

GATHER ■ written and photographed by Zach Powers



The Proctor Farmers' Market is bustling with vendors and patrons by noon on a recent Saturday.

UP AND AT 'EM, AWFULLY EARLY

Vendors at Tacoma's Proctor Farmers' Market cheerfully rise to the occasion of building community and relationships — every single Saturday

EVENT STAFF ARE the first to arrive. It's 6 a.m., still so chilly that they wear knit hats and winter jackets as they set to work coning off the Tacoma city blocks that, over the next three hours, will bloom into the Proctor Farmers' Market.

The first vendor pickup truck rolls in 45 minutes later, towing a custom-made brick pizza oven trailer. Chef Alfredo Russo hops out and immediately begins prepping his station. "These early mornings are nice," he says. "The air is crisp; it's quiet. Everything is coming together."

Russo recently sold Europa Bistro, a neighborhood favorite just a few hundred feet from the market. He doesn't miss the daily grind of the restaurant, but he still loves the thrill he gets from serving a line of hungry marketgoers.

"It's just what I do," he says. He speaks with a charismatic Italian accent, and like he's already had three cups of coffee. "I love the hustle and bustle, making sure people are taken care of."

"Anything exciting going on?" asks a Proctor resident out for a morning walk. "My life!" replies Russo, flashing what must be

his signature grin.

The Proctor Farmers' Market is held every Saturday in North Tacoma. Organizers take pride in running a year-round market. "Rain, sleet, heat, snow — we're out here no matter what," says manager Karen Bowes.

Trucks continue to roll in. Staff and vendors can see their breath in the cold air, but they're cautiously optimistic about warmth from the slowly rising sun.

Christie Qualey, the owner of Green Heart Smoothie, says sales can double on a sunny day. Like Russo, she cherishes these early mornings, when the market is just beginning to yawn and stretch.

"It's kinda like the pre-party, the calm before the storm," Qualey says. "It's a time to get centered and chill."

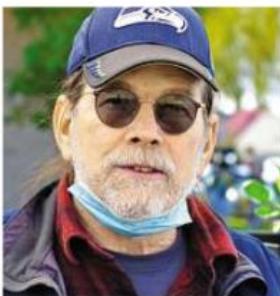
It doesn't seem chill. Folks are moving quickly: pitching tents, running to and fro with extension cords, firing up ovens and stoves, brewing coffee, organizing flowers and produce. Not a movement or moment goes to waste. Luckily, seasoned



Adam DeLeo sells mushrooms grown at his small farm or collected by foraging.



Christie Qualey, the owner of Green Heart Smoothie, has been blending them at the market for 12 years.



Jim O'Neill owns Cottage Gardens Farms, a 5-acre operation in Graham.

vendors such as farmer Jim O'Neill don't mind chatting while they prep.

"We're like a family here," O'Neill says, while organizing a table full of succulents. "It's all about this community. We feed off the energy of Proctor."

O'Neill owns Cottage Gardens Farms, a 5-acre operation in Graham. Today his stand is full of potted seedlings of peas, cauliflower and cabbage. "It's still cool-crop season," he explains.

O'Neill is something of a gardening evangelist. He particularly loves advising marketgoers who are just beginning to grow their own food. "I want people to be successful," he explains. "Part of coming to a market and buying these starts from a farmer is that we can have a conversation that sets you up for success once you get them home."

For Bowes, who has managed the Proctor Farmers' Market for a decade, that relationship is the foundation of the experience. "When you come to a farmers' market, you can ask a



Chef Alfredo Russo has been bringing his mobile pizzeria to the Proctor Farmers' Market for 13 years.

farmer about how they grow their vegetables or ask a food-maker about their favorite ingredients," she says. "It creates a direct connection between you, your food and this community." □

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