

AROUND THE REGION

Allure of the outdoors



Chester Jacinto / Westchase District Farmers Market

Jay Hiebert makes a sale to a customer for two jars of jam from his company Ma-Mere's Maison Specialty Foods at the Westchase District Farmers Market. The market is open Thursdays.

Farmers markets find business booming, thanks to shoppers who are far more comfortable these days in an open-air setting

A silver lining of the pandemic: Business is booming at area farmers' markets.

The Westchase District Farmers Market is among those who have seen an influx of shoppers who are more comfortable in the open-air setting. The market is open from 3 to 7 p.m. Thursdays in the parking lot of St. Cyril of Alexandria Catholic Church at Westheimer and Rogerdale.

"For the first few weeks of the pandemic, everyone was spooked. Our vendor count was way down. Our customer count was way down," said market manager John Carey. "But then after the first couple of times, people realized that you can get your fresh produce, get your eggs, get your bread. As people became more aware of that, our traffic increased, and our vendor count increased. We have more new faces coming to the market than we've ever had before."

Jay Hiebert sells specialty produce that he grows on his 40-acre farm in Lexington, which is about halfway between Houston and Austin. He also carries the 18 jellies and jams that he makes for his business Ma-Mere's Maison Specialty Foods. His sales are up 25 percent from the same time last year, he said.

Beekeeper Chris Kohnke said the pandemic has not really impacted his business, Pure Texas Honey, and that his sales are right on par with last year's.

"The bees don't care," he quipped.

Both Hiebert and Kohnke tout the much lower risk that comes

By Elliott Lapin
STAFF WRITER

with an outdoor market. The Centers for Disease Control has stated that outdoor gatherings are lower-risk environments. Residents are taking notice and attendance is up at some markets across the city.

Both wear masks and encourage social distancing. Kohnke has a cord in front of his stand to keep people at a safe distance.

Vice President of Communications for the Westchase District Sherry Fox buys a lot of her food at the farmers market.

"I'm not speaking scientifically. I'm speaking as a consumer, but it seems like an outdoor market is just about the safest place to shop," she said.

Carey noted that the west Houston event serves a niche of people who are unable to get to a market on the weekend.

Fox feels that more and more people are discovering farmers markets during the pandemic and the many advantages that they present.

"The greatest tip that I can give them is by buying at the farmers market, they're getting the best as far as the taste, the vitamin content and the freshness," Carey said of what people should know. "The vegetables haven't been frozen and shipped over long distances. These vegetables were literally picked last night or this morning, so freshness, taste, and vitamin content is what comes out of a farmers market."

To learn more about the Westchase District Farmers Market, go to its Facebook page at facebook.com/westchasedistrictfarmersmarket or website at westchasedistrictfarmersmarket.com.

elliott.lapin@hearst.com



The Westchase District Farmers Market is outside St. Cyril of Alexandria Catholic Church at Westheimer and Rogerdale.