

The Orange Farmers' Market

Just in case you hadn't noticed, we have a heckuva little farmers' market right here in Orange. It's true. The Orange Farmers' Market is a good one, better than some in towns thrice its size. Page Sullenberger of the Orange Downtown Alliance, which organized the venue, adds, "The town fathers love it. The town council has said to ODA, 'You keep doing this farmers' market' because they see it as such an asset."

It officially started about 10 years ago. Frank and Cindy Gillan of Retreat Farm in Rapidan were the first "Market Masters" until their own all natural produce and meat business kept them closer to home. Nowadays to become a vendor is pretty simple. It costs \$5 for a space. Sullenberger says, "They have to own an apron or a hat so they can be identified as a vendor. We use those little bits of money to run a tiny little ad in the paper every week in the *Orange Review*. But we don't really incur a lot of expense. It's word of mouth a lot and people driving by."

The market has had its ups and downs over the years. It started in the fireman's fairgrounds at the intersection of Routes 15 and 20, an ideal location, according to experts on such matters. However, current Market Master Jeanie Altman says "It just didn't

work out. People for some reason did not want to go in there."

So a couple of years ago, it moved to Taylor Park on Main Street. "This has been the best thing that ever happened, moving up here," points out Sullenberger. Walk-in traffic and regular customers found it much more appealing and convenient. Another advantage: the market became year round, moving to the Visitor's Center on Saturday mornings from November through April.



"It's just a great group," marvels Page. "It's a quality of life thing in our town... The other part about it too is there are a lot of us interested in knowing where our food comes from." Page quotes an article she saw in the *Washington Post* recently. "The average produce product in your grocery store has traveled 1,500 miles...1,500 miles," she repeats for emphasis.

Connie Carpenter turns ashen. "Oh my word," she gasps. "Think what it was like when it started out. Green and hard as a brick...Nothing can have any flavor when it has to do that." Page adds, "You know, I don't buy produce unless I get it from them." She points to the vendors and proceeds to fill up a bag with end-of-the-season fresh red ripe tomatoes that traveled 15 miles max...not 1,500.



Photos by Phil Audibert

Above, Jimmy Darnell, who also owns and operates the Garden Spot on Caroline Street, displays heaps of veggies that he grows himself on a plot along the Rapidan River just minutes away from Orange. Left, Page Sullenberger of the Orange Downtown Alliance (left) says the farmers' market has the political support of the Orange Town Council. And Connie Carpenter (right) is one of the reasons why the local mart is so successful.

Market moves indoors until May

Just recently, the farmers' market moved to its winter quarters in the Orange Visitor's Center...Saturdays only, 9-12. Come next spring, it will move outdoors again, twice a week in Taylor Park. Here's a brief list of current vendors.

Jimmy Darnell- beautiful fresh veggies and plants. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. Jimmy is also the owner/operator of the Garden Patch on Caroline Street, but he doesn't see the Farmers' Market as competition. it's more like a partnership.

Claire Cervens- a relative

newcomer, Claire sells everything from zinnias to pumpkins. She used to be a vendor in Charlottesville, but finds Orange much more to her liking. "Less traffic, nice people," she summarizes succinctly.

Betsy Lamb- Handmade jewelry, made in Barboursville. She might also give you a kitten to adopt.

Maura Paris- rice balls, pizza, calzone, lasagna, egg-plant parmesan, risotto - mostly her grandmother's recipes and her grandmother stepped off the boat from the old coun-

try.

Joyce Miller- Tote bags, purses and hats, knitted items, various crafts, from Gordonsville.

George Pollard- woodturner, a brand new exhibitor, also from Gordonsville.

Brandy Hopwood- jams, jellies, butters, sauces, gourds, and some baked items.

And last but not least, **Connie's Cooking**, who also represents Marshall Farms cheeses, Papa Weaver's Pork products, and Miller Farms produce.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Zinnias for sale in the Orange Farmers' Market add a burst of autumn color.



