

Wayne Buckner drives a produce wagon at Seattle's Pike Place Market during its 100th anniversary celebration on August 17, 2007.



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## Seattle's Pike Place Market

# Home of Improvised Theater

# and Flying Fish

By KAITLIN McVEY

**P**ike Place Market, overlooking the Elliott Bay waterfront in Seattle, Washington, is one of the oldest continually operated public farmers' markets in the United States. Fresh food of every kind—from colorful produce, just-picked home garden herbs to fresh-catch fish—abounds in the market's stalls. The stalls also feature handicrafts fashioned by artisans from local materials, antiques, flowers, ethnic cuisine, and a menagerie of curiosities tucked into every nook and cranny of this 4-hectare market.

Before the market opened on August 17, 1907 local farmers sold their crops to commission houses that would re-sell the

products with a hefty mark-up to the public. Rampant rumors of corruption, ill treatment of farmers, and inflated prices charged by the wholesale houses caused the public and farmers to grow increasingly vocal in their unhappiness with the situation. The Seattle City Council, under the leadership of its president, Thomas Revelle, passed an ordinance establishing a public farmers' market on the west side of Pike Place. The ordinance's stated objective was to establish a public market whereby farmers and fishermen could sell directly to consumers and the public could "meet the producer."

Over the next decade the market quickly grew from an average



of 64 to 150 participating farmers per day. The city continually worked on making improvements to the market through “the enlargement of the farmers’ stalls area and the construction of arcades, public rest-rooms and a footbridge to the waterfront” (<http://www.seattle.gov>). Farmers gravi-

tated to the market from all over the surrounding region to sell their goods. The stalls were assigned by lottery; in 1912 rent was 10 cents per day. To rent a stall, farmers had to prove that all their produce was grown from their land, and that they lived on the land. By the 1930s, more than

600 sellers worked in the market every day. However, after World War II, the market went into a period of decline, which was arrested in 1974 when it was designated as a historic district, catalyzing its rejuvenation. Today the public-private complex houses 56 food vendors, 98

*Above: Pike Place Market overlooks the Elliott Bay waterfront in Seattle, Washington.*

*Right from top: The Market Theater, located in Post Alley, is dedicated to the art of improvisation; J.J. Swanton throws a fish during a salmon-tossing contest, held during the 100th anniversary of Pike Place Market; Danna Caudill (right) and Ervin Anies shop for flowers at the market.*

general merchants, 50 restaurants, 20 offices or service outlets, 240 rotating street performers, 450 mostly low-income residents, a senior center, a day care center, a food bank and a health clinic. It draws about 10 million visitors a year, half of them tourists.

Besides offering a plethora of good things to eat, Pike Place Market is a haven for the arts. Local performers sing, dance and perform mini plays in the labyrinth of streets and passageways coursing around and through the market. The Market Theater is located in nearby Post Alley. The theater was originally built as a stable and was completed in the early 1900s. The building had revolving tenants until finally in 1990, Unexpected Productions, the current occupant, took possession of the premises. Unexpected Productions has managed the space ever since and it is now one of the largest live theaters in the Pacific Northwest dedicated to the art of improvisation. Gum Wall, a local landmark, can also be found on the theater's red brick wall running along Post Alley.

One of Pike Place's prime attractions is its fish market. This is a market where, oddly enough, the emphasis is not on fish that swim but rather on fish that fly (at least momentarily). Sean Wood, who frequents Pike Place, explains: "When a customer orders a fish, an employee at the ice-covered fish table grabs the fish and literally hurls it over the countertop to another employee who catches it (most of the time!), and then cleans and preps it for wrapping."

This attraction was born when John Yokoyama purchased a small fish stand in 1965. As Yokoyama recalls, "One of the young kids working for me said, 'Hey! Let's be world famous!' At first I thought, world famous...what a stupid thing to say! But the more we talked about it, the more we all got excited about being world famous. So we committed ourselves to being world famous." Soon after, the team began to contemplate the meaning behind

being world famous and came up with their own definition of "going beyond just providing outstanding service to people. It means really being present with people and relating to them as human beings" ([www.pikeplacefish.com](http://www.pikeplacefish.com)). That dream has become a reality as tourists from all over the world now flock to the market to witness the aerial acrobatics of flying fish. One can even watch from the comfort of home on the Pike Place Fish Webcam as the fishmongers routinely hurl and snag three-, four- and five-foot salmon back and forth while maintaining a running banter of jibes, jokes and puns.

ELAINE THOMPSON © AP/WIDEWORLD



Trond Goderstad clammers atop Rachel, the bronze-cast piggy bank at Pike Place Market. Rachel is considered the market's unofficial mascot.

Another attraction of the market is the original Starbucks Coffee shop, which opened in 1971. Yes, from this humble shop sprang the world chain of Starbucks. Besides being the first, a small detail contributes to the uniqueness of this shop. It is the only one that bears the original, founding Starbucks logo. The sign hanging outside the store features a bare-breasted siren that was modeled after a 15th century Norse woodcut. All other Starbucks logos, of course, sport the siren but in a more modest format.

Pike Place Market's unofficial mascot is Rachel, a bronze-cast piggy bank that weighs 250 kilograms. Because of her enduring charm and the fact that she rarely moves, she has become a landmark for friends and family to meet at within the confines of the market. "Meet me at the pig" is the common phrase used by Seattleites to establish a guaranteed point of reference among the maze of stalls and

the masses of shoppers, tourists and idle gawkers. More than just acting as a meeting point, Rachel's main function is as a piggy bank to collect donations that are distributed to the market's charitable social services through the nonprofit Market Foundation. Rachel was designed by local artist Georgia Gerber and was modeled after a real pig name Rachel that lived out her days on the nearby island of Whidbey.

Today the market sees tens of thousands of tourists pass every day through its warren of stalls shopping for inexpensive flowers, fresh baked doughnuts, handmade crafts, organic vegetables and much, much more. The market continues to draw new visitors and definitely contributes to Seattle's creative, municipal personality.



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#### For more information:

Pike Place Market

<http://www.pikeplacemarket.org/frameset.asp?flash=false>

Market Theater

<http://www.unexpectedproductions.org/>