In February 2002, the historic South Australian town of Willunga received a metaphorical dose of Viagra. It wasn’t the ‘wonder drug’ of that name, just a humble Farmers Market, but for some people in the town it was a bitter pill to swallow. The starting of the Farmers Market represented change and it took some time for people to get used to it. But now it has become an exciting Saturday morning activity for the whole town.

Many of you will not know where Willunga is. It is a small township in the heart of the McLaren Vale wine district, and I’m sure many of you have heard of that. The town is less than forty-five minutes from the centre of Adelaide and just ten minutes from one of the state’s most beautiful beaches. I used the reference to Viagra because we have a high proportion of middle-aged people and retirees, and things got a lot quieter in the 1980s when the busy Victor Harbour Freeway bypassed the town and took the traffic with it. We were left with a lovely streetscape established in the 1880s, but many of the buildings were left vacant.

The town needed some kind of development, but the surviving main-street traders and most of the residents were concerned about the possible impact of any kind of development on the rural and historic nature of the town. We still had a doctor, a baker, a general store and two banks. About the only thing missing was the candlestick maker, and the residents had resisted attempts to establish one of the chain supermarkets in the town, using the historic buildings regulations to block such a development. When we first had the idea for a Farmers Market, we thought that would fit in well with the community spirit in the town and also attract more visitors—a perfect development option!

**Overcoming Early Resistance**

But as with any new wonder drug there can be unexpected side effects. In this case, some of the residents had a surge in their blood pressure when the plans for the Farmers Market were unveiled. But now we can say it has been
good medicine for the town. It has provided some real ‘get-up-and-go’ and has stimulated businesses to take sustainable economic development more seriously. It took passion and demonic enthusiasm on the part of the key drivers, and patient work to address the fears of the community. You have to remember this was the very early days of farmers markets in Australia and we really didn’t have any examples to refer to in talking about the impacts. In that sense it was a bit of a gamble.

Because there was so much early resistance, we had to work on a strategic plan, involving community participation, and also a careful marketing campaign. In the end, however, it has been the commitment of both the producers and customers that not only saw the market survive but succeed beyond our wildest dreams. It became not only a place to buy fresh food but a small business incubator. It led to an increase in land under cultivation for food crops and greater economic activity in the town. It created new opportunities for employment and enabled the setting up of new businesses in the main street. There are estimates—which may not be very accurate because farmers don’t like to say how much they are making—that the market now injects about $1 million a year into the local economy. Our Council calls it ‘the jewel in their crown’ and it has delivered, in spades, what the bureaucrats like to call the ‘triple bottom line of sustainability’ in regard to the economy, community and environment. Politicians love it and they all want to be seen shaking our hands.

It has become an established part of the weekly shopping, and I want to stress that point because, as far as I am concerned, if you are going to have a farmers market there is no point doing it just once a month, when people have to buy food every week.

**Spin-offs**

There have been many spin-offs, such as ‘Visual Feast’ — an open-air festival of short films about food — and ‘Eat your words’ — a forum of food writers, held at the market as part of the South Australian Writers Festival. The award-winning chef Gay Bilson has moved from Sydney to live in our area and she was on that panel of writers in 2005 with her autobiographical book, *Plenty*.

We have a sculpture which is a cast-iron rooster and as part of our marketing program we ran a competition to find a name for it. The winner used an abbreviation of the words ‘Willunga’ and ‘market’ to create the name ‘Sir Willmark the Magnificent’ and this has now become our mascot. From this, we spun out the idea of the Willmark Awards, when we all dress up and the winners are given chooks. One of the biggest spin-offs has been a permanent ‘community kitchen’, which now houses four or five of the local producers on a shared-time basis. This started out in a building owned by a blueberry producer, but it got so big he had to move the other producers into another building next door and, in his generosity, he built them a huge cool room.
Since the market started, a regional food group, supported by Food SA, has been established and, as a result, we now have a regional *Flurio Fiesta*. This is a Spring celebration that is based around the release of the new season cooking oils, and the focus is on taste and flavour. As a result, the region’s oldest food festival, the Almond Blossom Festival, is at risk because it has been too narrowly focused on one crop. The Farmers Market newsletter—*The Forager*—is the first regional newsletter based entirely around food, and it now incorporates news and views about local, regional and global food issues. It strongly promotes the message of sustainable food production.

