by Jack Kittredge

Last summer in the New York Times Julia Moskin wrote a thoughtful article entitled: “When Community-Supported Agriculture Is Not What It Seems.” It is worth reading and can be found at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/20/dining/csa-farm-share-community-supported-agriculture.html?_r=0> for those who want to do exactly that.

Moskin’s basic point was that ‘farm share’ programs have evolved in complex ways from the original simple CSA model. This evolution has blurred the lines of exactly where the food is coming from, whether it is local, and whether local farmers are benefitting from the programs.

Traditional CSAs encapsulate a specific relationship between a farm and its customers. The model originated in the 1980s in the US -- earlier in Japan and Europe -- and the term adopted in Japan for the system could be translated as ‘food with the farmer’s face on it’. Whether started by a farm or by a group of consumers, a CSA was basically an agreement by the farmer to provide shares of the farm’s products each week during the season, and by each consumer to pay, upfront, the cost of their share.

This transaction was two-way, with nothing siphoned off for middlemen, distributors, or brick-and-mortar stores. The early full payment was a critical factor, enabling cash to the farmer when needed to buy seeds, hire staff, invest in improvements and equipment, and pay all the regular bills of any business.

The customers of a CSA get produce straight from the farm, coming from a farmer they know and trust. It is a mutual relationship based on that knowledge and trust.

Recently, however, a lot of new farm share marketing services have popped up claiming to be supportive of local agriculture. Some even claim to be CSAs. But many of these are based on the presence of a middleman who takes part of the price, leaving less for the farmer — precisely what traditional CSAs are designed to avoid. Many also promote their ‘convenience’ by having more items than any single farm is likely to raise (dairy, meat, fruit, bread, fish, eggs, mushrooms, honey) and also have items which are clearly not local (citrus, coffee, avocados, olives) and which provide no income to local farmers.

This is no question that many customers are attracted by convenience and a broader array of products than are likely to be sold in a one-farm CSA. But those are exactly the reasons most people buy at stores and most of the resultant money goes to non-farmers. Only one kind of arrangement -- the CSA -- pays the farmer 100% in advance, year after year.

In addition, CSAs give the farmer control of the market. When selling to a middleman, however, the farmer is in competition with all other farmers. The dynamics of the market mean that the middleman is going to look for the lowest possible price. Even if that means a farmer has to sometimes sell for less than cost, given the perishable nature of produce, that may be what she is forced to do.

(continued on page 2)
Why Aggregators?
by Jack Kittredge

This issue deals with a reality that all too many organic farmers are having to face – as new, younger people are coming into the market, they are bringing new expectations with them. As excited as they are about local food, they also want convenience, more choice, easier payments, and other features that we have not been good at providing – but that the conventional American food system has delivered in spades.

The market model that is under the most stress now is the CSA. For years pure CSA has been the preferred marketing model for many farmers. You get retail prices, you are paid up front, all your produce is sold, and you have few costs compared to staffing a farmers market or roadside stand, buying expensive boxes and delivering to stores, or paying a middleman or receiving reduced prices when selling wholesale.

Clever marketers have inserted themselves into this model. Touting more choice they have come up with software shopping systems. Promising a wider product mix they purchase from several farmers and sell an aggregated selection from a food hub. Stressing convenience they offer workplace and home delivery. But all these “improvements” come with additional costs which farmers are being asked to pay. What is inherently a low margin business has for some become no margin business!

(continued from page 1)

Among the programs cited by Moskin exemplifying this lack of control by farmers are a farm-to-table subscription service called Local Roots NYC which has almost two dozen pick-up sites around New York City on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and buys from a Pennsylvania vegetable farm, a New Jersey fruit farm and a Pennsylvania mushroom farm, as well as two dairy and cheese operations, three bakeries, two granola companies, a pasta maker, a fish wholesaler, and a honey producer. Only the vegetables are organic.

A second operation cited was Rustic Roots, a home delivery service requiring customers to preorder by Saturday night for delivery on Tuesday through Thursday of the following week. Several share sizes range from $43 to $105 (with $50 of meat) and don’t include the flat $10 delivery fee or the cooler or insulated bag fee if you want those to keep your order cool for several hours. Suppliers include a couple of organic fruit and vegetable farms, an Amish co-op, five meat and poultry operations, five Amish farms, an Alaskan fish company and a maple syrup supplier.

