

FEATURES

Sixty-year-old Hsu Hsin-chuan (徐辛泉) grew up on a mountain-side farm in Miaoli County. Back then, there was no electricity. The little boy would catch fireflies and put them in a glass bottle to illuminate his room while he wrote his homework at night.

Hsu returned six years ago, and started growing banana plants to provide a favorable habitat for his childhood beetle pals, which had vanished from the area after the soil was polluted by herbicides and pesticides.

Now the bugs are back, and Hsu has carts of bananas and other fresh fruits and vegetables to sell at the 248 Market (248農學市集), a weekend farmers' market held in a parking lot in a bustling alley off Zhongxiao East Road in Taipei.

Opened in July, the market is the brainchild of Yang Ju-men (楊儒門).

Formerly dubbed the "rice bomber" by the media for planting explosive devices in trains, parks and telephone booths to draw the government's attention to the plight of local farmers, the angry young man became a farmers' rights advocate following his release from prison in June 2007 after then president Chen Shui-bian pardoned him.

He has traveled the country visiting smallholder farmers who reject the use of artificial chemicals on the soil. Currently, there are 16 such agricultural producers hawking their wares at the market.

"The primary aim of the market is to communicate and build trust between consumers and growers ... The initial challenge for the farmers is to learn to speak for themselves after plowing fields for 50, 60 years, just like their fathers did before them," Yang said.

Li Yan-sen (李衍森) is learning to share his years of experience in cultivating native medicinal plants such as Chinese mahogany and ailanthus prickly ash.

"Nature has great wisdom. But it won't tell you. You have to observe and discover it," said the farmer from Taitung County who uses fermented taro and cassava as compost and simple farming tools such as rakes and shoulder poles to till the land.

Seasonal, fresh vegetables and fruits from several Aboriginal tribes in Hualien, Nantou and Hsinchu counties that have converted to organic farming with assistance from World Vision Taiwan can be found at the market.

Spring Trading Company's (春一枝, www.fruit-ice.com.tw) fair trade ice lollies are popular with shoppers. The manufacturer ensures that fruit growers in Taitung benefit from a system that promotes sustainability and pays a fair price for their produce.

Red on Tree (在樹紅, www.redontree.com) makes high-quality jams with an emphasis on exploring indigenous varieties of fruit, such as cape gooseberry and guava, that have much stronger aromas than cultivated strains.

"Known as the poor man's fruit, cape gooseberries are part of many people's childhood memories ... Those cape gooseberries are the best free fruit one could find on the roadside," said staff member Wilma Ku (顧瑋).

Other participants at the 248 Market promote social causes.

Initiated by a retired elementary school principal as a way to help Aboriginal children



PHOTO: HO YI, TAIPEI TIMES

“You have to have a capitalist's mind and a socialist's heart.”

— Yang Ju-men, activist

and elders in Wulai Township, Taipei County, Fushan Grange (福山農莊, www.eq.org.tw) collaborates with small farmers and runs a community-supported agriculture operation that aims to build mutual support between growers and consumers.

While selling a fresh catch from her hometown, Keelung's Badouzi (八斗子) fishing port, NGO worker-turned-entrepreneur Hsueh Li-ni (薛麗妮) is eager to talk about her protest against Taiwan Power Company's plan to construct a port for unloading coal and renew the Shenao (深澳) coal-fired power station.

Over the past couple of years, farmers' markets have taken root in Taiwan's metropolises. There is the Breeze Market (微風市集, blog.breezemarket.com.tw) in Kaohsiung County, and the Hope Market (合模農學市集, www.hopemarket.com.tw) and NCHU Organic Farmers' Market (興大有機農夫市集, organic.nchu.edu.tw) in Taichung City.

The markets are not only sites of trade but venues that serve as public forums frequented by social activists, environmental groups and concerned citizens, Yang said.

The answer to the social and economic problems facing farmers who have seen their livelihoods threatened from increased competition and rising costs is to cut dependency on wholesale dealers by finding who and where the consumers are, Yang said. Farmers' markets do that and allow producers to maintain a stable and direct outlet for their crops.

