

Farm is more than a market – it's a lifestyle, a destination

By Kathryn Reed

BECKWOURTH – Even iceberg lettuce doesn't like 22-degree weather.

Two days after losing 80 percent of his lettuce, Gary Romano shrugs it off. That's what a farmer has to do as he accepts Mother Nature as his boss.

"In 15 years, I never got hit like that. So, I'm not much ahead of last year," Romano tells *Lake Tahoe News*.



Greenhouses at Sierra Valley Farms help protect produce from the elements.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

Last year it took forever for the fields to dry out after the winter that would never end. Last Wednesday it was a freak cold system that turned his greens black.

Even so, Romano was wandering around his farmers' market on June 15 looking and sounding like a man confident in what the season will bring going forward.

This is his 17th year farming in Plumas County. His family has

had the land since 1938. Sierra Valley Farms is the only certified farmers' market in California that is actually on a farm.

"It's become like a destination farmers' market," Romano says.

He only allows one vendor of each type of product so they can all make money.

"I select the closest farmer with the most diversity," Romano explains.

It's like a community between the vendors.

Cody Poole of Longboards Bar and Grill in Graeagle is selling scrumptious, soft melt-in-your-mouth peanut butter cookies. A delicious, you won't want to share cherry croissant has fruit from K&J Orchards from Winters, which is a couple stalls away.

Kalayada Ammatya boasts of having the best apricots in the world. They must be because until that day this reporter didn't like apricots and more than one was consumed on the premise.



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– Gary Romano

Out of the 14 markets where K&J sells its fruit, Sierra Valley Farms is No. 3 on that list when it comes to the amount of produce it moves. And one of the markets they go to is the

Ferry Building in San Francisco.

Meat, fish, beer and wine are also usually available so patrons can leave with enough food for several meals – maybe a week's worth until they need to return.

A bonus is lunch can be had for free if one shows up at the correct time. This is because each Friday there is a cooking demonstration. Adam Williams with Smile Dog Catering said the beef he was cooking came from a cow that was slaughtered earlier in the day. That's how fresh this food is.

The greens and warm potato salad he assembled were stellar – if only he would have brought recipes to share.

Tables are scattered about so people can watch the demo and then sample the finished fare.

With it taking some effort to get to Sierra Valley Farms, it's definitely a place to linger.

It's a great place for friends to meet. Cathy Churchill and Becky Hardy are neighbors in Clio, but neither knew the other would be at Friday's market. Besides picking up a bottle of Grant Eddie wine (after sampling a few varietals), they moved onto Alfred Cominotto who imports his cheese from the Netherlands.

"I try to get here as often as I can. I like fresh food and organic food," Churchill says.

Despite Romano's bad luck with the weather last week, what is still in the ground on this 65-acre farm makes it look like it would be fun to sit in the dirt and have a feast of greens in the field.

Other edibles are in green houses.

"My specialty is growing winter vegetables in summer," Romano says.

While he has pounds of lettuce for sale, along with carrots, cucumbers and herbs throughout the season, Romano is not one to sell just the original product.

He turns wasabi into paste, horseradish into mustard and fruits into cocktail mixes.

Romano has several stories to tell about the trials and tribulations of farming. He wants to share his experiences with others. Bona Fide Books of Meyers will be publishing his book in spring 2013.

Until then, the public is welcome to his farmers' market each Friday as well as to the barn dinners that feature a vegan starter course, then fish, meat and dessert courses. The dinners are served in the old barn, whose slats are just wide enough for owls to come and go.

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Notes:

- Sierra Valley Farms is online.
- Farmers' markets are Fridays through Sept. 21 from 10am-2:30pm.
- Dinners in the Barn are July 14, July 15, Aug. 25, Aug. 26, Sept. 22, Sept. 23. Reservations necessary – (530) 587.8688.

Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe, get to Truckee going around either side of the lake. Take Highway 89 north toward Sierraville.

In Sierraville, at the Y, go left onto Highway 49.

Turn right on county road A23.

Pass Calpine Road on left.

Continue on until you see the sign for Sierra Valley Farms on the right.

If you hit Highway 70, turn around.

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