As another example, Peapod is an online shopping service owned by the international grocery giant Ahold. The minimum order is $60 and the delivery fee starts at $2.95. Peapod delivers not only food (not local) but also health and beauty products, pet care, household products and paper goods. FreshDirect offers meal kits (priced at $10 to $12 per serving) as well as fruit, vegetables, meat and poultry, dairy, bakery products, frozen foods, beer, wine and spirits in New York, Vermont, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

According to Moskin these new programs are not really CSAs. That term is not regulated in most states and can be used pretty much by anyone for anything. But these new ‘aggregators’ or ‘food hubs’ are burdened, by their very nature, with different risks and concerns than CSAs. They do not represent important markets for a host farm, for example, and can come and go quickly if not meeting the needs of the founders. One, Good Eggs, ended deliveries in three cities – Los Angeles, New Orleans and Brooklyn – suddenly in 2015 after one year of operation. Farmstr, founded in Seattle in 2013, also shut down in 2015.

The growth of demand for local and organic produce in the last few years has fueled a rash of new ideas for connecting farmers to customers. Online hubs that used sophisticated software to manage distribution was one approach, and many appropriated the acronym ‘CSA’ to describe their service.

But some of these were transitory. In midsummer 2016 15,000 households that subscribed to a company called Farmigo received their last food boxes in New York, New Jersey, Seattle and Northern California. The three year old company had run through $25 million of venture capital raised on the strength of a food distribution software platform – an online farm-
The real problem with these new markets, say farmers, is that they should not be called CSAs. Partly by offering a more convenient product the hubs have siphoned off the traditional farm CSA members. To make matters worse, the hubs blur the definition of terms like CSA and ‘farm share’ so that customers believe they are directly supporting local farms with their purchases when they might not be.

Maryellen Driscoll of Free Bird Farm in the Hudson Valley, for example, estimates that her farm’s income will be down $12,000 compared to last year from the loss of C.S.A. members. “CSAs are not for everyone, we know that,” she says. “What’s frustrating is that the copycats have such a lack of transparency, and it’s very easy for the real issues to be glossed over.”

“They are absolutely in competition with us,” says Ben Shute, an owner of Hearty Roots farm in the Hudson Valley, referring to the new services. “There are only a certain number of people who will buy food this way.”

Paula Lukats, program director of Just Food, an advocacy and education group for local agriculture in New York State, agrees: “The CSA system was developed because they wanted a more traditional market. "I never saw a conflict with the CSAs," Moskin reports Ronen as saying. "That model was already failing. We saw a lot of customers leaving CSAs because they wanted a more traditional market.”

But the realities of managing all those items -- washing, packaging, refrigerating, distributing and delivering them to 400 locations -- proved too difficult. So Farmigo members lost their shares and the farmers Farmigo had contracted with were left with fields full of produce they had planted for a buyer no longer interested in them.

The siphoning of customers from real CSAs to these middleman-oriented aggregators or food hubs is of great concern to many small farmers. While the new businesses may still buy their produce, the farmers no longer have effective power in the relationship and may well have to forego some of their income, handing it to the middlemen. Many CSAs also report that after years of growth, their memberships have declined since the arrival of services like Local Roots or Farmigo.

Judith Redmond, owner of California’s Full Belly Farm, which was once one of the oldest and biggest CSAs in the Golden State (the only state which has actually codified the term Community-Supported Agriculture), reports that her membership, after holding at 1200 members (and a long waiting list) since 1992, dropped significantly in 2016. “The CSA system was developed because they wanted a more traditional market. "I never saw a conflict with the CSAs," Moskin reports Ronen as saying. "That model was already failing. We saw a lot of customers leaving CSAs because they wanted a more traditional market.”

Ms. Ying argues that the more food options her customers have, the more likely they are to remain in the system. "If the goal is to make local food accessible," says Wen-Jay Ying, founder of Local Roots NYC, "we need to make shopping for it as much like a one-stop shop as possible."

But the proponents of new, more flexible hubs and aggregation systems, whatever they are called, are convinced they are helping the local farms. "If the goal is to make local food accessible," says Wen-Jay Ying, founder of Local Roots NYC, "we need to make shopping for it as much like a one-stop shop as possible."

The natural problem of the new markets, say farmers, is that they should not be called CSAs. Partly by offering a more convenient product the hubs have siphoned off the traditional farm CSA members. To make matters worse, the hubs blur the definition of terms like CSA and ‘farm share’ so that customers believe they are directly supporting local farms with their purchases when they might not be.

“Do consumers even know that their CSA membership had dropped from a high of 900 in 2012 to 600 now,” she says. “What’s frustrating is that the copycats have such a lack of transparency, and it’s very easy for the real issues to be glossed over.”

