

Woodstock Farmers' Market Gets Back

In Swing After Irene

By Katie Beth Ryan
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On the Friday before the New Year's weekend, almost four months after Tropical Storm Irene caused the Ottauquechee River to rise and deluge the Woodstock Farmers Market, the place was full of customers who were in town to ski at Killington and Suicide Six and local patrons stocking up on crab artichoke dip, crackers and champagne with which to ring in 2012. The floodwaters and mud that inundated the market on that Sunday night in late August had kept the Route 4 business closed until mid-November.

Yet Friday was not without hiccups. That morning, the temperature inside the new deli case was a balmy 70 degrees, and up to \$1,000 worth of food had to be thrown out. It was the latest setback in a year of misfortunes, and owner Patrick Crowl saw the machinery's failure as just part of the market's long road back.

"These are the trials and tribulations of what we're going to have to face the next few months," he said. "You can't dwell on it."

Vestiges of the market's three-month closure can be seen around the store; such as a sign taped to a freezer that says the frozen food selection is still being replenished. But the lights are back on at the Woodstock Farmers Market and its longtime customers have returned to shop.

"It was just such a habit to come here for a ready-made meal or for the ingredients for a meal," said Deb Goodman of Woodstock. "It's nice not to have to rethink that."

The market reopened in time for the Thanksgiving holiday, and while it is still building its way back to robust sales, the past month and a half have been pretty busy.

"Let me tell you about Christmas," said Lisa Battilana, the market's seafood and meat buyer. "We had more special orders than I've ever seen, and I've been here since '97."

The market's offerings haven't changed a great deal since the storm; one can still purchase Vermont-made products such as Vermont Smoke and Cure Ham and Pastabilities frozen pizzas, along with the popular Amy's brand of frozen dinners and the market's prepared foods offerings. But an atmosphere that was personable before the storm -- employees pride themselves on getting to know customers' names and tastes -- seems even more so now. When longtime customers who haven't been in since before the storm enter now, they might just get a hug.

"Everybody's kinder to one another, and comfortable showing it," said Amelia Rappaport, the market's grocery manager. "There's a lot of hugging going on and kind inquiry into how things are going."

Many of the stores' regular patrons, the ones who stop by daily for dinner ingredients on the way home from work, were present on the morning after the storm, ready to shovel the sludge out of the building.

“People were making lunch, shoveling, mucking,” said Crowl. “It was nutty and it was very humbling.”

Few could have predicted the impact that Irene would have on Vermont's small towns. But Crowl had taken some precautions in advance of the storm. “I'm a bit of a novice meteorologist,” he said, “and I knew that 60 mile per hour wind gusts (don't) bode well for around here.”

As a result, Crowl and his partners made the decision to close down the operation on Aug. 28, the day Irene passed through Vermont, and have employees stay late on Saturday night to move food into walk-in coolers and freezers. But the store had no backup generator, and about \$125,000 in produce, dairy products and prepared foods had to be thrown out once the store lost power.

“When I came into the store Monday morning, clearly there was no way you were going to get it open anytime soon,” Crowl said. But there was never any question of whether the market would reopen. The market is the main livelihood for most of the store's employees, who collected unemployment benefits while it was shuttered.

In addition, “We had vendors to pay back a mortgage on the property,” Crowl said. “We're a significant part of this community. You need to rebuild and get yourself going again.”

When he wasn't working with employees and volunteers to clean out the building and throw away perishables, Crowl was consulting with the Vermont Economic Development Authority, trying to figure out a way to get the business up and running again. The market ultimately received the maximum \$100,000 loan that VEDA awarded to businesses impacted by Irene.

The market also found a novel way to raise capital during the months it was closed. In the wake of the storm, customers frequently made offers of money to help get the market back on its feet, but “that didn't seem really OK,” said Lisa Battilana, executive chef and meat and seafood buyer. As an alternative, pre-paid “Irene Cards” were purchased by customers in amounts of \$25 to \$5,000 and will be valid for purchases through November 2014.

On Nov. 19, the “open” flag in front of the Woodstock Farmers Market, absent for nearly three months, was present once again.

“At first, they were still trying to get their feet on the ground,” said Michele Buzzell, a regular customer from Mendon, Vt., who stopped in the day of the re-opening. “They're slowly coming back and it seems they're at optimal operation.”

In 2005, the market's employees drafted a 10-year plan titled “Woodstock Farmers Market 2015.” It was a way of envisioning how the business would progress in the next decade. This year, a similar report is to be drafted to carry the market into the rest of this decade and into

2022. Among the items that the market's management will consider are ways to grow into both the addition to the store that was completed last June, and the adjacent Woodstock Glass Works building, which the market purchased in 2010, Crowl said.

“Planning is important, visioning is important. We have to get back to that,” he said.

The customers on Friday, however, were more focused on dining plans for the holiday weekend. Some placed orders to the market's catering department and others purchased champagne and the makings for New Year's Eve hors d'oeuvres. Kay Jenkins of Killington, Vt., had stopped by to pick up ingredients for minestrone soup. “We really missed it and we're delighted that it's open,” she said. “It's like everything is coming back together again.”

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