

# Farmers markets explode in popularity

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Farmers markets are all the rage in the U.S., and Wisconsin is not immune to the trend.

Since 2008, the number of farmers markets has increased by 76 percent to a total of 8,268 farmers markets nationwide, according to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Wisconsin has 295 farmers markets, allowing it to claim the title of the No. 8 state with the most farmers markets in the country. California, New York, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania surpass the dairy state in the number of farmers markets it hosts. Virginia and Missouri come in at No. 9 and No. 10.

The popularity of farmers markets is not a sudden development. In the past 20 years, the number of farmers markets in the U.S. has more than quadrupled, growing from less than 2,000 in 1994.

[Alfonso Morales](#), a University of Wisconsin-Madison associate professor in [urban and regional planning](#), said the beginning of the rise in farmers markets can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s, when middle and upper classes began to demand fresher produce, tired of processed, grocery-store food.

## Eating fresh

This frustration with chemically altered food, coupled with an increased interest in consuming local fruits and vegetables, led to an increase in demand for farmers markets, Morales said.

“People see this local food, often, as healthier,” Morales said.

Dan Mielke is a farmers market vendor and manager of the Stevens Point Farmers Market, which began in 1847 and is the oldest continual farmers market in the state. A certified organic farmer, Mielke said his family has sold its products at the Stevens Point Farmers Market for about 150 years, since the early 1860s.

Like Morales, Mielke attributes the growth in farmers markets and their customer base to the organic food movement. People want locally grown food, Mielke said.

“The organic food and healthy food industry have really promoted the idea of eating natural and fresh,” Mielke said. “And that has helped us tremendously.”

During his 20 years selling at Stevens Point Farmers Market, Mielke said the number of vendors on its major market day have increased from about 12 in 1994 to close to 60 stands today.

SNAP benefits are becoming more widely accepted at farmers markets as well. Vendors at farmers markets in Marshfield, Wisconsin Rapids and Stevens Point already accept Electronic Benefit Transfer cards, which replace paper food stamps and checks. With the introduction of this new facet of paying, Morales said EBT could further encourage the growth of farmers markets in the country.

## Sustainability

Central Rivers [Farmshed](#), a nonprofit organization that promotes the consumption of local food in a sustainable manner, helped the Stevens Points Farmers Market establish its EBT system.

Farmshed program coordinator Krista Engelhardt said farmers markets are especially appealing to those consumers concerned about sustainability. Unlike produce found at grocery stores, the fruits and vegetables found at farmers markets are from the region and don't travel long distances by truck or ship.

Thus, the carbon footprint of farmers markets' produce is substantially less than grocery store fruits and vegetables, Engelhardt said.

"It's often really high quality (and) really fresh — it's often picked that morning," Engelhardt said about farmers markets' produce.

Farmers markets also offer a social experience that big chain grocery stores just can't provide. Both Morales and Mielke noted that farmers markets can supply a totally unique atmosphere — a place where shoppers have the chance to interact with the people actually growing their food and where vendors interact with their competition.

"People enjoy the social life in farmers markets," said Morales, adding that markets, in general, provide the common meeting ground for people of different backgrounds and political voices.

After all, though it's made differently across cultures, food is a universal concept.

"Food is something that everyone can relate to and it brings everyone together — literally around the dinner table," Engelhardt said.

### **Why Wisconsin?**

As for why Wisconsin — known for its frigid winter — is the home to so many farmers markets, while many southern states with year-round growing seasons are lagging behind, Morales points to Wisconsin's practice of small agriculture as the driving force behind the small markets.

"In other states, there is not the same tradition of small agriculture," Morales said.

"There is a strong tradition in this state of doing things together," he added, pointing to the residents' enthusiastic support of the cheese industry.

This emphasis on supporting local food might foster a more hospitable environment for farmers markets to thrive, Morales said.

Mielke, who used to be on the board of the Organic Crop Improvement Association's Wisconsin chapter, noted the organic food industry has been "extremely strong" in the Midwest, possibly contributing to the prevalence of farmers markets in Wisconsin.

As for the future of the farmers market movement, Morales said he expects farmers markets to considerably increase in popularity in urban areas. In regions such as central Wisconsin, he expects existing farmers markets to grow in size and in the number of vendors.

"Even if the number of markets don't grow in small cities, the size of the markets will grow (and) the amount of activity will increase," Morales said.

States with the most farmers markets:

1. California: 764
2. New York: 638
3. Michigan: 339
4. Ohio: 311
5. Illinois: 309
6. Massachusetts: 306
7. Pennsylvania: 297
8. Wisconsin: 295
9. Virginia: 249
10. Missouri: 245

Source: United States Department of Agriculture's 2014 National Farmers Market Directory

<http://www.wisconsinrapidtribune.com/story/news/local/2014/08/10/farmers-markets-explode-popularity/13856415/>