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HOW THE WINNETKA FARMERS' MARKET BECAME THE ONE EVERYONE WANTS TO TRY

From a village hall parking lot to 45,000 visitors a year — the story of the Winnetka Farmers' Market is a testament to its two leaders and a lot of great food.

By Paul Clements | Photos provided by Lisa Bell

There's a moment, somewhere between 5 and 7 a.m. on a Saturday morning in Winnetka, when the train station parking lot stops being a parking lot. Tents snap into place in the cool air. Farmers back their trucks into assigned spots with the precision of people who have done this hundreds of times. A band does its soundcheck. Dogs, having apparently heard about this on their own network, begin materializing from every direction.

Guiding all of it are Jim Thompson and A.J. Horner, the market's coordinators, arrive as early as 5:00 a.m. to welcome the first vendors and don't leave until the last tent comes down.

By the time most of the village has finished breakfast, the Winnetka Farmers' Market is already at full stride — 60 vendors, live music, the smell of sourdough and fresh-cut flowers, and a crowd that last season exceeded 45,000 visitors.

That number deserves some context. When this magazine last profiled the market a few years ago, annual attendance was roughly 25,000.

That was already considered a success story. What has happened since — a near-doubling of visitors, a vendor roster grown from a struggling handful to a carefully curated 141 across the season,

an 80% vendor return rate, and a finding that 80% of shoppers stay in Winnetka to shop or dine after visiting — is something else entirely.

It is, to use the word that both Terry Dason and Rockey Flintermann reach for naturally, a business.



A Goal Written Down

Not long before the market relocated from the Village Hall parking lot to its current home at the Metra station, Dason and Flintermann enrolled in a farmers market management course offered by the Illinois Farmers Market Association. The course required a final presentation — a strategic plan, in essence, for what they wanted their market to become.

"We named some things we needed to focus on," Flintermann said. "One of them was to double the attendance and double the number of vendors. Everything we foresaw, we accomplished. It's really interesting in a relatively short period of time."

They finished the course as certified market managers. They also, as it turned out, discovered they were already doing most things right.

“What we found out is we were doing most of it,” Dason said. “It made us feel pretty good. We just got better at the things they showed us.”

The market’s unlikely accelerant arrived, as it did for so many things, in the spring of 2020. When Gov. J.B. Pritzker designated farmers markets as essential businesses, Winnetka’s became one of the only public gathering places still operating. Beaches, restaurants, movie theaters — all closed. The market, open.

“When COVID-19 hit and we were still in that parking lot next to Village Hall, everything was shut down,” Flintermann said. “You couldn’t go to a coffee shop, you couldn’t go to the beach, you couldn’t go to movie theaters, and restaurants were limited to takeout only. But Pritzker, in his wisdom, said farmers markets

were an essential business and they had to stay open. We were the only game in town. That’s what literally launched that market.”



Reputation as Strategy

Ask what’s behind the growth and Dason doesn’t hesitate: reputation. Not marketing spend, not gimmicks. Reputation.

“The vendors are telling other vendors,” she said. “The vendors are telling their customers from other markets. We’ve been told we’re the nicest and most organized.” There is a genuine network among farmers market vendors across the region — they compare notes, recommend markets to each other, and Winnetka keeps coming up.

Flintermann adds specificity to that: quality. “We sometimes survey shoppers during the market,” he said. “We ask specific questions — what’s your zip code, how did you hear about us. What keeps coming out is that they return because of the quality of the vendors, the quality of the produce. We’re not selling hand-knit baby socks. We made a conscious decision two years ago to go heavy on food.”

That decision — food first, exceptions deliberate — defines the market’s identity. When pressed on a few craft vendors still in the mix, Dason was precise. “The cutting boards are kitchen-related,” she said. “And the cashmere vendor was there before we started focusing on food, so she’s grandfathered in.” Every deviation from the rule has a reason.



