



Cedar Rapids Welcomes Iowa's First Public Market

By Renee Brinck

The October opening of NewBo City Market drew more than 20,000 shoppers and spectators to Cedar Rapids for a taste of the region's freshest flavors, along with cooking demonstrations, children's activities, music, dancing and other festivities. Iowans can expect a similar menu of excitement year-round at the state's only public market.

"We tried to create a destination that not only is a food outlet, but also is a source of entertainment and a place for community gathering. There will always be something going on," says Patrick DePalma, board president of Cedar Rapids City Market, Inc., the nonprofit that operates NewBo City Market.

Consumers new to the public market concept sometimes mistake it for a traditional farmers market. But, NewBo distinguishes itself with permanent and seasonal merchants, cafes and creative public spaces designed for culinary education and special events. The market currently welcomes shoppers three days a week, and the goal is to open more often as business expands.

"This is not to replace the farmers market that happens eight Saturdays a year in downtown Cedar Rapids," DePalma explains. "When that

goes on, we will have a complimentary event at NewBo – we're not trying to compete."

Part of an ambitious downtown revitalization project that reaches across the Cedar River to the Czech Village, the Market covers a full New Bohemia neighborhood block at the junction of 12th Avenue and 3rd Street SE. The main facility is the last structure still standing from the old Iowa Steel & Iron Works, and is in an area heavily damaged by the record 2008 flooding.

"The NewBo district is a shining example of post-flood recovery in the city, showing what can be done if people put their minds to it," says DePalma, who has been involved in several downtown rebuilding projects. As evidence, he points to the restoration of CSPS, a National Register of Historic Places hall that houses Legion Arts events and exhibits as well as new restaurants, retail shops and residential spaces opening near NewBo City Market.

Success is also measured in regional support, adds NewBo Project Director Libby Slappey. She oversaw the market's \$3 million community campaign, part of a \$5.9 million fundraising drive that included government grants and in-kind land donations.

"This is truly one of those dream projects, because it was such a collaborative effort. You have an idea that germinated with a bunch of local folks, and now it has come to fruition in this beautiful market," she says.

NewBo received backing from Linn County, the Linn County/Cedar Rapids Solid Waste Agency, the Hall-Perrine Foundation, the McIntyre Foundation and more than 600 other companies, civic groups and individuals. The City of Cedar Rapids is leasing land to Cedar Rapids City Market, Inc. for \$1 a year for five years; after that period, it plans to give market administrators the option to buy. The State of Iowa also supported the project with a Vision Iowa grant.

"The community campaign was such an important part of this, because there was so much buy-in from so many different entities – hundreds of individuals, hundreds of businesses and corporations, essential foundations, city support, county support and state support...There was nobody left out," says Slappey.

She is particularly proud of a \$200,000 gift from the Cedar Rapids metro-area Rotary clubs, made as they prepare to celebrate 100 years of Rotary in the city in 2014. The contribution put the name "Rotary Hall" on NewBo's central hub, an 18,000-square-foot venue occupied by 24 Anchor Merchants. Among the offerings are fruits, vegetables, meats and flowers, as well ethnic dishes, pasta, baked goods and Iowa-crafted beer and wine. Some vendors, such as Morgan Creek Fresh Produce, are extensions of existing brands. Others, like Betty and Bobo's Better Breads, are new ventures by entrepreneurial owners.

"This is a perfect opportunity because it's lower overhead, it's well-supported and there is good potential foot traffic," says Betty and Bobo's Better Breads owner Jerry Gillon. He filled small-batch orders in his home before opening his first commercial storefront at NewBo. Gillon grinds his own flour and bakes up an impressive selection of sandwich breads, artisan breads, scones and biscotti, along with bulk granola and make-at-home mixes.

The supportive environment also inspired friends and first-time business partners Mary Krivit and Luann Gilman to launch NewBo Cheese Co. They traveled throughout Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin to select their products, curating a tasty menu of farm-crafted cheeses, crackers, jams and olives.

"It's a nice way to start a business, since it's small – ours is a 10- by 10-foot space – and it's only open three days a week. It seemed manageable for us," says Gilman.

Joining the anchor tenants in Rotary Hall will be a mix of guest merchants, artists and performers, as well as more traditional farmers market stands on select days of the week. Nonprofit partners and community groups are invited to use the adjacent NewBo Distribution Center to process and sort food that will nourish those in need. And, the 1,500-square-foot Kirkwood Culinary Kitchen provides a facility for hands-on instruction. A selection of continuing education, nutrition and menu planning workshops, along with other market-related cooking activities, take place at four learning stations. Course options range from knife basics to cake decorating to canning, cooking for kids and an international cuisine series.