We have a visiting chef program in which chefs demonstrate their skills at using market produce in a makeshift kitchen under an umbrella at the market. This not only demonstrates what people can do with the produce they are buying; it also gives new people in the food industry some work experience in customer service. We want to provide opportunities for young people in the region to build careers in this area, and they can start out by working alongside their parents or by helping other stallholders. And, of course, some of the young people have a go at busking and they seem to do pretty well. Music is important on market days and we have a Farmers Market Choir. Now, I am half Maori and half Welsh and my mother always sang in choirs so I have also started a choir called Soul Food, and we perform music that celebrates community, food and the seasons.

The market has stimulated many local restaurants to include local produce on their menus, and the *Fiesta* includes the announcement of the chef of the region as a major activity. I have now lived in this region for more than twenty-five years. When I first arrived, there was only one restaurant, called The Barn. It was impossible to get good coffee, and there was no food sold at the cellar door outlets of the more than fifty wineries. Locals spent a huge amount of time discussing the merits of wine, and consuming it, but there was no local lexicon to describe or discuss local food. Now, the local produce is firmly on the menu and food is available throughout the cellar doors of the region. And the winemaking blokes don’t cut it anymore unless they can also cook well, or at least are able to discuss the food of the region intelligently.

When something really takes off like this, you soon get a reputation, and all this activity has led to some serious food professionals making the seachange and moving to the region. The attraction is that they can better combine family life and their professional practice because it is notoriously difficult for chefs and restaurateurs to have enough time for their families. And, for us, the quality of food in the area has risen enormously. Yet I rarely go out to restaurants these days. Maybe this is an age thing, but I now prefer to shop at the market and then cook for family and friends at home, on my balcony overlooking the sea. Sometimes I get together with neighbours to cook and I think this is the basis for a regional cuisine—local people growing, buying and cooking food that is close to home and relevant to the local seasons.
Reasons for our Success

There are a number of reasons why the Willunga Farmers Market has been so successful. The most important one, in my mind, is the nature of the organization that runs it. When we first set up this market, we were determined it would be a not-for-profit operation, owned and operated by the community for the community. I’ve never done anything like this before; in fact, I had never been on a committee before. I have been running my own businesses for twenty-five years, so it was real learning curve for me to realize that I had to take other peoples’ perspectives into consideration. But that was the only way to win community support and to create something that could be sustained. The three of us who were the major drivers when we started have all had major family crises related to health. We supported each other over the hundreds of hours we spent planning and implementing the project, to the detriment of our own businesses. Then we all experienced unexpected grief and I, for one, would have found it difficult to get out from under the doona if not for the motivation of the joint project.

So, three of us had the energy and that is what eventually drew the community into the project. We also delivered on our promises and won trust. The community was not only invited to contribute to the project but to also take ownership by becoming members of the organization. We now have more than 1,000 members paying a membership fee of $35 per year, and this gives us more financial security. To get government money you have to go through the lengthy process of writing submissions and so on, and so we avoided all that by going straight to the community. Members get a 10 per cent discount at every stall but, more importantly, they feel a sense of ownership of the whole thing.

In the end, food should not just be about vitamins, diet or even policy. It is a daily cultural ritual and a celebration of being alive. It is a constant reminder that our health is dependent on the health of our environment. Communities that can feed themselves are more intrinsically sustainable as a result.

Zannie Flanagan is a restaurateur, olive oil producer and passionate supporter of local foods. She was the driving force behind the establishment of the highly successful Willunga Farmers Market in South Australia, which has stimulated the local economy and brought Willunga community closer to the food growers and producers in the region.