Photo by Phil Audibert

"It's apple time now," says Connie Carpenter who would fit the bill for the illustration in the dictionary for "kindly grandmother."

The farmers market lady

It's a weeknight and Connie Carpenter will be up well past midnight cooking. Same thing tomorrow. "I'll cook till midnight tonight and at least that tomorrow night," she says in her distinctive clipped speaking style. "It might be one o'clock before I get to bed tomorrow night."

The following day, Saturday, she'll move her creations that she

has staged on her dining room table to her compact car. She'll drive the mile or so to Orange, where she'll set up for the farmers' market at the visitor's center in the old train station. Connie's baked goods can cover three long conference tables: eight to 10 kinds of cookies; brownies: pumpkin, blond, chocolate; dessert bars: raspberry, key lime, lemon; cakes: carrot, pumpkin spice, poppy seed, lemon, cranberry, and apple; regular pies: coconut, chocolate, lemon chess, pecan; fruit pies: cherry, peach, blackberry, blueberry, damson and apple, "depending on the season...It's apple time now."

Pause for a breath here...yeast rolls, bread, cinnamon rolls, canned goods, "all kinds of jams and jellies and preserves and pickles..." fresh veggies from Miller Farms in Mine Run, fruit from

This is American southern country cooking at its best. Her rolls are soft as a pillow, and she does not skimp on sugar.

INSIDER

BY PHIL AUDIBERT
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Mayo Yowell in Madison. Oh, we almost forgot... gingerbread... that's also popular this time of year.

And what about those coolers at her feet? "A lot of these people can't come to the market, but we try to have a variety for people here, so I just do it," she says pointing to the ice chests containing cheese from Marshall Farms in Unionville, pork from Papa Weavers in Uno... "all natural meat, no preservatives."

Whew, that's a lot of stuff to be cooking and carrying around. "They've compared me with the clowns at the circus," she laughs. "You know, how many clowns can you get in a little car? Every time you think there's not one more coming out, I can get another basket of cookies out." She can barely shoe horn her own frame behind the wheel.

And then, during the summer months, on Monday, she'll start the whole process all over again, staying up into the wee hours cooking and baking...Tuesday night too... for the Wednesday farmers' market in Taylor Park. Connie is dedicated to the farmers' market.

It's the last Wednesday outdoor farmers' market of the season. Page Sullenberger of the Downtown Alliance saunters by. "She is the consummate promoter of the market," says Page pointing to Connie, adding "AND she's just a nice lady. She's ALWAYS here." In fact, Connie Carpenter has not missed a farmers' market since it began nearly ten years ago! "Cooking, cooking, cooking. I love it," is all Connie will say.



Contributed photo

This is Connie Carpenter's graduation picture from Madison County High School. The year is 1965. She saved enough money working at the Silk Mill to buy a 1955 Turquoise Chevy with huge tail fins.

If you looked up the phrase "kindly grandmother" in the dictionary, a picture of Connie Carpenter should be the illustration. Born and raised just across the river in Madison Mills, Connie grew up with her two little brothers, nine and 11 years her junior, on a small dairy farm six miles from the Town of Orange. "So we always came to Orange to do everything when I was young. Even though I had to ride 13 miles to school when I was in Madison County, we considered Orange home." She thinks back to those days in the 1950s and 60s. "I had to get up and milk and make sure I caught the bus in the morning."

Both of her parents worked, so it was Connie's responsibility to take care of her siblings. "They were more like my children because there was so much difference in our age. I kept them in the summertime while mama worked, and got them ready for school in the morning and everything."

Most importantly, Connie learned to cook and can on her mother's woodstove. "When mama finished work in the afternoon, she'd come home and do all kinds of canning at home.

We ate what we canned in the wintertime. We didn't go to the store and buy like children do today. We ate out of our cellar in the wintertime." It was not uncommon for the Carpenters to put up 100 quarts of beans in one season. "That was a staple for us at suppertime," along with mason jars crammed to the lid with corn, or tomatoes, or relish, or fruit preserves.