“Every time I eat something at the hub, it’s a cookie cutter cookie. "I never saw a conflict with the CSAs," Moskin reports Ronen as saying. "That model was already failing. We saw a lot of customers leaving CSAs because they wanted a more traditional market.”

Besides, some feel, consumers have only so much time to spend vetting their food system. Taking the time to tease out whether buying granola made in Brooklyn qualifies as supporting local agriculture can test the patience of consumers.

“I just assume that if it’s organic, it’s good,” said Raquel Hoffman, a CSA member in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. “I can’t also worry about whether it’s local, or whether the chickens were happy, and all that.”

Eric Stone, who oversees CSAs at FreshDirect, believes that widening distribution and raising visibility for local produce — as the company’s boxes do — benefit local agriculture in the long term. Hepworth Farms, in the Hudson Valley, packs boxes for FreshDirect customers that are stamped with the farm’s own name and logo. “I really think it gives them a chance to get their stuff out there,” he said. “It expands the whole market.”

Now that local food has become big business, there is no limit to the possible competition. Target and Walmart, for instance, are trying to get a piece of it, and even Amazon is building infrastructure for home delivery of food.

This new demand has been a boon for many farmers across the country, but the beneficiaries are especially large-scale farmers equipped to sell in bulk. Small, local farms are at a disadvantage in this market.

In interviews with farmers, policy makers and entrepreneurs, all parties agree that for fragile local food systems to strengthen, consumers will somehow have to be offered more choice and control over what they eat than is possible with a traditional CSA.
Committed to the Future of Organic Farming

Allganic® Nitrogen helps organic farmers meet the needs of their crops by providing lasting and sure application, especially during flowering or early and late in the season when days are shorter and soils colder. Producers generally see significant yield increases when Allganic® Nitrogen is used in combination with crop rotation, reduced tillage and other organic nitrogen sources.

At FMC Organic we are proud of our many farmer partners practicing responsible use of Allganic® Nitrogen as part of their overall nutrient planning. They understand the value, but, and provide them as a supplemental nitrogen source in their overall organic farming nutrient management program.

As you think about your nutrient use plan for this next growing season, we urge you to follow the lead of these farmers.

For yields, use Allganic® Nitrogen responsibly.

To find out more about Allganic® Nitrogen, 18-0-0, please contact us today!

www.allganic.com

FMC North America
Tel: (406) 241-0300
Email: alganicsales@fmc.com
Food Hubs

reprinted from the Center for Healthy Food Access

Food hubs offer an exciting bridge between food producers and consumers, providing a mutually beneficial relationship across both ends of the food system.

As defined by the National Food Hub Collaboration, "a food hub is a business or organization that actively supports the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers in order to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand:"

Food hubs present an opportunity for communities to make healthy and local food sourcing a profitable enterprise for producers, distributors, retailers, and other business types (e.g., worker-owned co-ops). Similar to more traditional food distributors, food hubs provide the wholesale infrastructure and often, the logistics needed to serve at-scale customers who are seeking to procure locally and regionally grown foods. Food hubs act as value-chain facilitators by adopting a values-based approach to moving food along a supply chain to ensure that all actors in the supply chain— from farmers and farmworkers to consumers—benefit from the business model.

Unlike farmers markets, in which farmers and other producers engage in direct sales to customers, food hubs typically operate to support wholesale customers like institutions (schools, hospitals, universities) that are able to purchase at scale. For example, food hubs can provide a single point of aggregation for small- to mid-sized producers that may otherwise not be able to access wholesale markets. Food hubs may also provide transportation of products, assume costly liability insurance requirements on behalf of their producers, and/or provide customers with education and marketing materials. Food hubs can improve access to healthy foods in low-income or underserved areas by making it easier for farmers to sell to them, thereby reducing costs associated with infrastructure and logistics. Food hubs may also provide additional value-added services like fresh-cut operations for fruits and vegetables, or may serve as a business incubator for small-scale food producers.

Food Hub Obstacles

While food hubs can have a wide range of positive and equitable impacts, starting and operating a food hub can be challenging. Given the complex business model, food hubs require strategic site development to ensure that food hub products will have a dedicated customer base through a broad range of buyers, and/or provide customers with education and marketing materials. Food hubs can improve access to healthy foods in low-income or underserved areas by making it easier for farmers to sell to them, thereby reducing costs associated with infrastructure and logistics. Food hubs may also provide additional value-added services like fresh-cut operations for fruits and vegetables, or may serve as a business incubator for small-scale food producers.

Food Hub Financial Benchmarking Study

Investing in higher, family-sustaining wages for workers who have previously been excluded and underemployed workers can be a commitment from the community to support the hub.

