

Ciera Coleman

The Sarasota Farmers Market (SFM) has been around since 1979 and is the oldest, year-round market in the Sarasota area. Ciera became the new market manager in October. On Saturdays, she's at the market at 4 a.m. to make sure everything goes smoothly. Ciera has upped SFM's game with a beautiful website, useful map and, with her team, a greatly increased social media presence. She's working hard to not only keep the market a safe and enjoyable experience, but to also gain back vendors and increase visitors and it all looks to be working.



Back row, l-r: Ionie Organic - Ionie Bergs. Wild Side Farms - Allie Harris. The Empanada Girl - Stefania Fochi
 Middle row l-r: Market Logistics Manager - Chrystal Benkhardt. Kurtos Chimney Cake - Aniko Gulyas.
 Market Operations/Social Media Mgr. - Heather Empsall. Ciera Coleman, Market Manager, Sarasota Farmers Market
 Front row: All Around Orchids - Elfi Espino • Sunflowers from Worden Farm; pineapple from Kinsey's Produce

Gorgeous weather, a hunger to be outside, a desire to be with people and revel in the bounty of the earth and human creativity. That sure sounds like a farmer's market - and it is.

The Sarasota Farmers Market (SFM) has been around since 1979 and is the oldest, year-round market in the Sarasota area.

SFM started small with one toe in the water. There were early concerns about closing streets, parking and mainly, would anyone show up. Well, the naysayers lost that argument, and the market, in its present form, has had as many as 76 vendors spread across three streets in downtown Sarasota.

That vendor total of 76 is pre-COVID by the way, as they shuttered the market in March, 2020 and reopened with about half of its vendors in August. Some additional vendors came back in September.

In October, they brought on a new market manager named Ciera Coleman. I caught up with her on a Friday, half expecting an anxious person busily preparing for "showtime" — aka the Saturday Farmers Market — taking place in less than 24 hours. Instead, I Zoomed with a very calm woman sitting in her backyard. "I make an effort to keep my Fridays open—anticipating things, like watching the weather, for example." But at the bleary-eyed hour of 3 a.m. on Saturdays, Ciera gets up so she can be "on the floor" by 4 a.m.

She's joined by two staff members, Heather Empsall (market operations and social media manager) and Chrystal Benkhardt (logistics manager) who work through a myriad of details with her such as taping off the streets, setting up barricades, orienting new vendors and helping other vendors unload. And, as she explains, everyone has to be "off the footprint" by seven a.m. (The "footprint" is the area in front of their displays where pedestrians and their gourmet dogs walk.)

On board six months, Ciera already knows all the ins and outs of the market. Her eclectic background has helped in many ways. A University of Florida graduate, she was the gallery director for the student union. After college she worked for local nonprofit Healthy Start Coalition managing their website, events, grant-writing and fundraising.

After that, she set up a freelance business and was also the creative director for Mommy and Me, a local magazine for parents. There she did the layout and website for the long-running publication that unfortunately shuttered due to the pandemic. It's a background she admits is "all over the place," but, "it all fit" being the market manager. Was she a market devotee? Yep, she often went to the SFM to shop and also "tabled" as an exhibitor when Healthy Start exhibited there.

Ciera stepped into a situation where the pandemic dramatically cut the amount of vendors. Yet, if you went to the market pre-Covid and now, you'd see it has the same, if not larger "footprint" with displays on State Street, Lemon Ave. and First Street.

That's because to ensure visitors and exhibitors are at a safe distance, booths are placed at a much wider distance. Ciera has made sure the market has safety measures in place and follows CDC guidelines (yes, masks are required). She's also improved signage and created a handy map of the market.

It's a tired pun, but the SFM market has blossomed—from a few vendors selling produce and plants, to one that sells not just produce and plants, but also soaps, candles, baskets, baked goods, BBQ and stone crab claws (to name a few, but not all). You can get a chair massage or get your bike fixed. And there's live music with seat-

ing areas at both the north and south ends of the market in case you need to rest for a few minutes.

Vendors are carefully chosen to offer variety so there aren't say too many flower sellers or bakers. And each vendor must have an owner at the space. Working with vendors requires diplomacy and lots of "active listening" as Ciera calls it. She understands that they're all different and thus have different personalities.

The market wants local growers. As expected, they get lots of applicants and a committee helps with the selection process. But it's Ciera's job to create a nice mix of vendors and make it all run smoothly.

For some vendors the market is a new experience and a way to launch a business affordably which she likes. "It feels great to give them a start," she explains. Others have used the market as a launchpad of sorts to grow a business and others, due to the pandemic, have added new services and made their products available in more ways such as delivery.

Ciera's nonprofit experience helps because SFM is "community-minded" and, as a nonprofit, reports to a board. Over the last eight years, the market has supplied free space to over 100 nonprofits offering them invaluable "face time" with the community.

Ciera has upped SFM's game a lot not just with a beautiful website, useful map but, with her team, has greatly increased its social media presence. Ciera is quick to thank Heather Empsall, SFM's social media manager who has grown the market's Instagram page to over 18,000 followers. Another 8,000 subscribe to the SFM's attractive newsletter. In each issue you get to "meet" the vendors which gives you a glimpse into how they make their products. Throw in 7,400 followers on Twitter and 24,000 follows on Facebook, and you've got a solid social media presence for a business open just one day a week.

Ciera's husband, Jesse, is also in the food biz and works as Farm Manager at Blumeberry Farms. Together they have two children Calvin (8, almost 9) and Juniper, 7. And, as Ciera points out, they both started at their new jobs in October of 2020.

A look at SFM's online market directory shows it has become international in flavor offering savory empanadas, Lebanese food, Kurtos baked goods and Tuscan food. It also reveals the diversity of interests people have these days from donuts to gluten-free cookies, wheat grass to BBQ, raw food to pizza.

Fresh herbs and bright produce, colorful flowers, plants to buy, pyramids of tomatoes or whatever is in season, the smell of bacon wafting through the air, the scent of lavender soap, the sound of live music, the experience of seeing a friend you almost didn't recognize because they're wearing shorts and a t-shirt — it's all part of the wonderful market experience.

The people watching, dog-watching, (and watching people with their dogs) is also entertaining. Have you been yet? You should visit and be sure to bring a big recyclable bag - you'll need it.

As Sarasota and the nation slowly move towards a post-pandemic life, Ciera will have to work to get vendors back, get people to return to the market, and always keep the system moving smoothly. With her calm and steady manner and diverse skills, it's just a matter of time.

The Sarasota Farmers Market is open 7 a.m. to 1p.m., rain or shine. More info at www.sarasotafarmersmarket.org.

STORY: Louise Bruderle
 IMAGE: Evelyn England

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