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Feasting at farmers markets

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Most people go to a farmers market so they can make a meal. Some of us go to eat a meal.

That's because a handful of farmers markets serve up hot, fresh, delicious food.

It's a little known fact, but many farmers markets—and all official city of Chicago farmers markets—are forbidden to serve hot prepared food. They're not licensed for it. So you have to seek out the independent markets that have the proper licensing if you want to get treats while buying your beets.

We recently visited five that serve different types of grub. Here's how the eating went:

Bronzeville Community Market

A field at 4400 Cottage Grove Ave.

When: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sundays, through October. Food service usually starts around 11 a.m.

Why it's special: This is Chicago's first hybrid market, blending an official city farmers market with a community fair and featuring art, antiques, music and community development booths. Because of the scarcity of grocers in the area, vendors are allowed to sell non-local produce (bananas and oranges) along with a nice variety of seasonal fare.

The chow: Delicious organic vegan specialties from Yah's Cuisine catering, including a rich eggplant lasagna, a refreshing mustard greens salad with a citrus dressing, scrumptious "African rice" and barbecue seitan twists. From Signature Cuisine catering, excellent perfectly grilled and aggressively spiced jerk chicken wings served with decent rice and beans but overcooked green beans. Both booths sell sampler plates for \$10.

Dining facilities: Tables in the middle of the field. Comfortable but can be super-sunny.

Other vendors: Art, tea, incense and jam producers.

Dunning-Eli's / Wright College Farmers Market



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Montrose Avenue & Forest Preserve Drive (4400 N.-6701 W.) in the Eli's Cheesecake Co. parking lot

When: 7 a.m.-2 p.m. Thursdays, through October. Hot food served after 11 a.m.

Why it's special: With cooking facilities nearby—unlike the portable set-ups at many markets—the chef here can make elaborate fare.

The chow: Special menu overseen by Eli's chef Antonio Rivera using local produce. The ever-changing menu of dishes includes barbecue ribs, Greek grilled chicken, paella with market vegetables, grilled chicken tacos, steak sandwiches with chimichurri, fresh roasted corn with assorted butters and summer roasted squash.(\$2-\$7)

Dining facilities: Tables and chairs under a tent

Vendors: On my visit, only one booth (by Nichols Farm) was selling fresh produce. Others sold art, toiletries, catering services and baked goods.

Green City Market

South end of Lincoln Park at Clark Street and Lincoln Avenue

When: 7 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays, through October

Why it's special: With its great selection of local and organic produce, this place attracts foodies, chefs and families. For those who enjoy watching Chicago's foodie social scene, it's a must stop.

The chow: Made-to-order crepes filled with sweets or cheese and vegetables to benefit the market (\$2-\$6). Cold gourmet sandwiches, hot breakfast sandwiches, grilled sausages, hamburgers and sides from Eat Green Chicago (\$3-\$10). The portions may seem small, but the combinations are sophisticated and the produce is from high-end organic and artisanal producers.

Made-to-order smoothies from Seedlings Enterprises produce with whatever fruits they have. By the end of the market you may end up with a melon, rhubarb and kale smoothie, which was a little tart for me and my kids (\$5 each). Wraps and quesadillas using sprouts and cheese from Tiny Greens that to many is just "the sprout booth" (\$7.50-\$9.50).

Bakery goods including prepared sandwiches, quiches and breads from at least three local bakeries. Add some cheese from the Capriole goat cheese booth and you can make your own cheese sandwich.

Dining facilities: Sometimes there are benches and plastic chairs available but it's best to bring your own.

Vendors: Lots of fresh fruit and vegetable stands plus cheesemakers and honey purveyor.

Logan Square Farmers Market

Logan Boulevard and Milwaukee Avenue

When: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sundays, through October

Why it's special: Even if it doesn't have the best selection of produce in town, its artsy vibe (and great food)

make it Chicago's coolest farmers market.

The chow: Eat Green Chicago sells burgers and meatball sandwiches (\$6-\$9), Vella Cafe sells tofu scramble wraps, quesadillas, scones and muffins and Intelligentsia iced coffee (\$2-\$7), occasional crepe and Mexican food vendors. On the first of the month, Grace Delcano's Galewood Cookshack is a trailer which serves up pulled-pork nachos, pulled-pork sandwiches, chips and local soda. Do not miss the pulled-pork nachos \$7.

Dining facilities: None. Bring a blanket.

Other vendors: Some produce, flowers and a booth for a food co-op.

Oak Park Farmers Market

Parking lot of Pilgrim Congregational Church, 460 Lake St.

When: 7 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturdays, through October.

Why it's special: A huge selection of fresh local and some organic produce, a live bluegrass band and an earthy Prairie Home Companion crowd.

The chow: There is one prepared food here and it's worth the trip: warm, cinnamon, sugar and plain cake doughnuts (75 cents each) made in the church basement. Avoid the long line (for individual doughnuts and drinks) and buy a whole dozen (\$7.50) from the shorter line to the left. Just make sure you wait until boxes of fresh-from-the-fryer hot doughnuts come out. Yummmm.

Dining facilities: Some tables; they fill up fast. There are some blanket-friendly grassy areas along the periphery but you don't really need to sit down to eat a doughnut, do you?

Other vendors: A big plant booth, bakeries and lots of great produce.

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