

Potter Mike Smieja featured at Broadway Art Park in Grand Marais

By Steve Fernlund

When kids make it to high school graduation they often have to put their true love on hold and find a job to make a living. Often it's well-meaning parents who demand they do that.

Mike Smieja was just such a kid.

Instead of making pottery for a living, what he always wanted to do, he let his mom talk him out of it. Mike grew up in Minnetonka, MN. He became a serial entrepreneur after high school, operating 15 different businesses in the Twin Cities area before he'd had enough. He owned coffee shops, bike shops, a catering company, and a couple of different marketing firms. By the time he was in his 30s, he'd graduated with a degree from the Carlson School of Management. He was the businessman his mom thought he should be.

But the arts cannot be denied.

Almost 25 years ago when he was in his early 20s, Mike bought his current home in Grand Marais. He visited off and on over the years and became a full-time resident six years ago.

His specialty is wood-fired pottery, where he applies a glaze to the inside of the pot leaving the exterior to be decorated by the fire, smoke, and ash from the woodfired kiln. "I love that you never know what you're going to see until the piece has been fired," he said.

Mike fires his pottery at a wood-fired kiln at St. Benedicts in St. Joseph, MN, which means he throws his pots here on the North Shore and must transport them for firing. "The kiln at St. Bens will burn six to seven cords of wood to fire 800 to 1200 pots," Mike said.



Mike Smieja, owner of Grand Marais Pottery, will feature his craft at the Broadway Art Park in downtown Grand Marais. (submitted photo)

They have to keep a fire going over the four to five-day firing process, heating the kiln up to 2,375 deg f. Basically, 110 to 120 hours at a time. One day, Mike would like to build his own wood-fired Kiln in Grand Marais.

Grand Marais Pottery, Mike's business, is featured at the Broadway Art Park in downtown Grand Marais, between The Sweetwater Company and the Beaverhouse. Mike is throwing his pottery on the wheel every Thursday through Friday from 9 to 5 until MEA weekend in October. He'll be selling finished pottery and demonstrating his

process. You may even get to see his dog, Roscoe.

As summer progresses, Mike will offer a "Paint Your Own Pottery" program at the Art Park. Folks will paint the outside of a pot onsite and under Mike's watchful eye. He will fire them in his electric kiln at home, making the finished pot available within 48 hours.

Mike is fast becoming a Grand Marais institution. Stop and say hi at the Art Park and listen to the fascinating life story of how he came to find his first true love--pottery.

Farmers Market Season is Here: SNAP is now TRIPLED!

By: Katee Rose

It has finally turned from white to green up here on the Northshore. After a long and cold winter, our beloved farmers have been busy prepping their garden beds, canning supplies, and recipes for the upcoming season of sharing food with one another.

Supporting your local farmers markets is important in so many ways. These markets are a critical component of rebuilding our local food economies. Shopping at your local market is an investment. An investment in your health and in the health of your community. "There is a large disconnect between people and the food that they eat. There is a middle man at the grocery store where people don't know how it's grown or people don't know what it's supposed to look like when it's grown naturally, organically and not in a factory setting," says Pam Melby of Finnosegen Farms out of Finland. "I came from the cities and had that disconnect for a long time, so coming up here and starting to grow my own food, there is a huge difference in the quality, the taste, and knowing where it came from. Knowing the people that it came from and the soil it came from. It's all connected and it's all worth celebrating," she says. "The food is better. Locally grown food is better than what you're going to get in the grocery store, and if you like to eat you're gonna like better ingredients," comments Kaare Melby.

All of the Markets on the Northshore accept EBT SNAP benefits. There has been an increase in federal funding this year to triple the amount of money for SNAP users. "Funded by the Minnesota State Legislature, Market Bucks matches EBT spending dollar-for-dollar, up to \$10, each time a customer on SNAP visits a participating farmers market. In 2021, SNAP users in Minnesota spent a record \$410,646 in SNAP/EBT dollars at their farmers market and received an additional \$208,346 to shop for SNAP-eligible food items with. Over 17,000 SNAP users visited their farmers market to take advantage of the program last year. This year, they're adding an additional Produce Market Bucks match. This will double the program's impact thanks to the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), a federal grant program aimed at improving the health and nutrition of households facing food insecurity. Now, individuals on SNAP will receive a dollar-for-dollar match on EBT spending at their farmers market through the state-funded Market Bucks program, AND an additional dollar-for-dollar match on the same EBT spending funded by the GusNIP grant to purchase produce at the farmers market," stated on the

Hunger Solutions website.

