



Farmers' market, weekly outlet for fresh food, crafts, fun

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Markets have been around for millennia. They're friendly places where people go for quality merchandise at quality prices—maybe even do a little haggling, but everyone generally leaves feeling good about the day's transactions.

And now there is one in Ramona.

The Ramona Certified Farmers' Market opened for business in early March in Collier Park, 626 E St., with five vendors. Now, eight months later, there can be as many as 20 sellers offering their wares every Saturday from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in the park.

The force behind the market is the Randol family from the Randol Ridge Ranch on Barona Mesa. State regulations require that a certified market be sponsored by a certified producer, "so we went ahead and got certification in December 2008," said Lucy Randol.

The idea of having a farmers' market in Ramona began to evolve in August 2008, when the Randols had extra produce from their 20-year family garden, "so we decided to set up a stand on a corner in San Diego Country Estates to see if anyone wanted to purchase what we had left over. We found that there was incredible enthusiasm and excitement about fresh veggies," she said.

However, the Randols had to abandon that approach when they found out that selling produce on the roadside is illegal.

"Then we had so much input from the community. People kept asking us where we would be selling our vegetables," Randol said.

Meanwhile, two other Ramona women were also looking for an outlet for their wares: LaDawn Jung for her scented candles and quilted items, and Cari Slater for her Cookie Lee fashion jewelry.

The three joined forces to sell on weekends at Joe's Java Hut in the Estates and then moved into town at a site off Main Street.

"LaDawn found the site in town, but we kept running into roadblocks with legalities, so that's when we decided to go ahead and become a certified producer so we could sponsor a certified farmers' market" Randol said. "Now we are trying to grow it so we can offer the community more produce, and we hope Ramonans will want to shop locally and support local people. With the economy the way it is, a lot of people need to work on the weekend so they come to sell their crafts or whatever."

The opening of the farmers' market has brought a drastic change to the 10-acre Randol Ridge Ranch in the past year.

"We've gone from having a single family garden to five garden areas that cover almost an acre, more if you include the fruit trees and avocados," said daughter Summer Hardesty, who serves as manager of the market.

"The ranch is a pure family effort, with no outside help," Hardesty said. "There are four kids and we all pitch in. It's a lot of hard work, seven days a week, but we all enjoy it or we wouldn't do it."

Hardesty said that she and her mother may be the faces up front, but her father, Marshall, "is the man behind the scene who takes care of everything." With a degree in ornamental and organic horticulture from California Polytechnic State University, "he has the knowledge and background and does most of the manual work."

Now that the market is up and running, "We just need to get people there to support it," said Jung. "We need more buyers and more vendors. We all need to be helping each other."

"We are trying to get the word out," said Lucy Randol. "And it's great to see people come. They walk their dogs and talk to friends. It's like a community event every weekend."

And once a month, the kids even get to ride ponies while their parents shop. Laurie and Michael Rothbart of Poway, owners of Party Pony Express, arrive with two or three ponies and several costume choices.

"We have a Western hat and vest, capes for princesses and kings and a fiesta theme with sombreros and Mexican-type shirts and serapes," Laurie said.

For \$4, kids can ride a pony and enjoy a fantasy.