

Farm and craft markets making a comeback in Elgin

In Aylmer, Central Elgin and St. Thomas farm markets are aiming to reinforce home-grown goodness and draw people to the region. With climbing fuel prices, fault-lines showing in large-scale supply chains, and increased interest in locally-grown goods, those running the markets believe there is demand and room enough for everyone.

By Renée Hueston of The Aylmer Express

For a long time, Aylmer was the place to be on Tuesdays. Since the 1950s, people would come from near and far to shop the fresh crops, locally processed meats and cheeses available at the farmers' market in town. They'd stay for lunch and patronize the downtown businesses while here. And the vendors would come from across the region for the chance to sell their goods directly to customers.

It was not a novel idea, but not a common one either, with few other places offering direct access to local food. This was part of the reason it became so popular. Londoners would descend upon Aylmer for the chance to purchase produce from the same people who grew it.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then the Aylmer Sales Arena and Farmers' Market should have been very flattered, as London followed suit with the revitalization of both the Covent

Garden Market and The Market at the Western Fair District. Farmers began to man booths at those markets, wanting to access the largest audience, and some started vacating their booth closer to home. The proportion of farm stands to other businesses began to change in Aylmer, and eventually the produce booths were the minority, dominated by goods, wares, and flea-market offerings. A few core farm vendors remained, but it transformed into something other than a farmers' market, and two years ago the owners decided to close.

Stephanie Dall'Armi-Lensink remembered exactly how it used to feel visiting the Aylmer Sales Arena and Farmers' Market: "My first experience was coming in 1993 around Christmas time with my family. I remember it being so busy, it was bustling."

She reflected, "Over the years, with many markets, they dwindled. It's been sad to see the bigger markets taking over and making the smaller ones less busy."

Stephanie grew up, and met then later married Mark Lensink. She was surprised to learn that her in-laws, Eddie and Marja Lensink owned that same sales arena she remembered visiting years ago.

She worked at the Sales Arena for a brief spell, selling fabrics for her in-laws a decade ago. She said it had become a different place by then, "When I worked there, it was a little slower."

A lasting impression from that experience was "everyone in the community, they're just lovely people to talk to. It was always a great experience. Tuesdays were my favorite day."

Bringing back the market

And she hopes that Tuesdays will become her favourite day again, since she purchased the business in January.

The market had been permanently closed, though the car wash business on the lot continued to operate. The Lensinks though were planning on retiring.

"So, I had the crazy idea of buying the business, revitalizing it and reopening."

The project seemed to answer some problems she had seen in the community. "I think we've lost the connections during the pandemic. It's been a hard two years. It's been very socially and physically isolating and people are looking for connection again."

"A market is a place for people to gather every week. And you are able to connect with the people who grow your food or make your meals, or make the crafts that you purchase. It would be great to revive the market and provide the exciting bustling atmosphere again."

Stephanie said, "It's been a bit of an undertaking, basically starting from scratch."

Save for that time selling fabric, she was new to markets, though had a background in sales and marketing. "I'm basically learning as I go," but she had confidence in the project and a vision. And she had great resources to go to for guidance, "My mother- and father-in-law have been great to lean on if I need some advice."

Since January, they have been renovating the space in anticipation of welcoming vendors and customers back the first Tuesday in May. "We've had a lot of friends help us with the renovations. They've been wonderful. It's been really helpful."

It has been hard, stressful work but there was a happy surprise during the process.

Her husband Mark was certain he recalled exploring vaulted rafters in the building growing up. They decided to peel back tiles of the drop ceiling - only to find another dropped ceiling. They tried again and to their delight, a domed hardwood ceiling was →



Old Imperial Farmers' Market
516 John St. N, Aylmer - Elgin Innovation Centre
Saturdays, year-round
Soft launch planned for July 2021



Wildflowers Farmers Market
42338 Fruit Ridge Line, St. Thomas (Central Elgin)
Fridays from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Starting June 3, through October 7
(Market After Dark - until 10 p.m. June 24, July 22, Aug. 19, Sept. 23, Oct. 7)



