



Culinary Corner

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FEATURE



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

A picture-perfect view of all the Mecklenburg County Market has to offer finds Dale McLaughlin, his daughter Beverly and his three grandchildren (from left) Eve, Gavin and Evan right in the center of things.

Where everything old is new again

Mecklenburg market offers produce, baked goods, slice of history

by Heidi Billotto
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Dale McLaughlin spent the Wednesday and Saturday mornings of his childhood helping his mother and grandmother sell produce, flowers and homemade baked goods at the Mecklenburg County Market. Now McLaughlin, 69, owns the place. Believed to be the oldest produce market in the state, the market is a blend of nostalgia and freshness, a slice of old Myers Park infused with new but familiar faces.

For 69 years, the market has occupied its current locale at 1515 Harding Place, off Morehead Street just one block past the intersection of Kings Drive. But the concept originated when a group of young women, McLaughlin's grandmother Pearl Wallace among them, opened the Home Demonstration Curb Market in a small building Uptown next to the courthouse. That enterprise operated for years before the group raised enough money – primarily through Saturday night ice cream socials – to purchase the property on Harding Place. The structure, now nestled among a cluster of Carolinas Medical Center buildings, was originally a facility

for storing lumber. After incarnations as a sandwich shop and a dance studio, the structure was purchased by Wallace and her family and converted into the current marketplace.

All in the family

Wallace's daughter, Rebecca "Beck" McLaughlin, worked alongside Wallace, eventually running the market herself. Under Beck's proprietorship, the market hit its heyday, with competition for display space so heated that vendors were allowed only four feet of selling space. Vying for the best position, vendors pushed the boundaries as hard as they pushed their goods.

"The women back then were really vicious about it," said Beck's granddaughter, Beverly McLaughlin, with a laugh. "They had big, thick lines drawn on the tables – and if you went over your four feet of space, there was talk." Those big black lines have since been painted over and clothes cover many of the tables, but if you look closely enough you can still spot this trace of the market's ultracompetitive past.

Beck, who passed away two years ago at age 94, ran the market with her son Dale until she retired in 1987. Together they sold produce from the family farm, as well as baked goods, canned goods and

flowers. Several other women also sold baked goods at the Mecklenburg County Market. Among them was Ellen Byrum, one of the Home Demonstration Curb Market's original members. Now Byrum's daughter, Martha Kale, sells at the market on Saturdays.

Kale, who sells homemade cakes, pies, biscuits, cookies and cheese straws, is joined on Saturday mornings by fellow bakers Jean Russ and Polly Godwin. Godwin also offers her baked goods, canned pickles, jams, jellies and handmade quilts and blankets at the market on Wednesday mornings.

"I've been here selling for 34 years – almost longer than Dale," Godwin said. "My mother baked and sewed and I just picked it up – I love it."

She grew nostalgic in thinking of the history that has unfolded at the long-lived venue. "This market is a special place," she remarked. "Over the years, you get to know customers. We've seen their families grow. Now, many people I knew as children are grown with families of their own and they still shop here."

As a complement to the home-baked goods the women offer, Nova Bakery has a stand at the Saturday market, offering freshly baked breads, sweet breads and danish.

Locally grown and then some

As years passed, Dale and wife Lucy, who used to bake cakes herself to sell at the market, stopped

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bringing in their own produce. "I had heart surgery a couple of years ago, and it just got hard to do all the farming myself," Dale said. Instead he brings in produce grown on Patterson's Farm in nearby Rowan County.

The Mecklenburg County Market offers local seasonal produce from A to Z – literally, apples to zucchini and everything in between. Now, at summer's end, shoppers will find bags of fresh limas, butter beans, crowder peas, black-eyed peas and more, shelled and ready to cook or to freeze for future use. Tomatoes abound: look for several heirloom varieties such as German Johnsons, black, Brandywine pink and Candy Stripe. Dale also brings in sweet local slicing tomatoes such as the well-known Betterboys and Early Girls. Watermelons, cantaloupe, Silver King corn and South Carolina peaches are at their prime now, as are fresh figs, picked each week from a tree in the McLaughlins' yard. As is the case in many of Charlotte's farmers' markets, local produce gets supplemented by items from out of state. "We have fresh produce here all year long," Dale said.

In addition, Dale's daughter Beverly offers a wide range of homemade soups, quiches, savory pies, casseroles and pimento cheese made from Beck's original recipe. If you go to the market for

nothing else, be sure to walk away with a tub of pimento cheese – it's light, fluffy and full of flavor.

Timeless goods, modern marketing

None of Beverly's homemade items include processed foods, preservatives or artificial coloring or flavorings. She prepares all her products in a commercial kitchen using recipes that prove to be big sellers. Although the goods she sells at market reflect the hearty and handcrafted wholesomeness of times past, Beverly has modernized the marketing of her goods to better fulfill demand. She e-mails menus to customers on Mondays so that they can place orders in advance of market day. Those who don't order ahead may still choose from a variety of items if they arrive early – Beverly's goods move fast.

