



## For local producers and consumers, value-added products live up to their name

by [Bridget Macdonald](#)  
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A handful of vendors at Lincoln Park's Green City Market on Saturday showcased homemade salsas, jams, and soups, "value-added" items that enable them to increase the economic yield of a limited number of acres. While some farmers continue to grow fresh produce during the winter using greenhouses, others use the off-season to transform surplus vegetables grown during the summer.

Bowls featuring samples of salsa and tortilla chips lured customers to a display of products made in Tomato Mountain Farm's certified-organic kitchen. The Brooklyn, Wis. farm encompasses only 12 acres, and grower Dennis Fiser said the addition of a value-added operation several years ago "completely changed how viable the farm can be."

Fiser said it takes about 400 pounds of tomatoes to make 300 jars of salsa, priced at \$8.00 for 16 ounces. Fresh tomatoes sell for \$3.75 a pound, so each jar of salsa contains about \$5.00 worth of tomatoes, meaning Tomato Mountain has a \$3 margin per jar, excluding other ingredients and labor.

While the farm still sells fresh tomatoes in the summer, Fiser said, value-added products now account for 95 percent of his sales.

Products with local flavors and a long shelf life provide added benefits for market patrons, as well. Judy Gebhart of Lincoln Park made a beeline for the Tomato Mountain display to scoop up a jar of roasted tomato soup with shallots. "This is the finest soup on the market," she said, speculating that the best product a leading commercial-soup company manufactures "is horrible compared to this."

She and her husband Joe, regular patrons of Tomato Mountain, said the products provide them with fresh, local produce year round.

Mushroom Valley Ranch started solely as a mushroom producer in 1976, but now sells a variety of value-added items alongside fresh products. Grower Rick Hosken said the farm eventually started pickling mushrooms to use up excess produce. The question soon became: "How many things can be incorporated into a product that we already grow on the farm?" Salsas and soups were the logical next step.



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Soups, salsas, and sauces made from farm produce are a way for growers to market local products year round.



Hosken estimated he uses about 10 pounds of mushrooms to make five gallons of portabella salsa. Portabellas sell for \$5 per pound, so each 16-ounce jar uses about \$1.25 worth of mushrooms, but sells for \$7.95.

Although the prices of fresh mushrooms range from \$3 per pound for white buttons to \$13 per pound for shiitake and oyster mushrooms, Hosken said, the cost of individual varieties is not taken into account when pricing a product such as his farm's creamy mushroom soup, which might incorporate a combination of different mushrooms.

He pointed out that if there is excess produce, it is more cost effective to use it for something rather than let the mushrooms rot.

Fresh mushroom have a shelf life of about 10 days. A jar of pickled mushrooms, said Hosken, "can sit on the shelf for years."



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Tom Fiser of Tomato Mountain Farm in Brooklyn, Wis. makes a sale to patrons at Green City Market in Lincoln Park on Saturday. He said 95 percent of the farm's sales come from value-added products like salsa and soup.