



Culinary Cornucopia: Landmark at Third and Fairfax celebrates 75 years of good food

May 20, 2009

By Natalie Haughton Food Editor

In July 1934 on a vacant lot at Third Street and Fairfax Avenue, 18 farmers began selling produce off the back of their trucks. They each paid 50 cents a day rent to A.K. Gilmore (the owner of the Gilmore Oil Company). That little ad hoc venture during the Great Depression has since grown into a thriving Los Angeles icon, the Original Farmers Market.

This year the bustling landmark is celebrating its 75th anniversary and features a cornucopia of more than 100 stalls and shops.

Although the original market with its stalls remains intact, the landscape surrounding it has changed in recent years. In 2002 an expansion added the North Market and the Market Plaza. In addition, The Grove Los Angeles, a high-end lifestyle center with restaurants, shops, a dancing fountain and live concerts on a central park, opened on A.K. Gilmore land (still family owned) adjacent to the market seven years ago with a vintage green trolley and a "Main Street" connecting the new and the old.

The Grove has re-energized the enduring old-time market and given it new verve along with enticing a younger crowd resulting in a younger vibe, notes **JoAnn Cianciulli, author of the recently released "L.A.'s Original Farmers Market Cookbook: Meet Me at 3rd and Fairfax" (Chronicle Books; \$22.95)**. The Grove and the market play off one another - and offer the best of both worlds in a single destination.

But "the market remains what it has always been - a place to meet, eat, shop and relax," she adds. "It's a thriving, ongoing festival of sights and sounds, flavors and smells in the center of our nation's second-largest city. It's a melting pot with food from all over the world. I love this place, it has such charm and nostalgia."

With more than 50 eateries, grocers and specialty food places under one roof, the maze of market stalls offer something for everyone - Mexican, Middle Eastern, Brazilian, American diner fare, Chinese, French, Thai, pizza, gumbo, pastries, yogurt, ice cream, English toffee, breads, sushi, crepes, fresh produce, meats, sausages, poultry, seafood, cheeses, wines, hot sauces, teas and more.

Among the options and reasons to frequent the unique place are family-owned and -operated stalls like Loteria! Grill, The French Crepe Company, Pampas Grill, The Gumbo Pot, Littlejohn's English Toffee House, Moishe's Restaurant, Thee's Continental Pastries, Bennett's Ice Cream, Singapore's Banana Leaf, La Korea, Peking Kitchen, Farm Boy and Farm Fresh Produce, Tusquellas Fish & Oyster Bar, Magee's House of Nuts, Monsieur Marcel Gourmet Market and such.

Stroll the stands leisurely, select a few choices to sample, grab a patio table, dive in and enjoy.

You can read all about the market merchants, the faces behind the places, in Cianciulli's book filled with more than 75 recipes for home cooks, some from stall owners and others developed by the author using market products to capture the spirit and reflect the personality of the market.

"It's more than a cookbook," says Cianciulli, who was drawn to the market to relax, eat, people watch and dawdle when she moved to Los Angeles from New York 17 years ago to pursue and merge her passion for food, television and entertainment.

"I call it a food lovers' storybook. It is about the food, people and history of this Los Angeles landmark."

Cianciulli also passes out historical notes and trivia from a treasure trove of the multigenerational vendors' memories and experiences along the way, giving readers a sense of what the market is all about. There are loads of vibrant color photographs that make the market come alive.

You'll learn that Blanche Magee, a local restaurateur from downtown Los Angeles who began selling lunch to the farmers in the beginning, established Magee's Kitchen, the first nonfarmer tenant at the market, which is still going strong. Phyllis Magee, who married into the family, has carried on the legacy and still uses some of Blanche's recipes. Today, corned beef, turkey and roast beef are daily menu mainstays. "As long as I love it, I will be here," says Phyllis, who works at the stall daily when she's in town.

Bill Thee, the owner of Thee's Continental Pastries for the last three decades, stops his baking tasks behind the counter one recent day to tell us, "We specialize in European-style pastries with whipped cream and butter (no substitutes). We're a from-scratch bakery known for our Princess Torte, Alligator Coffee Cake and croissants." Also famous for the Pink Elephant Cake, Thee adds, "That goes back four generations."

If you want to celebrate the anniversary or share a market memory, go to www.farmersmarketla.com to peruse the festivities.