This is an incredible opportunity to use federal money that can now be cycled into our local economies and communities. The dollars that come into the local economy are more likely to stay in the local economy. "I know for me personally, I want my dollars to make the most impact," say the Melbys.

"It is a really important part of our household's yearly income, and it's a big deal for us to have extra income in the summertime. It has a real effect on how we are able to live life, raise our children and afford survival." they say.

"When we spend local money that we get from the local farmers market and we spend it at the community co-op, we're supporting people that we know. Those are real people, real friends that get to have jobs, get to have money, and a co-op that gets to expand and serve the community. When you shop at the farmers market it's the same thing. You support the same thing. Local people who are trying to make a life off of living with the land and providing food for the community," they say.

Farmers markets are also a great way to engage with your community and make those critical human connections we all need. Supporting each other and our endeavors. To gather once a week with other residents to share stories, recipes, hopes and dreams is important. "The way I look at the farmers market is a weekly check in with the community. It's so fantastic to be able to interact with so many different people, all caring about the place we live," says Pam.

Many markets offer live music, educational food demos, local food and art, and plenty of new and old friends to connect with.

"It's a nice variety of products we have to offer," says Bianca Seay, Two Harbors Farmers Market coordinator and owner of Little Chili Farm in Two Harbors. "From soap, to candles, meat, fresh veggies, canned veggies, baked goods, hot sauce, kombucha and more, it's a very well rounded market....We have grown so much over the years. We used to be 8-10 vendors when we first started at the Cedar Coffee parking lot location. Now we have an average of 5 new vendors joining us every year. We are up to around 30 producers that participate. It is a very friendly market and inclusive of everyone, we all help each other set up our tents and take down at the end of the day," says Bianca.

"I'm bringing my cult favorite: the spicy mustard," says Pam. "We do fresh sourdough bread, fresh vegetables including ones you may not have

seen like lovage. Lovage tastes like a cross between celery and parsley, it's very herbaceous, you can use it just like you would celery. Every part of the plant is edible, the root, the stalk, the leaves, the seeds, and it's a perennial, which is what I love about it. Green onions, oregano, mint, and mushrooms that grow in garden beds between the plants will all be available. The mushrooms are part of how we build what we call our bio beds, it's a soil building process that we use, so we get to grow mushrooms and grow food, and at the same time build up soil so that it will keep working in the future."

So get out there this summer and meet your local farmers and community members, grab some delicious homemade treats and support our local economy and your community! Spread the word about the incredible new market bucks program where EBT users funds can be tripled! If you would like to participate as a vendor, please reach out to any of the Farmers Market Coordinators. They are always looking for more vendors, musicians, and ideas for the markets to grow!

There are a few local farmers markets to choose from on the North Shore:

Cook County Farm and Craft Market:

Held in the Senior Center parking lot
10 Broadway Ave., Grand Marais
Saturdays, end of May-October
From 9am to 1pm weather permitting.
Contact: Jennifer Schulz at
ccfarmandcraft@gmail.com

Finland Farmers Market:

Held at the Clair Nelson Community Center
6866 Cramer road
Mid June- early October
Thursdays 5-6:30pm
Contact: Katee@friendsoffinland.org

Two Harbors Farmers Market:

Held at Burlington Station 320 7th Ave
Late May through October
Saturdays, 10am-1pm
Contact: Bianca Seay at
bianca.e.seay@gmail.com or 218-310-7174

Brimson Market:

Held at Hugo's Bar, 6866 Hwy. 44, Brimson
July 2 - September 3
Saturdays from 9am - noon
Contact Jan Ringer at: 218-830-1615