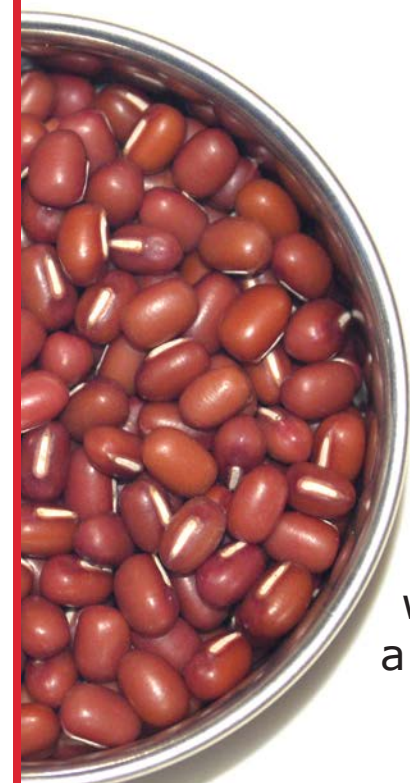
Aylmer Sales Arena & Farmers Market
51 Murray Street, Aylmer
Tuesdays from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00pm.
Starting May 3, through October



The Horton Farmers' Market
Manitoba Street, St. Thomas - half a block north of Talbot
Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 Noon
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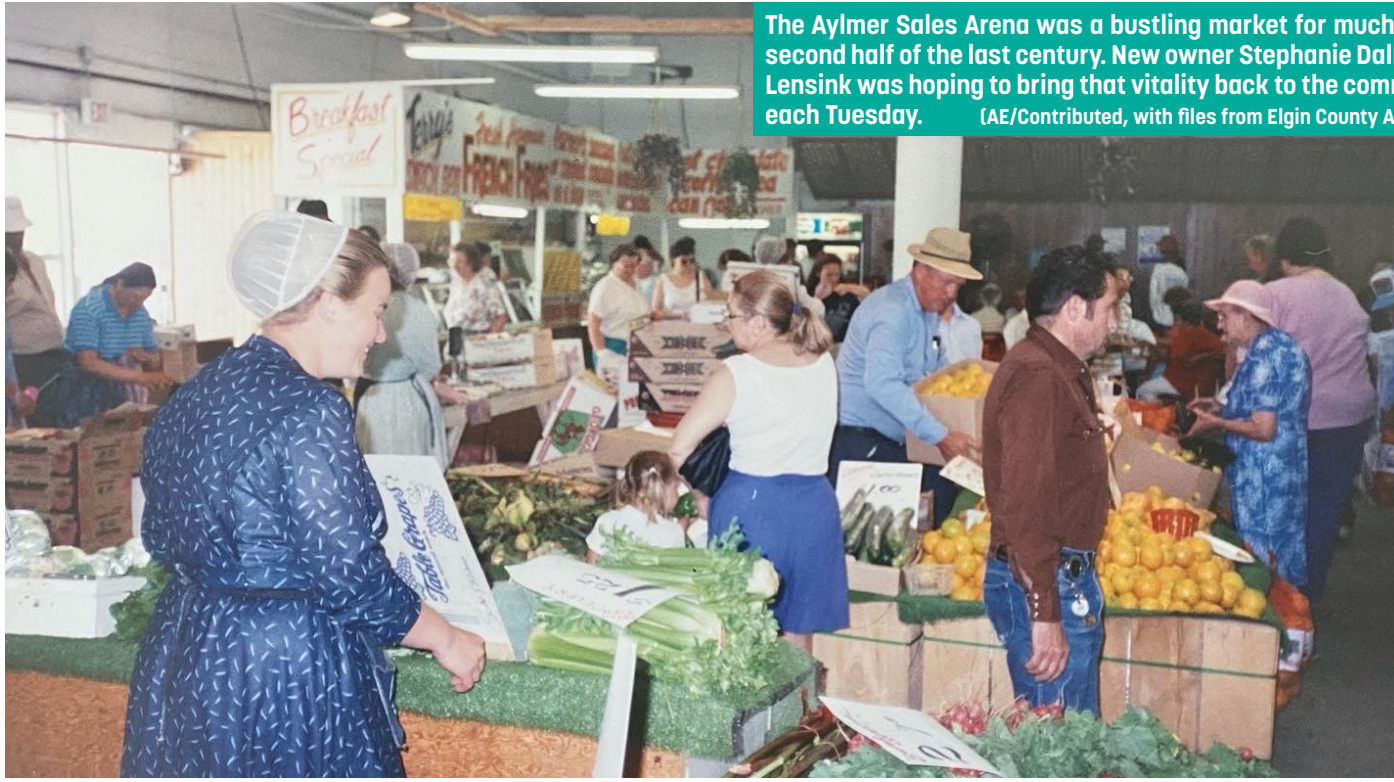