The year was 1965. Connie was a senior at Madison County High School. In the afternoons she took a part-time job at American Silk Mills in Orange. "That fed a lot of people," she says somberly of the local employer. "It helped me my senior year in high school. I worked there after school every day."

Anyone who was raised out in the country can relate to the fact that turning 16 is a major milestone in your life because you now have a driver's license...your ticket to freedom. "Oh my, it was like a dream come true," says Connie, giddily. She was able to save up enough money to buy a 1955 Turquoise blue Chevy with "big tail fins. Oh man I thought I was the hottest thing in town."

By the time Connie turned 20, she married Rae Carpenter and started a family. Because Rae has the same last name, she didn't even have to change her I.D. cards. The Carpenter family name has roots running deep in Madison County. Some go back to the original indentured German families named Zimmerman who jumped across the river once they pried themselves from the clutches of Alexander Spotswood and his iron mines in the early 1700s. "There are a lot of different ones in Madison so we're not all related," she says of the Carpenter name.

Anyway, Connie and Rae worked on his father's dairy farm up in Aroda. "A lot of work, hard work...It was an all-day thing. You milked the cows in the morning and went to the hay field, did that work, came home and did the same thing at night, round the clock, 24-7, 365," she says wearily. "I'd drive a tractor all day long, come home and bake and have supper for the men in the field at night."

During their hey day (or should it be hay day?) they had a herd of 120 Brown Swiss and Shorthorns, milking as many as 40 every day. Rae also took other jobs, leaving many of the farm chores to Connie. One time, when he was working for VDOT, he was struck by a van while setting out construction zone caution signs, permanently damaging his spine. Two surgeries in 1970 did little to ease Rae from his debilitating injuries.

And then one early morning, when he came home from a job as a nighttime security guard, his car was attacked by a Shorthorn bull. "After Rae got out, it knocked him around the yard quite a bit, and finally decided he'd had enough and went on his way. In fact, the car was totaled....he tore out every light on the car," says Connie incredulously. Rae suffered a bruised spleen, broken collarbone, "and he was awful sore for a long time."



Photos by Phil Audibert

On their second rise, yeast rolls await the oven in Connie Carpenter's kitchen. Let the bakathon begin! Once Connie Carpenter turns on her kitchen oven, she doesn't stop baking till the wee hours.

Connie's baking tips

Needless to say, Connie's Cooking relies on fresh local ingredients. Asked if she ever uses pre-made pie crusts, a look of shock crosses her face. "No sir. That wouldn't be fair," she says breathlessly.

Connie's pie crusts are made from scratch: 1 cup of flour, a tablespoon of sugar, and ¼ cup margarine, plus 1/3 cup cold water. "The secret is cold water," she confirms. "And sometimes ice water is the best thing for the best pie crusts. And the quicker

you work it up the better." And if you're using dried fruit for filling, "If you flour that, it won't all go to the bottom of the batter."

Yeast rolls: About 5 cups of flour, ¼ cup sugar, ½ cup milk or buttermilk, 1 package Fleischman's yeast in water. Combine ingredients and put in a greased pan or big bowl and let rise once, about an hour. "It depends on the weather. In the summertime it didn't have to go that long because it was so hot."

With the first rise complete,

Connie then punches it down, divides it into loaves or rolls and sets them out in baking tins to rise again. At this point the rolls are "at least two hours away" from the oven. Let them rise at room temperature, she says; a warm oven rushes the process. "Yeast for the rolls, if you add sugar to the hot water it works better, but you have to be careful not to get the water too hot, you'll kill the yeast. There are a lot of little tricks that you learn as you go."



Five years ago, the Carpenters sold the herd and the 87-acre dairy farm and moved to their current home on nine acres just outside the Town of Orange. In fact, Connie can almost see her childhood home place across the river from her back door. "Rae's health did not permit him to work anymore," she explains of the move. Serendipitously she found she had more time to pursue her passion...cooking.