The harder problem now is abundance. “A lot of food vendors are applying this year, and we can’t take them all,” Dason said. “It’ll saturate — nobody can eat that much food. We’re having to decide who’s going to be there and who’s not. That’s really hard, because I’m so inclusive, and I want every vendor to succeed and have a home. But we can’t accept all of them.” They currently have more coffee vendors than they can accommodate, more bakeries than the footprint can absorb and a waiting list for prepared food.

This is, to be clear, a good problem. It is also one that requires the kind of careful judgment that distinguishes a well-run market from a free-for-all.

“The vendors are telling other vendors. The vendors are telling their clients from other markets. We’ve been told we’re the nicest and most organized.” — Terry Dason

The Layout Question

Flintermann has a retail metaphor he returns to often. “If you were going to rebuild Northbrook Court, what do you do? You’ve got to get some anchor tenants.” At the Winnetka Farmers’ Market, those anchors are the farms — the fruit and vegetable growers that serious shoppers arrive at 7:30 a.m. to reach before the best items are gone. Everything else is built around them.



The layout itself is deliberate. Competing vendors are spaced; strong draws are positioned to lift their neighbors. When a vendor complains that a spot isn’t working, they listen. One sourdough baker, who started out selling her loaves under a tree in the park, was consistently selling out by 10:30 a.m. each Saturday. Hoping to help more people discover her, the market moved her into a high-traffic spot within the main footprint. But even there, she sold out just as quickly—and she realized she preferred her original spot under the tree. So the market moved her back, a simple example of how organizers listen and respond to their vendors.

They also work the physical logistics down to the level of shade, electrical access and truck clearance. The village installed a dedicated

electrical panel for vendors who need power — there are now two — and the Park District has granted access to its storm warning system so vendors can get advance notice of severe weather.

“You cannot over-communicate,” Flintermann said. Dason sends every vendor a weekly email every Friday: weather forecast, parking alerts, notes on what else is happening in town that Saturday. “I don’t think other markets do that,” she said. Based on the vendor return rate — 80% year over year — it’s working.



What It Does for Winnetka



The market’s impact on downtown Winnetka is not incidental. The Chamber’s own survey data shows that 80% of market visitors either shop or dine in the village after leaving. At more than 45,000 annual visitors, that translates into significant foot traffic finding its way to Elm Street.

“You go into Valentina at the corner of Chestnut and Elm,” Flintermann said. “I asked her one day, ‘What’s your busiest day of the week?’ She said, ‘Well, you ought to know — it’s Saturday. People are coming in here with carrots and celery.’” Hometown Coffee, he added, is so crowded on Saturday mornings that getting through the door requires patience.

The village government has taken notice. Both the Village of Winnetka and the Winnetka Park District maintain booths at the market — not for promotional purposes, but for genuine constituent access. “You can come to the market and have a discussion with village trustees or Park District commissioners,” Flintermann said. “Say, ‘Why are you getting rid of the dog beach?’ You can do it in a civilized manner, and you don’t have to go to a Monday night meeting at 7 p.m. To have access to your village government — I think it’s terrific. I don’t know many markets that do that.”

The trust runs both directions. “Our health department and village feel our reputation is solid,” Dason said. “They know we are doing everything right. We’ve got the documents, the insurance, the health inspection reports. It’s complete, so they don’t have to worry

about us.” Flintermann echoed that. “We’re grateful for the trust the village and Park District place in us, and we work hard every year to earn and strengthen it,” he said.

In the village’s own resident satisfaction survey, the farmers market ranked second among things residents value most, behind only restaurants. The Holiday Tree Lighting came in third. Two of the top three, Dason noted with characteristic matter-of-factness, are hers.

“Our survey found that 80% of people who come to the market either stay in town to shop or dine. That’s a lot of foot traffic we’re bringing into our community.” — Terry Dason



A Dog-Friendly Market in a World That Isn’t

Winnetka’s two closest competitors — Wilmette, just down the street, and Evanston, four miles south — are formidable. Evanston has a devoted following and strict standards: if a market runs 22 weeks, vendors are expected to show up all 22. But there is one thing Winnetka does that neither of them does.

