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Can you take me to City Market?

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As the resurgence of downtown living continues its climb in Edmonton, it seems only natural that the City Market should grow and flourish in its urban core. It serves a clientele of both local residents and other city dwellers in the lovely open-air surroundings of 104th Street north of Jasper Avenue.

The area's renaissance has helped the market to become even larger, attracting an ever-increasing crowd of both vendors and shoppers in a trend that looks set to continue with the growing residential focus of the neighbourhood. Every Saturday between 9 am and 3 pm, from late spring until Oct 7, you'll find everything from organic fowl to old-time candies. Everything from handmade jewellery to farm-fresh veggies is sold by vendors along the two-block strip of covered tables that line the street, rain or shine.

"Snow has happened," laughs Christine Hassay, the Edmonton Downtown Farmers' Market Association executive director and City Market manager. "I think only once in the last three years have we been taken out by the wind. I remember that, because it was so windy, it was knocking tables over—tables with jam on them."

While its current location is a relatively recent development, the City Market has a long and storied history in Edmonton.

"The Edmonton Downtown Farmers' Market started in 1912," says Hassay, noting that the market was originally housed on the spot currently occupied by Sir Winston Churchill Square. "We were the first market in Edmonton—ever.

"We were down in the general area of Churchill Square and 97 Street for a great number of years," Hassay continues. "The market did really well throughout the '70s and '80s, and then the market started to suffer on 97th in the '90s. In 2000, we moved.



“At the time, we had 12 vendors left from the old market,” Hassay says. “We moved down to 104 Street to open Edmonton’s only urban open-air market. We are the only outdoor seasonal market, only open from spring ’til fall. So, we moved with 12, and by the time we opened, there were 80 vendors! Now we’re up to 120-some three years later. We’ve done quite a bit of good.”

So, to what does she attribute the success of the market in its new location, which can see as many as 8 000 shoppers on a given Saturday?

“I think being open-air is a huge thing for downtown, and for the market, because it provides such a different atmosphere that you don’t get in an indoor setting,” Hassay explains. “I think the 104 Street location is good as well. It’s a little bit more central, for the people who live west of downtown, because that’s where a lot of our community comes from.”

According to Hassay, the unique and diverse range of vendors has also played a huge part in the success of the market.

“We are a member of the Alberta Farmers’ Market Association, so a minimum of 80 per cent of our stuff is handmade, homemade or home-grown. Approximately 60 to 70 per cent of those consist of agricultural or food vendors.” There is, of course, a reason for the concentration of foodie goodies.

“There’s no denying people come for food,” Hassay smiles. “They come to pick up their produce and their meats. They tend to find other things along the way. But that’s pretty standard for markets, and most of the crafters know that.

“The crafters are very dependent on the food vendors, because food brings people in. Once they’re there and they’ve got what they need, they start looking for other stuff for themselves or gifts or whatnot.”

A regular staple at the City Market, the Whimsical Cake Studio is popular with market shoppers of all ages. It tempts young and old alike with the sweet delight of cupcakes, the likes of which your neighbourhood grocery store bakery has never seen. As a matter of fact, Hassay is a big fan.

Along with her partner in cupcakery, Ken “Mr. Cupcake” Isla, 26-year-old Ailynn Santos has built a regular clientele at the City Market. While her day job as a substitute teacher may keep her busy during school-year weekdays, on Saturdays during the summer, her life becomes that of a cupcake chef extraordinaire. She bakes up a storm for the farmers’ market crowd and expands her passion for cupcakes into a viable business.

In fact, Santos has turned her cupcake stand into a full-fledged cupcake catering business. She provides specially-decorated cupcakes for a variety of functions, including weddings where the bride and groom have eschewed the traditional multi-layered wedding cake in favour of something, well ... a bit more whimsical.

There are currently over 20 varieties of Whimsical Cupcakes in Santos’s repertoire, although she continues to experiment with new recipes and toppings. During the Stanley Cup final, she even decorated sets of
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to experiment with new recipes and toppings. During the Stanley Cup finals, she even decorated sets of special Oilers-themed cupcakes with player names and numbers.

The cupcake flavours are anything but ordinary, with six different types available for purchase at the City Market each week. You can indulge in the subtle pleasures of the Frosted Blues, a vanilla butter cake topped with a blueberry butter-cream icing (hello, Lac St Jean, Quebec!) or the ever-popular Funky Monkey, featuring a rich chocolate cake base with banana butter-cream icing. Consider the Love Spell, a marbled mix of vanilla and chocolate cake, with a semi-sweet chocolate ganache on top.

On the truly whimsical end of the spectrum, the Just Ginger cupcake combines a gingerbread base with fudge icing, while the Mocha Chai blends a mocha cake base with a chai tea butter-cream icing, complete with a dash of cinnamon on top. How can you go wrong with something like that?

“We have two signature flavours,” Santos explains. “One is called New Yorker at Heart. It’s a chocolate mocha cake with an Italian meringue icing, which has a little bit of coffee in it. The other one is the Neapolitan à la Cupcake, chocolate with strawberry icing and white chocolate.”

Santos was originally inspired to start her small business after spending time in New York, where she learned the finer points of cupcake culture.

“I was teaching in New York for a while. They have cupcake shops on every corner of the street, almost,” Santos says. “So I came back home and I thought, ‘I could do this; this is fun.’”

However, if you want to get a cupcake (or 10?), you’d better show up early. The most popular varieties run out quickly. In fact, it’s not uncommon for Santos to completely sell out her entire stock of around 250 cupcakes by the early afternoon.

“We’re here setting up by about 8:15, 8:30,” says Santos. “You should definitely try to get here before 11 o’clock, just to be on the safe side. Sometimes we’re sold out by noon.” **V**

Saturdays (9 am - 3 pm) to Oct 7

Downtown Farmers’ Market

City Market on 104th Street (between Jasper avenue and 103 avenue)