

The West Australian

For a fresh look at food, find a farmers' market

29th April 2008, 15:00 WST

It's been a quiet week in Allen Park. So, on Saturday morning I took myself off to the newish farmers' market run by the P&C at Mt Claremont Primary School looking for something fresh and ran into National Party leader Brendon Grylls.



Now, there aren't too many votes for the Nats in those parts, so Mr Grylls was mainly shopping, but keeping a weather eye on the politics of food. This is fertile ground for a rural-based MP.



As the food-labelling campaign run by this newspaper back in 2006 showed, people are increasingly concerned about where their tucker comes from. And it's my guess that they will also become increasingly interested in how it is grown — and by whom.

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Take the salad truck for example. The vegetables being sold from it — lettuces, rocket, radicchio, elk — come direct from the fields and easily last for more than a week in the crisper.

You rarely find that with greens brought from a supermarket or even from the so-called "fresh" stores. The reason, so I'm told, is the way the wholesale market works and the time vegetables are held before they get to the point of retail, which is sometimes more than a week.

In the face of increasing control of our food sector by Coles and Woolworths, the Rudd Government has directed the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to inquire into grocery prices.

Frankly, as crucial as price is for many consumers, that is only scratching the surface of the problem.

It would be a big mistake to allow the debate on food to be based solely on price, which is where some of the big parties would like it confined.

It needs to embrace issues such as quality, nutrition, diversity of supply and the economic health of rural communities. It even takes in national security. A country that loses the ability to control its food supply leaves itself vulnerable.

It's not only rural producers who are suffering under the emerging duopoly.

WA pie maker Mrs Mac's told the ACCC inquiry last week that one of the major retailers had told the third-generation family business its products would soon be replaced by home brands.

George Weston Foods last month warned that the rise in supermarket home brands was threatening many well-known grocery lines such as its Tip Top and Noble Rise bread, Top Taste cakes, Ryvita crispbreads and Watsonia meats.

Put simply, home brands do not offer the same quality as brands built on consumer preference in a competitive market. And it is in the interests of the chains to force popular brands out of the market so they can better control their cost inputs.

That means just one thing. Declining quality.

Which is what Mr Grylls was talking about at the farmers' market on Saturday — and what he has been beating the drum about in the Legislative Assembly for years.

He is worried that the more the chains reduce competition, the more consumers and producers become vulnerable.

"We know that when Coles and Woolworths are the only ones leaning on the rail at the saleyards — it happens now — they will also be talking to each other about how much they should pay," he told the Assembly back in 2005 when Woolies announced it would increase its presence in WA.

And that's pretty much why a new operation, Mourambine Lamb, appeared at the Mt Claremont market four weeks ago and will be selling from a new farmers' market in Fremantle from Sunday, May 11.

Pingelly farmers David and Carmel Pauley, along with a group of enthusiastic locals, created the Dorpalee breed for its meat quality and have decided to market their lamb direct.

"These farmers' markets have been huge overseas for years and I reckon they bloody well should take off here too because it's all about community spirit and passionate farmers who are doing what they love," Mr Pauley said.

"It's pretty simple really. Our society has lost a lot of stuff and this is getting back to basics, dealing with real people who know what they are talking about.

"I'm not taking it any more. We have farmers in our area — real sheep country — leaving lamb like you wouldn't believe and going for wall-to-wall cropping. I find that terrible."

Asked if he would sell to supermarkets as his brand developed, Mr Pauley hesitated. "I'm not sure," he said. "I'll have to look at it. I am worried about getting too big too quick.

"If I run out now, people at the markets say 'gee, his stuff must be good' and come looking for us the next week.

"That is not the case when you are dealing with the big boys. They jump down your throat.

"I love farming. I love grabbing the dog and going to check the sheep. And that's what I want to communicate to people when they come to buy my lamb face-to-face."

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