“The other thing we do that’s different from a lot of other markets is we’re dog-friendly,” Flintermann said. “Neither one of them are.”

The market sees more than 100 dogs on a typical Saturday, and the policy is both a philosophical choice and a strategic one. “We had to figure out: what is your demographic, who are you after?” he said. “It’s the head of household with kids and a dog — right up my alley.” Some of the market’s most loyal vendors are in the pet business, and this year PAWS Chicago will make appearances to help rehome dogs available for adoption.



The conventional wisdom that dogs and produce vendors don’t mix hasn’t held up here. “The only thing you have to look out for is dogs getting too close to the produce,” Flintermann said. “That’s the reason some markets say they don’t allow dogs — they say it’s because the vendors don’t want them. We’ve never heard that from one vendor. Not one.”

What's New in 2026

The 2026 season opens June 6 and runs every Saturday through Oct. 31. Several additions are worth noting.

Harrison's Poultry Farm, the Glenview institution that North Shore families have been driving to for generations, has applied to join the vendor roster. The story of how it happened is pure Dason and Flintermann: they walked into the store while looking for a car rental nearby, started chatting with the staff and left having essentially recruited a new vendor. "This community is going to go nuts when they see them," Dason said. The appeal is clear — Harrison's is a known quantity, a trusted name, now available without the drive to Glenview.

Rivian, the electric vehicle company, will be at the market this year, following Tesla (which sold a car each of its three appearances) and Fields BMW (which sold several cars over two seasons). The market has become, improbably, a reasonable venue for moving premium automobiles.

Three alcohol vendors will be on hand for the first time this season — including Griffin's, a longtime participant — with sampling available after 11 a.m., consistent with village permitting requirements.

The registration and vendor management process has also been overhauled. The legendary binders — Terry Dason's three-ring command centers, well known among anyone who has worked the market — are gone. Everything now runs through Manage My Market, a Portland, Oregon-based platform that allows vendors to apply, update documentation and track participation across multiple markets. "No more binders," Flintermann said. Dason confirmed: "I like it better."

The Long View

When asked where they want to take the market, Flintermann doesn't aim small. "I'd like to get to 100,000 shoppers," he said. He's quick to note the asterisk: most are repeat visitors, not unique shoppers. "About 70% of our shoppers on any given Saturday are repeat visitors. They come every Saturday. The farmers and vendors don't care — all they want is people."

They are also in conversations with potential presenting sponsors, which would provide financial stability and allow continued investment in programming and infrastructure. "We're getting close," Flintermann said. "That would really help us financially."

The question of succession — inevitable for any enterprise built around two highly committed individuals — has come up. Flintermann acknowledges it directly. "Eventually we're going to have to discuss some kind of transition," he said. Dason is less eager. The farmers market, she pointed out, has become a meaningful contributor to Chamber finances. Walking away is not something she is in a hurry to do.

For now, the formula is simple enough to state and difficult enough to execute: excellent vendors, attentive management, rigorous data and an unwavering commitment to the community the market serves. "This is a business," Dason said, "but it's also a community. Working together, trying to do the best for the community is what we strive to do on a regular basis."

On a Saturday morning in June, when the tents are up and the sourdough baker is already sold out, and someone is buying tomatoes while their dog investigates the neighboring booth, and a trustee is talking to a constituent about the dog beach, and a band is playing somewhere near the park, it doesn't look like work at all.

That's the point.



754 Elm St. (Metra Station
Parking Lot), Winnetka

Saturdays, June 6 – Oct. 31, 2026 | 7:30
a.m. – 12:30 p.m. | Rain or shine

Dog friendly. Free admission. 141 vendors.
More than 45,000 annual visitors.

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