidays are a great time to come experience the market and explore the unique hand-crafted items we have to offer."

DeCaprio became the market manager about six months ago and is bringing in more organic vendors that sell fresh fruits, vegetables, breads and pastries, along with handmade crafts.

"I love the down-home community atmosphere of the market," she said. "Downtown Leesburg is a hidden gem right next door to one of the largest retirement areas in America. For anyone who is looking for a taste of nostalgia coupled with better health, you'll certainly want to spend time with us on Saturday mornings."