

Everybody Needs Good Neighbours

Artisanal markets are giving working professionals a chance to put their weekends to culinary use. Jennifer Thorpe explores this latest trend.



EVERY SATURDAY MORNING you can find 26-year-old Clementine “Clem” Eccles at the top of a steep gravel ramp, inside a renovated parking lot, with her high school sweetheart Dan Forsthofer and her friend Brandon Law. The ramp itself cascades down to meet the middle of a once dodgy alley, now newly cobbled and softly lit.

They are not alone. People stand around the alley, looking upwards at the simplicity and beauty of a red brick wall strewn with tiny plants in clay pots. Their presence among this crowd is not founded in a shared fascination with the art of parallel parking. Instead, they’re selling giant vats of fresh *paella* to about 2,000 weekly visitors to the Neighbourgoods Market.

Launched in late 2011 with the kooky phrase “Lettuce Turnip the Beet” the Joburg Neighbourgoods

Market oozes nostalgia. Fifties jazz drips out of well placed speakers. Old empty Bashews bottles cuddle cut flowers and dangle from the ceiling. Plaid table cloths adorn the tops of 56 stalls.

The gentle hum of conversation blends with the music and envelopes you in a warm blanket of sound. Close your eyes and this could be a market in Paris. Open them and it’s a collection of ordinary people selling extraordinary food and fashion to a crowd with an “intolerance for generic.”

Born and bred in Joburg, fair-skinned, strawberry-blond Clem works a 45-hour week as a public relations account executive in the health care industry. And then she spends six of her 48 rest hours trading at this market. So how did a public relations

account executive become involved in an artisanal market? Clem’s friends had a good product and she learnt how to make it. Her friends, the traders who ran the paella stand at the Cape Town branch, had been guaranteed a place in Braamfontein as long as they had someone to run it. Enter Clem and Dan who swiftly volunteered and became partners in the business. They’re not pretentious about the product they sell, but they are business savvy.

Following in the footsteps of its Capetonian predecessor the market is based in the aging suburb of Braamfontein. The move towards “ethical eating” and urban renewal

urged entrepreneurs Justin Rhodes and Cameron Munro to start the market in Woodstock, Cape Town, and its overwhelming success led to the creation of the Joburg branch.

Moving reticent mall rats out of the leafy suburbs and into the city precinct isn’t easy but the market with its welcoming ambience has made the gritty site a little less scary, and created a financial opportunity for traders. Without the rats and rotting fruit of an olden day market, but with all the character, this is an ideal place to make an extra buck or two.

Clem believes that keeping the

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product simple and high quality is central to remaining competitive, particularly in this ‘fickle market’. Clem and Dan have a permanent position close to the entrance of the market which improves their sales. When you’re far away from the entrance,

market-goers have to pass through a gauntlet of options (home-made ice cream, savoury and sweet pancakes and bright red fresh cherries) before they even reach halfway. As you can imagine, first impressions last.

Making high quality paella and making sure that plenty of people take it upstairs to eat in the dusty sunshine is all part of the plan. Above us on the open-air upper level trendy people sit at trendy wooden tables, some eating trendy Belgian waffles dusted with caster sugar.

Sleeping late is no longer a luxury that Clementine and other traders are permitted, but the market comes with its share of benefits. Clem says that she enjoys getting to meet and interact with people each week. The face-to-face interaction that traders have with their customers is a far cry from sterile shopping malls. People come to the market with a plan to eat something delicious or buy something beautiful and so it’s a much easier place to get conversations about products started.

The food project Clem’s involved with is paella: a Spanish dish that originated in the mid-19th Century. The Valencian word for pan, paella often includes a mixture of meat and vegetables with rice. Traditionally it was cooked over large pans by the men of the village. Now, time travel from mid-19th century Spain to arrive in 21st century South Africa at the Neighbourgoods market, and it’s cooked by Clem, Dan and Brandon.

Cooking this amount of food is no small feat. The average chicken and chorizo paella has around 2.5 kilograms of free-range chicken, and a kilogram of tinned Italian tomatoes. Pausing whilst stirring the dense litres of fragrant mixture to wipe a strand of hair from her forehead, Clem described trading here as “a lot of fun”; the best part of which is sampling the products from other stalls.

Sampling is certainly part of the fun. Walking along one row of stalls

you can savour squeaky goats’ cheese haloumi, sweet lemon curd, cupcakes towering with glistening icing or a generous sized mushroom kebab. Your drink options include barista brewed coffee, fruit smoothies, and, for the adventurous, an early morning Margarita or South African special beer.

Consumption is the name of the game at these markets with what Dion Chang calls the ‘artisan eater’, people he describes as “the new foodies who are interested in consuming local, hand-made products bought at small scale urban markets”. Paella, cooked from fresh ingredients and



based on ancient recipes from rural Spain is a perfect fit for these consumers who Chang suggests reflect a “global nostalgia for idyllic rural life”.

For Clementine, being a trader at the market is an opportunity to mix socialising and a passion for food. It’s something new to do in a city that craves new experiences. The fact that Clem and Dan makes such a great team, giving each other broad loving smiles across broader pots of paella makes the product, and the work of trading, seem that much more inviting.

Getting out from behind the computer and into the market space is something that many of us might envy, even if that market space is inside a parking lot in downtown Johannesburg. Sipping on naturally

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