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Hungry for a Market, but Where?

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

THE day was wet and so cold that the savoy cabbages nearly froze and the fat on [Mario Batali's](#) porchetta quickly congealed into a solid mass. But the few thousand intrepid souls who made their way to the southern tip of Manhattan on that dark Sunday afternoon in December did not seem to mind.

Neither sleet nor lack of a handy subway stop could keep them from Finger Lakes dried beans, hot fried oysters and Nantucket scallops still in their red shells. They had heard there was a market, and they were going to get there no matter what.

Set up just outside one of the former Fulton Fish Market buildings by a nonprofit group called New Amsterdam Public, the one-day event was meant in part to build support for a permanent indoor public market selling pristine local food. Similar events are planned for the spring and summer.

For shoppers, the little start-up represented hope that they might eventually have what many New York cooks dream of: a large, permanent market with local and seasonal produce, cheesemongers, butchers and a selection of staples like canned tomatoes, olive oil and granola.

The place, whether at the historic old fish market, the new Penn Station or somewhere else, would be warm in the winter and cool in the summer, with a stand where you could buy a good sandwich or an espresso and gossip with other people who like to talk about cooking.

"New York really just doesn't have that one place," said Micah Arbisser, who, with his wife, Lisa, had bundled up their infant and made their way from the Lower East Side to the little market.

Like many New Yorkers who piece together a cook's pantry from Chinatown shops, farmers' markets, FreshDirect, Fairway and other stores, the Arbissers have market envy. It may be easy to boast that New York is the greatest food city in the world, but one trip through San Francisco's Ferry Building and farmers' market, London's Borough Hall or Seattle's Pike Place Market can be deflating.

Some people who have been pondering the next generation of New York public markets think this will be a pivotal year in the slow climb toward such a space.

For one thing, the infrastructure for getting local farm products into the city is about to change drastically. In a speech in December Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) told the New York Farm Bureau that ground would be broken this year on a wholesale farmers' market somewhere near the massive wholesale food complex in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx.

The governor called it the Pride of New York Wholesalers' Market, but it would also sell food grown in

surrounding states, said Theodore Spitzer, president of Market Ventures, an urban planning and marketing firm that helped the state plan the market. (He is not related to the governor.)

Although the final feasibility study will not be released for weeks, people at the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets who have reviewed it say the market, a private-public partnership, will make it possible for as many as 250 farmers to bring their products to New York City.

A big, modern warehouse with good storage facilities and a steady stream of buyers could assure schools, hospitals and grocery stores of a reliable supply of local produce. And it could finally give local farmers a new way to bring their produce to town, particularly those with midsize farms of 50 to 200 acres. Selling wholesale could work for growers who are too small to make direct deals with big chains or not specialized enough for a stall at one of the city's 46 Greenmarkets.

"Asking the farmer to continue to do what they do at the farmers' markets after they have already grown the food is like asking me to shop for the food, cook it, serve your food and clean the dishes," the chef Dan Barber said. "It's just too much."

The Greenmarket came of age in a post-Balducci's era, educating New Yorkers about the value of local produce, artisanal cheesemaking and pasture-raised beef in a way the epicurean market boom in the 1970s and 1980s did not.

But with no permanent buildings or storage, long waiting lists for slots at the most popular markets and sparse choice at others, the Greenmarkets have their limits. And as the instant success of the Whole Foods near the largest Greenmarket, at Union Square, showed, there is more than enough demand to go around.

At the moment, nobody has proposed a big indoor market to rival the ones in San Francisco or even Philadelphia. The massive, high-stakes maze of New York development is one reason. In 2004 Nina Planck, a former director of the Greenmarkets and the founder of several successful farmers' markets in London, offered a detailed plan for a public market in the meatpacking district. Her proposal, sent to city planners and the Economic Development Corporation, went nowhere.

But the success of markets like the one at Grand Central Terminal, coupled with a growing interest in shopping for local food as a leisure activity, makes the proposition more interesting to developers.

Theodore Spitzer, whose company has helped plan large public markets in several United States cities, is also working to redevelop the Battery Maritime Building, a Beaux-Arts gem in Lower Manhattan. The property recently underwent a \$60 million renovation sponsored by the city's Economic Development Corporation, and was to include a specialty food hall dedicated to local products.

But it will not be the great public market described in early drafts of the plans, said Karen Karp, a food and market consultant who is also working on the project. Instead, the building's prime second-floor space will primarily be used for food-related trade shows.

Some advocates for a New York public market would like to see it become a part of the massive remake of the James A. Farley Post Office building and Penn Station, called Moynihan Station. Plans for the project call for

plenty of shops and restaurants, but economic development officials say a big public food market is not in the works.

Instead, it seems, New York is destined to take baby steps, some of them at the tourist-rich South Street Seaport. General Growth Properties, a developer, holds the lease on most of the properties in the area, including the landmark tin building at the former Fulton Fish Market, one of the spaces that the New Amsterdam team wants to move into.

The developer does want some kind of food market. To help figure out what kind, it hired Clark Wolf, a food and restaurant consultant who splits his time between New York and Northern California.

He proposes turning 16 permanent stalls on South Street into incubators for chefs who want to try out new concepts. He has talked to Scott Peacock, a chef in Atlanta, about a biscuit shop; to Mr. Barber about a creamery; and to Mr. Batali about a tripe truck. Culinary schools could feature promising new chefs in the space. A seasonal farmers' market could spill into the street.

It may not be the grand market some envision, but it could add to the momentum for one, or for several.

"A market in New York has to reflect political and cultural will, and we are arching toward it," Mr. Wolf said. "But New York can't have one market. It has to have 30."

In a twist, he thinks the ideal New York market, wherever it ends up, should be global and deeply local at the same time.

"New York should be uniquely ambitious about a public market," he said. "In the way the Ferry Building reflects Northern California, a New York market should reflect New York. And New York is a global crossroads."

That philosophy is at odds with what the people behind the New Amsterdam Public, Robert LaValva and Jill Slater, have in mind. Their goal is to make Lower Manhattan the beacon of New York's sustainable food movement by establishing a popular market filled with well-chosen local products in a historic public building.

"There is nothing easier to sell, other than maybe a newborn puppy," Ms. Slater said.

Mr. Wolf and people from General Growth Properties find the idea interesting, but the company has remained neutral about how it might fit into its final plans.

The New Amsterdam market, which backers plan to present to the city this year, has the support of culinary figures like Mr. Barber, [Alice Waters](#) and Odessa Piper. Michael Hurwitz, the director of the Greenmarkets, does not see it as competition. There are more farmers eager to sell their food and customers for them than there are outlets, he said.

And, he pointed out, "I don't think anything replaces direct sales from farmer to customer."

Whatever kind of market emerges, it cannot come fast enough for many of the farmers, because, for now,

selling to New Yorkers is logistically grueling.

“You have to combine a restaurant delivery with the Greenmarkets and mail order to move enough product,” said Michael Yezzi of Flying Pigs Farm in Shushan, N.Y.

Mr. Yezzi and his wife, Jennifer Small, who sell meat from about 475 rare-breed pigs a year, spend two days a week working at the Greenmarkets.

If they start at 2:30 a.m., the drive to the city takes about three and half hours. In the late afternoon the drive home can take five. With fuel, market fees, hired help and baby sitters for their two children, he figures that two days of selling costs him more than \$1,300.

A grand market with easy access for devoted customers and an on-site butcher to care properly for his expensive pork would solve the biggest problem he has selling in New York City.

“I spend too much time away from the kids and away from the animals,” he said.

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