



Produce Auctions

Oodles of onions, pecks of peppers, and plentitudes of potatoes are in store for consumers who shop at summertime produce auctions.

Produce auctions are venues where local farmers sell large lots of fresh local fruits and vegetables. Consumers are getting seasonally appropriate fruits and vegetables picked for freshness and flavor. Although geared for wholesalers like roadside stands, restaurants, and grocery stores, the auctions also welcome individuals.

The southern tier has two produce auctions, one in Clymer NY and the other in Centerville, NY. The auctions were established by their respective Amish communities in response to changing economic conditions. Rubin Miller, one of the original founders of the auction in Clymer, stated "The price of milk bottomed out and we needed to find other ways to generate income. We started to move from dairy to growing vegetables." "We saw that many of our young men were working off the farm to earn a living", said John Hershberger, manager of the Genesee Valley Produce Auction. "We wanted them to be able to make a living from their own land on their own land." In short course the auctions were established as a means for the younger Amish farmers to sell their wares.

"Western New York is rich in agricultural assets. We have more farmers and producers that are actually selling direct to consumer both retail and wholesale than most people realize,"

stated Kimberly LaMendola, Local Foods Project Manager. "The produce auction is almost a complete display of the food system. The farmers usually accompany their product to auction; consumers from home canners looking for large lot quantities to restaurateurs are present; and then there are the numerous transportation systems that operate on market day from personal cars and refrigerated trucks to horse and buggy."

Although operated by Amish businessmen the auctions are open to non-Amish buyers and sellers. The auctions are conducted throughout the summer on Tuesdays and Fridays at 10 AM. Sellers consign their product to the auction house for sale. Before 10 a.m. on market day, you'll find these farmers unloading, grading, and packaging their product for sale. They have to adhere to the selling standards of the auction house which may include product quality, cleanliness, and traceability.

Buyers register at the auction house and receive a bidder number. They can browse and inspect items available prior to the start of the auction. Nancy Westerberg explained the process at Chautauqua Produce Auction, "When the auction begins, the manager will identify the "lot" stating the number, item and size e.g., "lot 434, grade a plum tomatoes, 4 half bushels". The auctioneer calls out the starting bid. Bid spotters watch for buyers signaling their bid for the lot. The bidding continues until the highest price offered is not contested. The winning buyer shows his bidding number and the auctioneer will call out the winning amount. The lot number, item, quantity, bid amount is recorded and a runner takes the purchase information to the auction clerk. Once received by the auction clerk, the winner can pay for his purchase and collect the goods."



After a tour of the auction, we were anxious to get a number and prepare to purchase. We scouted long rows of the freshest fruits and veggies, sometimes spotting gallons of locally produced maple syrup and honey. Beautiful baskets of flowers and fresh cut bouquets were also up for sale. Vendors offered hot beverages and fresh delicious homemade donuts to bolster us for the big sale. The sale started promptly. A group of buyers surrounded the auctioneer as he moved down row after row of farm bounty. When they got to the items we were interested in we tried our hand at bidding, losing the first round to slow reflexes. After a few tries, we happily scored our veggies well within the budget set.

Here are a few tips for success at the auction:

- Bring a cooler to keep your purchases fresh.
- Bring cash.
- Arrive early and scope out the selection.
- Note the size of the "lot". "Lots" are auctioned unit. A lot could be 6 bushels of apples or 3 half-bushels of zucchini, generally not one box or one item. Each lot is tagged with the item name and quantity.
- Note the quantity of the bid. The auctioneer will state e.g. "lot 434, grade a plum tomatoes, 4 half bushels". Your bid would be for each half bushel and you'd pay that winning bid multiplied by 4. Sometimes you are buying by the piece. Such as, "lot 352, acorn squash, each, looks like 40 in the box". Chances are you didn't just get a great deal on a boxful of acorn squash for \$.50 but purchased a boxful with

42 acorn squash at \$.50 per squash for a total of \$21.

- Watch a few rounds of bidding to get familiar with the routine.
- Position yourself where you can be seen and make deliberate movements to indicate you're bidding.
- Some people will bid as one entity and split the lot. This is not permitted on auction house property and could result in a fine or ban from the auction house.
- Make sure you pick up the correct lot purchased.
- Respect the community standards. Refrain from photographing the Amish. They are our neighbors not novelty.

The Amish produce auctions are a great adventure for local food aficionados. Both are located in the heart of large Amish communities. Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties have well-established Amish Trails where you can explore roadside stands and locate Amish businesses that specialize in everything from furniture construction to home crafts. Come make a day of it and enjoy engaging from the ground up with our Amish neighbors.

Chautauqua Produce Auction - 7844 Route 474, Clymer, NY 14724

Genesee Valley Produce Auction - 8855 County Road 3, Centerville NY 14029