Favorites include gazpacho, Granny's vegetable soup and a tomato-basil pie. Other selections such as the cream of watercress (her family's favorite and a tradition at McLaughlin Thanksgiving dinners) and the asparagus soups also are quite good. When you go to the market, it's likely you will see Beverly's children – Gavin, 11, Eve, 9, and Evan, 3 – helping their mom and grandparents, just as generations of Wallaces and McLaughlins have done.

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What's cookin'

Restaurants for Relief 2;
Eat, drink and help
others be merry

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Restaurants for Relief 2 is a national dine-out promotion that mobilizes thousands of restaurants on one day and engages diners across the country to share their strengths and help ongoing recovery efforts in the Gulf Coast region. This nationwide event is sponsored by Share Our Strength, a childhood hunger relief fund with headquarters in Washington, D.C. This second annual dine-out to benefit Gulf Coast recovery efforts is organized in partnership with the Food Network and the National Restaurant Association.

Eat out on Tuesday, Aug. 29, the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, at a participating restaurant to help rebuild school cafeterias, open summer meal programs, and provide support to schools, feeding programs, community kitchens, farmers markets, FEMA trailer parks, and affected restaurant and hospitality workers.

Participating restaurants in the Charlotte area include The Capital Grille, 201 N. Tryon St., Uptown in the IJL Financial Center (704-348-1400); Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, 3415 Toringdon Way (704-541-3233), 8425 Northlake Commons Blvd. (704-494-4660), and 8304 Kenbrooke Drive (704-971-2060); Tim Schafer's at Lake Norman, 7343 Gabriel Street in Sherrills Ford (704-483-9127); Mojo Bay, 8933 J.M. Keynes Drive (704-579-7325); Buca di Beppo Pineville, 10915 Carolina Place Parkway (704-542-5146); Akropolis Café at the Arboretum, 8200 Providence Road (704-541-5099); and Harper's Restaurant Group, headquartered in Charlotte. Locally, Harper's Restaurant Group operates Harper's Restaurant, ToGoGo, and Upstream in SouthPark and Harper's Restaurant on Woodlawn Avenue; and Harper's Blue Ribbon Diner and ToGoGo, Mimosa Grill, Arpa Tapas and Wine Bar, and Zink American in Uptown. Call 704-375-9715 or visit www.harpersgroup.com for more information.

Whether you're not able to dine out on the appointed day or you'd like to participate in more ways, Restaurants

for Relief offers additional means for making a difference:

- **Subscribe.** The Six O'Clock Scramble, a weekly e-mail newsletter, provides five family-tested dinner recipes and a corresponding grocery list to its subscribers. Most meals take 30 minutes or less to prepare and have fewer than 10 ingredients. Subscribe to The Six O'Clock Scramble at www.the-scramble.com between now and Aug. 29 and 50 percent of the subscription costs will be donated to Share Our Strength's hurricane recovery efforts. Enter the word "Strength" in the field that asks how you heard about The Six O'Clock Scramble.

- **Support the District Hogs on their Restaurants for Relief Ride.** District Hogs, a Washington, D.C.-based motorcycle riding club for chefs and foodies, will ride 1,600 miles from Washington, D.C., to South Dakota, this month on their way to the 66th

Annual Sturgis Rally. All participating chefs will be collecting pledges both online and at their restaurants through Tuesday, Aug. 29. To make a pledge, visit www.strength.org/restaurants/other/.

- **Select a dining gift certificate from Restaurants.Com.** Buy a \$25 gift certificate from Restaurants.com for only \$10 and 50 percent of the proceeds will support Share Our Strength's efforts to end childhood hunger and for ongoing recovery efforts in the Gulf Coast. The certificates are good at more than 7,000 participating restaurants nationwide.

- **Simply make a donation.** All monies donated will go directly to local programs supporting hurricane recovery efforts.

For more information about Restaurants for Relief 2 or any other Share Our Strength programs, visit www.strength.org. □

Meck market

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A musical interlude

The market offers another home-grown element: a group of local part-time bluegrass and folk musicians who perform each Wednesday and Saturday from 9:30 or 10 a.m. until the market closes. Sometimes it's a small group; at other times, a dozen or more musicians crowd in to play. But at the core of the fluid ensemble are Phil Lesser on hammered dulcimer, Tom Walsh on the fiddle and Martha Kiker on auto harp. Usually the group is tucked in the back between the tomatoes and the baked goods, and their sound flows out the

doors of the market to lure customers in. If weather permits, they perform outside.

Want to go?

The Mecklenburg County Market is located at 1515 Harding Place and operates Wednesdays and Saturdays from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. It's housed behind the Centex complex in a brick building with double white doors. Parking is available behind the building.

For more information about Beverly McLaughlin's market specials or to receive her weekly menu by e-mail, contact her at the market or at bl_mclaughlin@yahoo.com. □