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Situated on a bustling high street in southwest London, Farmers' City Market appears to be just another shop. The only clues to what may lie within are the two white statues of cows. A glimpse inside and it soon becomes clear that this is not your average store.

But nor is it your average farmers' market. This is a venture that aims to provide all the quality and reliably sourced food of other farmers' markets but without the draughty surroundings and temporary stalls. More ambitiously, the three founders, Jana Satchi, Stephen Wilkinson and George Beach, say they want to redefine food shopping.

"Jana and I were at Borough Market in London one day and it was freezing," says Wilkinson, a former food and wine buyer for Marks and Spencer. "It was at that point we thought: wouldn't it be great to do something like this but indoors?"

Their idea became reality just before Christmas when they opened their first store in Hampton Hill, Middlesex, in partnership with Beach, who is a fruit grower from Warwickshire. It is a move that reflects a trend in British food shopping towards fine foods and more interactive retailing. There are now some 550 farmers' markets across the country, the numbers having mushroomed since the first one opened in Bath in 1997. It is estimated that around 20 million people spend £2bn a year at the markets. A survey for the National Farmers Retail and Markets Association (Farma) showed that 30% of the population

would like to shop at a farmers' market or farmers' shop but only 11% do.

"There is still interest in setting up new farmers' markets - we see a strong wish from consumers to buy directly from producers," said Rita Exner of Farma. "There is a strong indication that as more of these outlets become available, more people will do this."

Supermarkets have responded too. Tesco's strong performance over Christmas was powered by a 39% increase in sales of organic produce. It reported that sales of organic turkeys doubled on the previous year. Sainsbury's has also seen a similar explosion in sales across the organic range. Asda has trebled its range of organic products.

Farmers' City Market's footfall reflects this growing phenomenon. The figures have been four times what the directors expected and already there are plans to open another five stores across the south-east by the end of the year.

Connecting

"Working in the textile industry, I saw there was this transparency in the retailing chain that I was dealing with," says Satchi. "I wanted to apply the same model to food. At the moment food retailing in Britain is all about buying products and selling them on at an added margin. It's so impersonal. We want to take retailing back to basics, a forum where people sell goods to each other - people who know what they are selling to people who want to buy."

However, you won't often find farmers behind stalls at FCM. The store is set out more like a conventional shop without individual counters or tills, although the produce is clearly labelled so shoppers can see where it was grown and by whom. The founders see themselves as connecting consumers to producers who often find it difficult to make time to sell their goods at markets and grow produce at the same time.

"Farmers' City Market is not a brand, it's a concept," Satchi says. "We don't want to overshadow our suppliers - it's important they retain their individuality. When they can, they pop into the store - it's great for them to meet and interact with the customers buying their produce. But most importantly they are at their farms doing what they do best."

There were four main elements of the traditional farmers' market that the trio thought they had to change. "Customers were wary of health and safety at some markets," says Wilkinson. "They didn't like having to pay cash and queue at each stall they visited. There were uncertainties over when the markets were open. And often people couldn't buy as much as they wanted because they had no way of carrying it all."

So at their Hampton store they are open seven days a week, have parking right outside the shop, recycled shopping bags, credit card payment and trolleys - with a smaller size just for children.

However, they are keen to stress their differences from supermarkets. "It's not what we sell, it's what we don't sell," says Beach. Nothing is packaged or manufactured. There is no bleach, toilet roll or microwave meals. But there is fresh food and lots of it. Ripe tomatoes in all shapes and sizes, cheeses

stacked high, earthy vegetables still with their roots and leaves, slabs of meats. The color and smells mingle to invite the customers to touch and taste.

There is also a large kitchen and restaurant, where Andrew Sargent makes meals from the produce. Demonstrations are given and warm trays of cakes and breads are brought out. "People thought we were mad to put a kitchen in the middle of the shop," says Wilkinson. "But it's all part of our ethos. We want you to enjoy your experience, be surprised."

Inundated

"We're not about buy one get one free," says Satchi. Their beef and milk, he says, is the same price as in many supermarkets, the difference being that at Farmers' City Market the customer can find out exactly who supplied it and where it came from. Furthermore, since emphasis is placed on sourcing goods locally and in season, it means the costs of getting produce to the store are lower.

The feedback is encouraging. A message board in the shop is inundated with messages from enthusiastic customers inquiring about new foods and requesting a store nearer to them. Kylie Odd is a frequent shopper. "I would go out of my way to come here," she says. "I like good-quality food and you get what you pay for." Whereas many dread visiting supermarkets with children in tow, Mrs. Odd is happy to bring her four-year-old son Louis. "He loves having his own little trolley. It's just a much nicer experience."

FCM have not launched an advertising campaign and prefer to "let the food do the talking". As another

customer leaves with several bags full, it appears that the food is doing just that.