Just outside Rotary Hall, the Market Square provides an open-air setting for special events, concerts and festivals. A children's playground is slated for completion next spring and spring will also see the opening of a spacious demonstration garden with a living wall, where community members can see NewBo's ambitious composting program at work. A 5,000-gallon rainwater catchment system supplies supplemental water for the gardens, and permeable pavers patterned in a traditional Czech Easter egg design lead to New Bo's main entrance.

Other eco-friendly efforts include a market-wide recycling program developed in partnership with Linn County Solid Waste. Merchants are trading traditional Styrofoam containers for compostable bags and packaging wherever feasible. Rotary Hall is insulated with soy-based foam insulation, and windows high in the rafters let in natural light. Two electric car-charging stations are available outside the market, through a gift from Schneider Electric, and NewBo leaders hope to see a bus stop installed nearby in the coming months.

The combination of educational experiences, shopping options and social activities gives members of the public plenty of reasons to visit NewBo, even if they don't plan to spend money. Creating a gathering place is important, explains NewBo Director of Operations Wendy Zimmerman.

"We really are trying to be accessible to all," she says, emphasizing that accessibility extends to pricing, as well. "I think that's been a big challenge, the perception that we're a shi-shi market or that we're a market for the upper class. That's really not true at all."

In fact, sourcing fresh products from local purveyors is one way that market merchants aim to curb the processing and transportation costs that can drive up conventional food prices. Nathan Lein of Big Boy Meats partners with Rustik Rooster Farms (See page 6), V Creek Ranch and other Iowa and Illinois producers to stock his storefront.

"I certainly hope to be able to treat both the consumers and farmers a little more fairly than what can be had in the traditional farm-to-market kind of model," he says.

By selling meat from some of his own livestock, including the rare Lincoln Longwool sheep he raises near Arlington, Lein hopes to preserve genetic diversity and create new markets for threatened breeds as well. He sees customers increasingly engaged and interested in hearing the stories behind their food.

"People really want to know where their food comes from...they want to have an idea that the animal was humanely raised and appropriately butchered. They want to know that their lettuce was not trucked in from the corners of Arizona or California," he says. "They want to have that connection."

"Our goal is to really give our customers the freshest produce available," agrees Bill Rieckhoff of Morgan Creek Fresh Produce, who harvests many of the organic and naturally grown vegetables for his family's NewBo store just eight miles from the market. "We want them to know their grower. We want to be very transparent. Where does this come from? How is it grown? What practices are used?"

Rieckhoff and his wife, Robyn, are also involved in two other NewBo anchor businesses: The Chill Ice Cream Shop, which is headed up by their 14-year-old daughter, Sydney, and CR Popcorn, the creation of their 10-year-old son, Carter. Carter completed a University of Iowa entrepreneurship camp in

preparation for his market debut, and he proudly lends his initials to his store's name. Sydney studied and sampled American and European ice creams as she planned her menu of scoops, sundaes and shakes.

"We really look at this as a learning ground for the kids, and, by extension, a lot of their friends and local kids," says Bill Rieckhoff.

NewBo's educational components – introducing children to business concepts, consumers to culinary techniques, shoppers to producers – are just part of the market's anticipated regional impact. Instead of empty lots and damaged buildings, Cedar Rapids residents now enjoy a year-round source of nutritious, local foods. The market provides a new family-friendly entertainment option, and it serves as a tourism destination for visitors from across eastern Iowa and beyond. Plus, NewBo brings new revenue to the area.

"Besides being good for the NewBo area, this will have an economic impact on the entire city. We will draw people in, and when they're here, they will not only spend money at the market but also in Cedar Rapids. It's an accelerator," says DePalma.

That increased demand means more jobs for small, regional producers. Adding a NewBo storefront allowed Anne Armitage and Alan Peterkin of Bark & Bloom to expand sales of their homegrown cut flowers, decorative willow branches and thoughtfully repurposed planters. In addition, they've partnered with new suppliers.

"I can't produce everything I need, so I'm obtaining other things locally. It's been great to discover all that's out there, and to help other small, seasonal businesses in the process," says Armitage.

Big Boy Meats' Nathan Lien also enjoys sharing local discoveries with his NewBo customers.

"I think it's community pride, and Iowa pride, too," he says. "Look at what products we can have in Iowa. Look at the diversity, and the kinds of things you wouldn't think are out there if you're just driving by on [Interstate] 380. Look at all that's going on."



WHEN YOU GO

NewBo City Market

1100 3rd St. SE (at 12th Ave.), Cedar Rapids

Hours:

Thursday, 4-8 p.m.
Saturday, 8 a.m.-8 p.m.
Sunday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

NewBoCityMarket.com
Facebook.com/NewBoCityMarket
319.200.4050