

The Stonington Village Farmers' Market at The Velvet Mill

by Amy White

Photos by Winter Caplanson
and Europa Photography

The Velvet Mill, a sprawling maze of artists' studios and small businesses located on Bayview Avenue in Stonington, was built in 1888 to develop new industry – namely manufacturing velvet cloth. Today, the building is an expansive space illuminated with natural light that beams in through the walls of windows. Visitors can't help but close their eyes and imagine the rambling plant once filled with millworkers running hundreds of looms, bolts of luxurious velvet dyed in rich jewel tones stacked neatly nearby.

Like in so many New England mills, the machinery stopped, and this one, too, closed its doors. But New Englanders are a thrifty and determined bunch. So, about ten years ago, a small group of local artisans banded together to repurpose the building, rather than tear it down.

Today, the space has become a second home to a creative community of photographers, painters, sculptors, glassblowers, fiber artists, potters, and printmakers. Entrepreneurs have opened small businesses that are thriving in the old Mill, including an artisanal bakery, a cheese shop, an award-winning



nano-brewery, a yoga studio, and some vintage boutiques. Weekends at the Mill are marked by a Vintage Flea Market, where one can find perfectly-seasoned cast iron cookware laid alongside antique gold and silver jewelry. And, five years ago, the Stonington Village Improvement Association decided to move its increasingly popular farmers' market inside the Mill for the winter.

From 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays from November through April, the Stonington Village Farmers' Market at The Velvet Mill attracts visitors from the Town and surrounding communities who come to shop for fresh, healthy, local ingredients. The Market gathers 25 permanent food and farm vendors and 10 rotating craft vendors every week. The farmers sell locally-grown fruits and vegetables throughout the winter, purposefully using greenhouses to produce crops year-round. So, while it is a matter of course that there are plenty of potatoes, onions, and storage crops for sale, there are also crisp greens, greenhouse tomatoes, and a host of other veggies on hand and harvested each week. In fact, as Market Master Kevin Bowdler says, "This is one of the few places in Connecticut to get fresh produce throughout the winter directly from the farmer."

Of course shoppers are glad to have a place to buy local vegetables all year; however, farmers' markets such as this one are critical for the farmers, as well. Susan Sink, American Farmland Trust's vice president of Development and External Relations states, "Next-generation farmers selling directly to consumers at farmers' markets have nearly a 10 percent greater chance of staying in business than those selling goods through traditional retail. When family farmers thrive, our community, economy, and families thrive."

Farm-grown food is not the only thing available at this lively market, however. Other native food items include preserves, baked goods, poultry, meat, seafood, maple syrup, honey, cheese, and prepared foods such as salsa, stews, and pot pies. Craft vendors offer an array of handmade items perfect for gift-giving. Parents can drop off rambunctious children at the kids' program run by the Stonington Community Center to tend to their purchasing in peace. Local musicians entertain guests with softly-strummed guitars and lively fiddles. In one



Photo: Winter Caplanston



light-filled area, patio tables and chairs are set up where shoppers can rest and enjoy a cup of coffee or a bowl of soup.

Whether they come for the Farmers' Market, art studios, Beer'd Brewing, Zest Bakery, the Vintage Flea Market, or all of the above, people from all walks of life are finding The Velvet Mill to be a Saturday destination. As you stroll through the maze, familiar faces keep appearing, people are smiling and holding hands, some are walking their dogs, and all seem to be nibbling, sipping, chatting, and buying. The vibe is one of a community gathering to share food, stories, and advice. Even the purveyors themselves notice. As one farmer put it, "We sell at a lot of the farmers' markets, but this one is the most fun!"

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