



Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle

Patty Unterman chats with Bill Crepps of Everything Under the Sun in 2013.

Q&A with Patty Unterman

By Jonathan Kauffman

Patty Unterman, owner of the 39-year-old Hayes Street Grill and a former restaurant critic for The Chronicle, has operated a stand at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market since 1992, when the market first opened on the Embarcadero, soon after the elevated highway was torn down. At the time, she writes, "We wanted to serve breakfast — a delicious made to order breakfast — using everything we could directly from the market." The Hayes Street Grill stand, with its perpetual and amiable line, is for many an essential part of their Saturday morning shopping routine. I conducted an email interview with Unterman about the changes she has seen. Our conversation has been edited for space.

The Chronicle: When did you get involved with the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market?

Patty Unterman: Right from the beginning, September 1992. The economy in San Francisco had ground to a halt. Everyone was depressed. Tourists were scared to come. The Civic Center and Performing Arts Center were a wreck. Here was a way to revitalize restaurants in the City by connecting them directly to super fresh local ingredients and give smaller family farms a way to sell unusual and artisanal produce at a sustainable level.

Why was it important to you to be part of the farmers' market?

I saw this particular market as transformational for the restaurant community. Here was a way to actually supply our restaurants directly from local farms. I wanted to do anything I could to make it happen and I knew that outdoor food stands are like catnip. If people knew they could get something tasty and fun, their hunger would bring them to the market, and then they couldn't help but buy from the farmers and vendors.

How did Hayes Street Grill's role at the market change with the move, and how has it evolved since?

When the renovation of the Ferry Building was finally completed March of 2003, we moved our market back (from a spot several blocks north). As a founding member of the board, I knew that our mission was to re-establish a more central, urban market there. As the market grew in the much larger space, our Hayes Street booth expanded its menu and started offering lunch: grilled wild salmon BLTs; crispy pan-fried oyster sandwiches; Dungeness crab cake sandwiches and salads. Of course, people could still get their beloved scrambled Rolling Oaks Ranch eggs piled into a soft super-fresh Acme baguette with Hobbs Shore's bacon and market tomatoes.

Do you feel like the Ferry Building, and the relationship between the marketplace and the outdoor market, has achieved its original aims?

I do. At the start, I felt that the indoor market in the Ferry Building desperately needed our vibrant and bustling 12-year-old outdoor farmers

market to survive, to achieve credibility, to draw shoppers to the site. We were the catalyst for the success of the indoor marketplace. That relationship evolved, but ask any of the indoor vendors when their busiest times are and they will tell you it's when our farmers' market is operating.

What has it been like to be part of the market for 25 years, especially as it has become a showcase for Bay Area organic farming?

I get the kind of pleasure, satisfaction and delight that comes from being part of a happy family, as Tolstoy might say. I personally shop there two times a week for the restaurant — something I've indeed done for a quarter of a century. I have personal relationships with so many of the farmers. I know them and their families; they know me. I know their crops, when the first asparagus and Blenheim apricots and fresh peas will appear. When something goes wrong — like weather — we all suffer. The menu of Hayes Street Grill is based on what I haul back. Giving cooks direct access to farms revolutionized the food in San Francisco restaurants, making it immensely better.

Are there ways that the market, or the building, or your stand, could change for the better?

I'd love to see more diversity in product at both the indoor and outdoor markets — more sustainably grown Asian vegetables outside, for example, and spices and dried goods like freshly milled flour inside. I was sad when Rancho Gordo, a grower of fantastic heirloom dried beans closed its indoor stall. Rents inside are too high to make a real indoor food market workable, and I suppose that tourists and shoppers who work nearby don't really do that kind of shopping. It's just my dream. But I think the whole operation is incredibly sexy and the best of its kind anywhere in the balance. Together, the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market and the indoor marketplace capture our food-obsessed northern California ethos.

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