

Masstown Market charms masses with ‘simple, old-fashion retail’

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Published October 30, 2017 - 7:44pm



Masstown Market shoppers can choose from a wide variety of both locally grown and imported produce. (Francis Campbell/The Chronicle Herald)

MASSTOWN — The maze is gone but the amazing remains.

Captain Cob’s Crazy Corn Cornundrum at the Masstown Market may have ceased operation but overall market business is zipping along at a brisk pace.

On a Friday afternoon in late October, market parking spots were at a premium, lengthy lineups persisted at the homestyle restaurant, and the grocery and giftware aisles were cluttered with shoppers.

“It amazes me,” said market owner and operator Laurie Jennings. “I’m here almost every day. It’s a rural business that seems to be working. My dad (Eric) started here in 1969 so we’ve been around for a little while. There are a lot of good people who come to work every day. It’s not those high-end sexy jobs where they have engineering degrees and doctorates. It’s simple, old-fashion retail but it takes good people and good service and happy customers.”

The market, located just off Highway 104 about 25 kilometres west of Truro, caters to locals and travellers alike.

“You hear people say, ‘I used to come here with my mom and dad and now I’m bringing my kids,’ ” Jennings, 52, said. He sees people stopping en route from New Brunswick to visit or take their children to university. Seniors’ bus tours and university sports teams take a market detour for a break from the road. Shoppers run into neighbours and long-lost friends. And some people are just out for a drive.

“It’s just a day trip sometimes for my husband and I,” said Shirley Phelan as she poked around the fresh produce. “We live in Pictou County. We like this area and we like this market. It’s a nice place to browse, to Christmas shop. I always pick up a few things, visit the bakery, have a snack.

“It’s always a busy spot, summer or winter.”

Jennings said the market “just seems like a desirable place to stop.”

“Geographically, we are on the way to a lot of places. If you are coming out of Nova Scotia, you have to drive by our door. Local people travelling people, we don’t have any particular demographic or group that we market to. We try to satisfy them all and it seems to work.

Morgan Carruthers, 22, echoes her boss’s sentiments about good people working at the market.

“I love it here,” said Carruthers, who was finishing a two-year part-time gig as a deli server at the market last week before uprooting and moving into Halifax for personal reasons.

“It’s amazing, The busy-ness keeps it moving. People come from everywhere: the States, provinces, all over Canada. People come in here to order pepperoni to ship out West.”

She said the employees are a draw.

“It’s just the charm of the people who work here. We’re all a big family.”

The employee family is steadily growing.

About 170 people work in the market, which also features a bakery, a dairy bar, a liquor outlet, a fish market and a greenhouse that converts to a Christmas giftware outlet as the seasons change. The market-owned gas station, convenience store and Tim Horton's outlet that opened across the road a couple of years back employs another 30 people.

Still another 30 people will be hired to work in the nearly 15,000-square-foot dairy and butcher shop that is under construction adjacent to the gas station. When that operation opens sometime next spring, it will allow customers to view the making of dairy products and the cuts of meat being readied for sale.

"People like to know where their food is coming from. People like to go to the farmers market and talk to the grower," Jennings said. "I think we can do that and produce a product that is competitively priced. It doesn't need to be expensive because it is natural and organic and wonderful. It can be all those things but you are not going to buy it because you think you are saving the world. You are going to buy it because it's a good product, a good price and you happen to be buying a local product, supporting a local farmer and knowing where your food came from."

He said the milk and meat that will supply the dairy and butcher operation will come indirectly from local producers, just as the existing market deals with about 80 local suppliers, large and small.

The new building was designed and is being constructed by Arlington Timber Frames in Sheffield Mills, Jennings said, the same company that built the open-concept pine-and-peg structure southeast of the market on Highway 2 that serves as a meeting, convention and wedding venue. Called the Peg, that building's schedule of hosting weddings each weekend from May to mid-October this year contributed to the demise of the maze.

"We can't have private

functions if it is opened to the public," Jennings said of the building that fronts the maze.

"It would have been rip-roaring crazy busy there," he said of how the maze would have fared in Saturday's warm sunshine. "It could have been raining and there would be nobody there. That's a tough, tough business to be in. It made more sense to see how it evolves, and go to more of a controlled sort of thing. If you book your meeting or your wedding six months out and it rains, you still have your meeting you still have your wedding. It's just a bit more predictable."

Corn still grows in the field and, as is the case each year, it will be harvested and donated to Harvest for Hunger Nova Scotia.

"There will actually be a better crop of corn this year because we don't have paths cut all the way through it," Jennings said with a laugh.

The approach to the busy market is now serviced by a recently completed roundabout. Jennings said the only roadmap to success is hard work.

“Being realistic and modest, you need to focus on tomorrow in the short term, not in the next year or decade or generation. Do a good job today. I spend most of my time unloading trucks and stocking shelves and cleaning floors. People always say ‘How come you are doing that, don’t you have staff to do that?’ Yeah, but that’s what I do, too. It’s the day-to-day stuff that makes it work.”

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