So here it is a weeknight. Boxes of sweet smelling apples and squash are stacked on the front porch of the Carpenter home; there's just not enough room for them in the kitchen. As Rae waters his beloved Appaloosas outdoors, Connie readies herself for a baking marathon. Eight tins of yeast rolls sit on an old fashioned desk, rising for the second time. The kitchen sink is full of recently washed and sanitized mixing bowls, spoons, measuring cups, and whisks. Twelve pounds of margarine soften by the sink.

Were it not for these minor details, there is nothing here to indicate that this is anything other than your average kitchen. No six-burner Viking stoves, giant multi-paddle mixers or walk-in coolers here. This is Connie's kitchen. She does all of this on a lone garden-variety GE electric glass-top range and oven.

However, she quickly points out "Once I start that oven, the race begins... Once I turn the oven on, I try to keep something in there all the time to utilize my electricity." She points to a small round kitchen table. It will be laden with cups and bowls with all of her ingredients pre-measured. "Prep time is as much as cooking time," she advises. Outdoors you can hear her flock of laying hens clucking. "That makes a big difference," she says of the big brown eggs. "The cakes come out nice and yellow."



Photo by Phil Audibert

Always with a smile on her face, Connie Carpenter hasn't missed a Farmers' Market since it began ten years ago. She started by taking leftover zucchini from other vendors and coming back the next week with loaves of zucchini bread.

This coming farmers' market, Connie must fill a special order for 75 cookies on top of her usual dozens of pies, cakes, breads and rolls. She goes through 50 pounds of flour a week "at least," and she buys her staples locally. She compared prices at Sam's Club and concluded, "I can do just as well with my local Food Lion." Besides, she's not running up and down the road burning up gasoline. "And time," she adds. "It takes me two hours to go to Charlottesville. Time is important to me."

Connie's cooking is not what you'd call gourmet. No fancy French words here, this is American southern country cooking at its best. Her rolls are soft as a pillow, and she does not skimp on sugar. "Real simple, but people like it a lot," she confirms. The important thing is it's natural, no preservatives. "Everything is natural," she confirms. "That's why I think I'm doing such a good business. People know it's all nat-

ural and nothing added. And people are much more aware of what's going in their body than they used to be."

Connie's Cooking is also frugal; she wastes nothing. "Whatever I have left over, the produce that I don't sell in the summertime, I'll use and put it in a jar." In fact that's how she started. She showed up for her first farmers' market with just some crocheting that she'd done, and was sent home at the end of the day with all the zucchini that had not been sold by her fellow vendors. She returned a week later with all that zucchini converted into bread, "and that was the beginning of my bakery business."

It has now grown to the point that she is licensed and inspected by the State Department of Agriculture. Her well has been tested and approved and she has sent samples of her products to Richmond. "You have to send a sample of everything and a flow sheet showing how you go about preparing that product." Hmmm. Wonder what they do with those samples after they're done, uh, testing them.

Ask her if she could make a living doing this and quit her other day job, housecleaning, she responds, "I'm sure I could if I wanted to...and I'm at the point where I can really rely on what I sell. If I had more time, I think I could sell everything that I bake." This becomes obvious as regular customers flock to her table and thrust money in her hands. One day, Connie Carpenter raked in \$700!

But she's not really in it for the money. "It's really rewarding when people come by, especially repeat people, and tell me how much they enjoy my product. That really does my heart good...I love what I'm doing."

Ask her if she's thought about expanding...developing a product line, maybe even becoming a brand name; she hesitates and responds carefully. "I've had an idea sometimes that maybe I might go big, but that would involve a whole lot more. It would mean I'd have to hire people." She pauses to reconsider. "I think the simpler I keep things the better off I am. And I love the farmers' market. As long as things are going the way they are at the farmers' market, I'm completely satisfied..."