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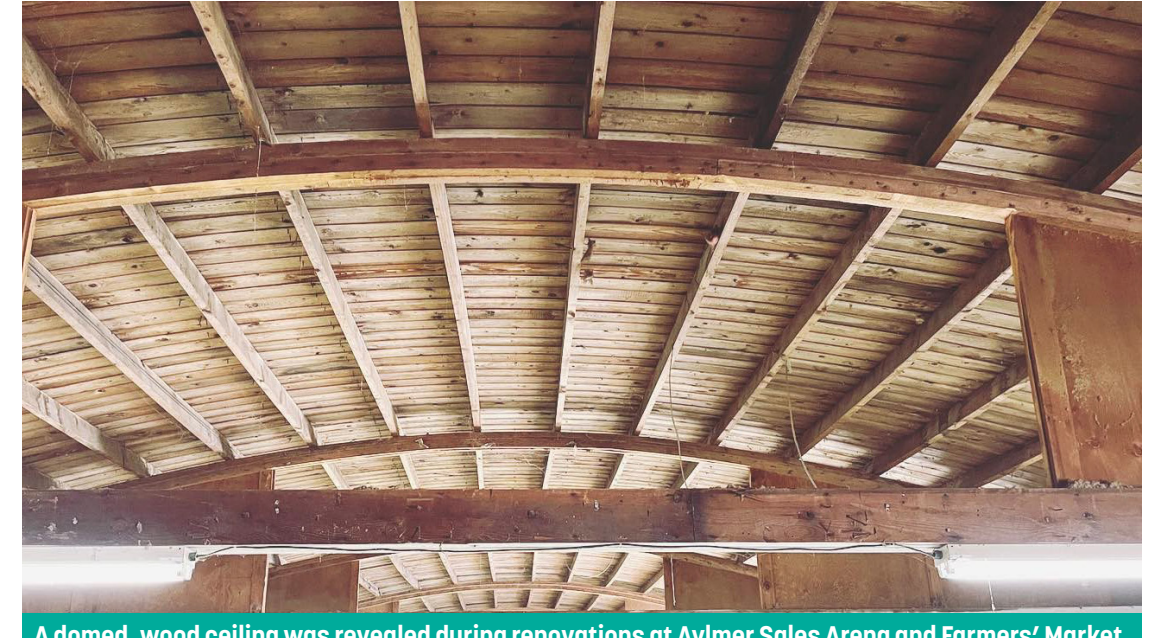
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The Aylmer Sales Arena was a bustling market for much of the second half of the last century. New owner Stephanie Dall'Armi-Lensink was hoping to bring that vitality back to the community each Tuesday. (AE/Contributed, with files from Elgin County Archives)



