

## TO MARKET, TO MARKET

Visit Healdsburg's new culinary center to learn about, try, and buy artisanal foods and wines

STORY BY KIM OLSON



**T**ucked among the shops surrounding Healdsburg's historic downtown square, you'll find a new hot spot. Inside, a couple exchanges approving nods after tasting glimmering olive oils. In another corner, a woman pops chocolates into her mouth. In yet another corner, a local winemaker raises a glass of Pinot Noir and gives it a delicate swirl. As people pass by, they peek in, curious. And then, almost invariably, they step inside.

They have entered Plaza Farms, a culinary market where anyone can learn about, try, and buy myriad artisanal foods and wine—all under one roof. “The products are local and of exceptional quality,” says Linda Luciani, a Plaza Farms employee. “And most are made by family-owned businesses.”

Shoppers can find world-class olive oils from DaVero Sonoma Olive Oil, handmade cheeses from Bellwether Farms, and chocolate from Scharffen Berger, as well as wines from three local wineries: David Cofarro, Philip Stanley, and Tandem.



But the experience is as much about individual attention as it is high-quality products. “Customers get to talk to the artisan producer, so it’s a very personal experience,” says Gordie Weisgerber, Plaza Farms’ retail manager. “People really get excited to discover that the olives used to produce their oil were pressed just two miles away. When a winemaker pops in to pour wine, they can talk to him about his favorite varietals or how he came to produce wines.”

Each producer has her own stall, and they all split the cost of the lease, with one stall shared by members of the Healdsburg Farmers Cooperative. At the back of the store is Bovolo, a casual restaurant where shoppers can enjoy such fare as pizzas, house-cured meats, and gelato sandwiches.

Plaza Farms is the brainchild of Ridgely Evers and Colleen McGlynn, husband-and-wife owners of DaVero Olive Oil, who wanted to connect artisan producers with artisan consumers. Inspired by successful market halls in Europe and the Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco, Evers began sharing the idea with local producers—and the producers loved it. “People in the Bay Area are passionate about food,” he says. “The producers all understand that if they can connect directly to their consumer, good things happen.”



Not only do Plaza Farms vendors get to know their customers, the arrangement allows them to become more profitable. “The cost of the distribution network is prohibitively expensive for the small producer,” Evers says. “If a product retails for \$20, the artisan gets at most \$7.50. But if you can sell directly to the consumer, you can offer the consumer a great value and make a living.”

Plaza Farms opened in June 2005. Its staff, trained to go beyond greeting customers, are more like sommeliers at high-end restaurants: They really know their products. “All of our employees have a passion for food and wine,” Weisgerber says. “They all spent a week training with each vendor, and their job is to tell the story behind every stall.”

“I went to cooking school, so this was right up my alley,” says employee Martha Nezgoda. “We get visitors from all over the world. Some are gourmets and have heard about us, and some just wander in. But they all love to taste the products and learn about them.”

Most of the vendors have never had a retail space before and are taking full advantage. Teaspots has little jars full of tea leaves that shoppers can feel and smell. “People may have seen our teas in the grocery store, but now they can talk to us about the tea,” says Veronica Tran-O’Leary, Teaspots’ co-owner. “Gourmet tea drinkers come in and say, ‘I’m so glad you’re here,’ because some of our teas are very rare.”

Although Plaza Farms enjoys plenty of tourist traffic, residents are also frequent visitors. Many stop by DaVero, for example, where they fill their own bottle with olive oil.

Plaza Farms took shape just as Evers and McGlynn envisioned it would, but the pair remains open to whatever the future brings. They already have a host of special events in the works, including in-store winemaker dinners, wine and cheese pairings, and culinary book signings. “The space will be dynamic,” Evers says. “It may not work out for some stallholders, and that’s OK. I expect it to change, and I’m going to be fascinated to see how it evolves.” ∞