

ROGUE TRADERS

FARMERS' MARKETS ARE A GREAT SUCCESS BUT SOME, FINDS RICHARD BENSON, ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

A sunny Sunday morning in a pleasant inner-suburb of North London. In a pedestrianised area near a park, crowds mill around a farmers' market, filling bags with muddy vegetables, chunks of undyed meat and sugar-crisped fruit pies. There is a feeling of cheery well-being such as you tend to find at these markets, one fired by the idea that this is a place where you can indulge your senses and do something worthy, sustainable and useful. You get fed properly, the connection between consumer and manufacturer is restored, and the reward goes to the producer rather than some huge multinational retail or food-processing company. It seems the answer to many of the questions consumers and producers have about contemporary food – but is it?

This market – unnamed here for legal reasons, but all too real – is in fact highly suspect. Despite the farmers' market banners, it is not accredited by the National Farmers' Retail & Markets Association (FARMA), and imposes few meaningful conditions on its stall holders. Accredited markets enforce strict criteria on their vendors, but they do not have a licence on the term "farmers' market", which means that unless you check for the FARMA logo at markets, you could end up buying food that is no more local than that in your supermarket.

According to Sue Thomson of the National Association of Farmers' Markets (NAFM), recent years have seen a rash of bogus farmers' markets, often selling products that are misleadingly labelled. It is of concern, she says, because visiting one might give people a poor impression of what farmers' markets can be. It is a rather galling phenomenon, because good work by people committed to the principles of FARMA – particularly the local food champion Henrietta Green, who transformed London's Borough Market – means that the British public now spends £120 million in farmers' markets each year. Unscrupulous copyists were perhaps

to be expected, partly because it is difficult to apply set rules for all markets. The definition of local, for example, has to be flexible because big cities need a different size of catchment area to market towns. The emphasis on local food as well as farmers means that markets have vendors who are processing or "adding value" as well – cheese-makers, say, or smokehouses. They "should be sourcing locally", adds Thomson, "so their produce should have been grown or reared within the definition of that market's 'local'." It is in fact very easy for consumers to be reassured. FARMA and NAFM are tremendously sound and conscientious organisations, and any of the markets certified by them will fulfil expectations. "We're a membership organisation" says Thomson of NAFM, "so it's down to markets who choose to be members of ours. They submit their rules so we know they're working towards the criteria. Then, after a set amount of time following membership, they go for certification." Moreover, the consequences for fraudulent selling can be serious – a trader at Richmond's farmers' market in west London was recently fined £5,000 for misleading labelling.

Kevin Randall, the principal trading standards officer for Lancashire County Council, has researched the problem, visiting 14 farmers' markets in his patch. "What we found was pretty scary," he says. "Only two of the markets were actually registered with FARMA. The rest just seemed to lay down their own rules regarding what they could sell."

Even in well-intentioned cases there can be grey areas that raise questions for consumers as well as would-be regulators. If someone is baking cakes from flour bought in the supermarket, is that right for a farmers' market, asks Randall? What about someone buying in and marinating olives? These are new questions, but ones which will become more relevant as farmers' markets grow. As ever, it pays to look at the label. **GFR**



A trustworthy FARMA market