A domed, wood ceiling was revealed during renovations at Aylmer Sales Arena and Farmers' Market, which will reopen for the first Tuesday in May. (AE/Contributed)

← revealed. It meant a lot more work to remove the entire two layers of ceiling from the large indoor space, but it was worth it in the end.

She said, "It's absolutely gorgeous, this beautiful wood, domed ceiling throughout. And we're not painting it, we're leaving it just as it is. I just love the history of the building."

She hoped the market would be a place for the agricultural community to come and sell their produce and meet the diverse community of consumers.

While it wouldn't be a designated farmers' market to start (at least 50% of vendors from farms), she said they were working towards that goal. And "there have been so many artisans that have approached us, I didn't want to turn people away."

She said visitors to the old market would see some familiar faces, as well as new ventures, with most vendors coming from the Aylmer area. "We have Jantzi's cheese coming back, which everyone seems very excited about."

They would also have ready-to-eat food with "five food trucks that will be coming in rotation every Tuesday."

While she wasn't setting any hard goals for their first year, Stephanie said her measure of success will be hearing from the customers. "You know, what would make me happy? It would be some really good feedback from the community. That would make all of the sleepless nights and all of the investment worthwhile. That would mean everything to me."

A place to gather

Much like Stephanie, organizers of other area markets have been inspired to open or revitalize.

Terry Dueck and Amy Burks are part of a team that is bringing a market to the Elgin Innovation Centre – The Old Imperial Farmers Market.

Amy grew up on a local farm and said markets like this encourage agriculture, and foster growth for smaller, more niche farms.

For those who choose to manage smaller farm operations, said it was a lifestyle, economic and environmental choice, and "The market gives a place for small farms to thrive."

Market interactions also meant "an opportunity to educate people on farming." Amy said there was a lot of misinformation on farming practices online, but places like this where people could

meet and talking to people who grow food and tend to livestock, might offer a chance for dialogue and learning.

Amy and Terry reflected the sentiment that—especially since the pandemic began—people were looking for ways to connect, places to buy local wares and venues to gather, and markets were the perfect way to accomplish all of those things.

Terry had experience as a vendor in other markets and had seen how they could act as business incubators. It can be the first place someone sells wares, and with enough demand they may grow a strong enough customer base to support a stand-alone storefront.

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They said they'd love to have a wall of fame where people and businesses that had gotten their start in the Old Imperial market could be featured.

In November and December, they had hosted a Christmas market and found the response to it was overwhelming, with more people arriving each day, and far exceeding their expectations.

Currently they were undergoing renovations, most notably a façade refresh which will feature red awnings to make the former industrial building more welcoming to the market crowd.

It would still be some time before the site was ready, and a "soft launch" was planned for July 16, and a Grand Opening to follow August 13. They expect about 25 vendors to start with room to grow.

Market on the farm

When the pandemic began in 2020, it was uncertain whether the Horton Farmers' Market in St. Thomas would

proceed. That's when Jane and Chuck Magri of Wildflowers farm in Central Elgin decided to step up. They took a creative approach and welcomed vendors onto their farm for Friday night markets. The results were positive, with line-ups around country blocks to get parking spots.

According to its website, the market "welcomes farmers, food producers, chefs, artists, musicians and entrepreneurs to share their passions and talents with you." It has a fun atmosphere, offering patios and gardens where patrons can socialize, eat, enjoy music, drink or explore. They hope visitors "are left with a sense of calm and connection to nature and community."

Jane told the Express, "Something new and exciting this year is our 'Market After Dark' series. Once a month we will be extending our market hours until 10 p.m. and create a theme."

In addition to the regular vendors and fare, those extended evenings will "bring you a different experience with each after dark event." They hoped to feature, "live bands, DJ and late-night snacks."

Having had so much success with their efforts in the first two years, they hoped this would be welcomed by returning guests, and attract new guests as well.

Elgin – a local produce destination

In 2020, the Horton market did eventually open for the season for its regular Saturday morning hours in downtown St. Thomas. The following year, it opened under management of the St. Thomas Economic Development Corporation.

The market has seen great interest from both sellers and customers. With 57 vendors planned for the coming season, it was "officially full," said Tara McCaulley, Manager of Entrepreneurship and Business Development at STEDC. Horton was a designated farmers' market and maintained a farm proportion of at least 50%.

Tara said the relationship with the farm vendors, the market and the customers was a special one. "We have some farmers who have been for years and years."

Horton Farmers' Market was a place to make to make lasting connections. "You'll have customers come find you at the market and forever be your customer wherever you are because you've estab-

lished that trust and relationship." Last year, they had increased the amount of outdoor seating, so shoppers could socialize and enjoy food that they bought there.

"The greatest reward is every week – whether it was scorching hot, freezing cold, sleet, rain, you name it – seeing the community show up to support the vendors at Horton Farmers' Market. It has been incredible."

She said being full was a good thing, especially with the other markets opening up in the area. They were able to refer artisans and crafters to the two Aylmer markets, or Wildflowers.

Tara said that they found the markets could coexist, building on each other's successes, growing the culture for buying and supporting local, and focusing on the unique atmosphere that each venue provides.

The markets all being on different days or times meant they would suit a range of schedules and lifestyles, both for shoppers and vendors.

"To have different options it's really exciting to see," Tara said. Over the past few years, it's been "really cool to see Elgin County becoming a wonderful mecca for farmers markets."

More markets mean more places for producers to connect with customers; more venues for musicians, crafters and vendors to share their talents and more locations for people to access fresh produce.

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