As for now, the 248 Market has found an additional venue at Taipei Kaiping Culinary School (台北市開平餐飲學校), and opens on Sundays. Like the Pacific Construction Co (太平洋建設), which doesn't seek rental for the parking lot, the school lets Yang and his fellow farmers use its sports field for free.

Yang is confident of finding more space for expansion. "You have to have a capitalist's mind and a socialist's heart," the 31-year-old said.

Meet your farmers and know your food

Located in the heart of downtown Taipei, the 248 Market offers urbanites a chance to become acquainted with where their foods come from and the people who grow and make them

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



The 248 Market is stocked with agricultural foods that are produced and sold with sustainability and fair trade in mind.

PHOTOS: HO YI, TAIPEI TIMES

IF YOU GO:

The 248 Market (248農學市集) runs every Friday from 2pm to 8pm and Saturday from 10am to 5pm at Ln 248, Zhongxiao E Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市忠孝東路四段248巷).

It runs every Sunday from 10am to 4pm at Taipei Kaiping Culinary School (台北市開平餐飲學校), 24, Ln 148, Fuxing S Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市復興南路二段148巷24號).

For more information, visit www.248market.com.tw



[HORTICULTURE]

An orchid by any other name ...

Showcasing one of the country's most important and beautiful horticultural products, the annual Taiwan International Orchid Show is in full bloom

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



Left: JW-Dragon, the grand winner at this year's Taiwan International Orchid Show. Above: Hsiang Yu Leopard, the winner of this year's cattleyas category.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF TAIWAN INTERNATIONAL ORCHID SHOW

The world's leading exporter of orchids, Taiwan is showing off its floral assets to the public at the annual Taiwan International Orchid Show (台灣國際蘭展), which is currently underway at the Taiwan Orchid Plantation (台灣蘭花生物科技園區) in Houpi Township (後壁), Tainan County. With 29 participating countries, the 10-day event ends on Monday and is expected by organizers to attract more than 200,000 visitors as well as some 2,000 overseas buyers and floral industry professionals.

The show's four main exhibition halls house varieties of orchids, flower arrangements, handicrafts and large-scale landscape designs made using orchids.

The Sales Booth Hall (風華館) features over 100 stalls that highlight Taiwan's commercial breeds, patented strains and local growers and breeders' new varieties.

"The aim is to bring both international and local buyers

face-to-face with growers, and also give a platform to breeders looking for commercial explorations of their new breeds," said Jia Yi-chiang (賈益強), vice secretary general of the Taiwan Orchid Growers Association (台灣蘭花產銷發展協會), the event's organizer.

The orchids that were entered in this year's international competition are on display at the Orchid Exhibition Hall (鏡豔館). The grand prize was awarded to Chen Chih-ming's (陳志明) hybridized paphiopedilums named JW-Dragon. The flowers have slender, red petals that measure between 50cm to 60cm long.

The top prize in the cattleyas category went to Hsiang Yu Leopard, which has 48 large, showy golden flowers, and was produced by Hsiang Yu Orchid Garden (祥玉蘭園).

The International Commercial Orchid Growers Organization from the US won top prize in the display category with its

landscape design that uses white dendrobiums.

Export orders secured at the orchid show totaled NT\$2.4 billions last year, a 65 percent increase from the year before. Despite the economic downturn, the show's organizer expects a moderate increase this year. "We remain optimistic ... After all, the export of butterfly orchids [or phalaenopsis] alone enjoyed an 11 percent increase year-on-year in January," Jia said.

According to the organizer, around half the world's butterfly orchid varieties are grown in Taiwan with 40 percent of the country's butterfly orchid plantations located in Tainan County.

For those interested in visiting, commuter buses run between Taiwan High Speed Rail's Chiayi Station and the venue during the exhibition period. A one-way bus fare costs NT\$100 per person. For more information, visit www.tios.com.tw.