Find your spot in the market. Engage and remain engaged with residents of local communities, restaurants, and institutional buyers to find out which products are most desirable. Engaging with the community will help you create a culturally relevant product line that attracts local customers, and creates a base of buyers who view themselves as partners in the food hub. The most profitable food hubs often reach a diverse customer base through a broad range of buyers, including small grocery stores, restaurants, and K-12 food services.

Grow Your Business with Equity. Food hubs have the potential to create a more equitable food system that values quality jobs, healthy food access, local economic growth, small business development, and sustainable agriculture. Food hubs designed with equity considerations can provide opportunities for growers and producers, aggregators and distributors, and the consumer. Below are strategies for developing profitable, equitable food hubs that foster more just, fair, and inclusive food systems and local economies.

Engage residents and community groups in the food hub planning process. Involve diverse community members in food hub planning from idea to implementation. Residents and stakeholders can provide crucial insight into issues such as location, hiring, and product mix.

Connect to small- and mid-sized farmers and producers. Locate farmers and growers in the region who have difficulty accessing broader urban markets, especially low-income farmers, because these growers may be looking for new aggregation, marketing, and distribution opportunities to scale their production.

Prioritize local farmers of color. Identify and reach out to farmers and vendors of color to support historically marginalized producers and strengthen a diverse regional farm economy. Immigrant farmers and farmers of color may grow culturally appropriate foods that will meet consumer demand in their communities.

Choose a location that maximizes equity benefits. Select a site in a low-income neighborhood, or a community of color, to maximize benefits for these residents. In addition to improved food access, siting your hub in a low-income community will facilitate local hiring, workforce development, and if done well a commitment from the community to support the hub.

Employ members of the community. Local hiring can help unemployed or under-employed residents of underserved communities benefit from the economic development brought by the food hub.

Invest in higher, family-sustaining wages for employees. The recent Counting Values: Food Hub Financial Benchmarking Study found that the highest-performing food hubs were those that paid their staff higher-than-average wages and benefited through overall better performance per full time employee. Higher wages translate into healthier and more productive workers, which has positive economic impacts for food hubs in the long run.

Assess demand for different products. Engage residents of local communities, restaurants, and institutional buyers to find out which products are most desirable. Understanding customers' product preferences and creating a culturally relevant product line ensures that food hub products will have a dedicated customer base.

Make the food hub a community asset. Make the food hub an inviting, appealing asset to the community. In addition to offering healthy food, the physical appearance of the food hub can help revitalize a neighborhood. If possible, engage your community by providing broader services such as educational opportunities and community programming.
A Brief History of CSA

by Liz Henderson

An Introduction to the CSA Charter

In February 1979, a tractorcade of 6,000 farmers tied up traffic in Washington, D.C. to protest farm policy that ended parity, the pricing system that had linked farm prices to the costs of other sectors of the economy. The deepening farm crisis of the 1980s accelerated the loss of family-scale farms. Developers were grabbing up farmland at the rate of many acres a day. In face of the grim reality that small and mid-sized, family-scale community based farming could disappear completely in the US, people who wanted to farm and support farms had to invent creative alternatives — that is how Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) was born.

In Anthony Graham's words: "Ideas have a way of hoeing over when the time is right or the right person or group can give it form. Booker T. Whatley sounds like he was a forerunner in the idea of communities supporting farms and farmers, but I don't think he can be said to have created the CSA concept. In the mid 80's what has now come to be known as CSA was an idea whose time had come, with roots in many places in many people. It grew out of a sense of community and it came an as answer to a need. When the time was ripe it grew exponentially through the work of many people, not the least of whom were the farmers who recognized a great idea and ran with it." In the South, Booker T. Whatley researched and taught farmers "How to Make $100,000 from a 25 Acre Farm." Inspired by Swiss and German examples, Robyn Van En and Trauger Groh, Anthony Graham and Lincoln Geiger established the first CSA farms in the US in 1986, Indian Line Farm and Temple-Wilton Community Farm. Robyn became CSA's Johnny Appleseed, spreading the concept at Biodynamic and Organic conferences. Line Farm and Temple-Wilton Community Farm. Robyn became CSA's Johnny Appleseed, spreading the concept at Biodynamic and Organic conferences.

At the 1993 New York State CSA Gathering in Syracuse, I shared my thoughts on the significance of CSA as an antidote to the dominant industrial food system. "We need to take our work more seriously. We have the chance to build the food system that will replace the current one. CSA is an idea — a tremendously flexible concept for a new consumer-producer connection, an alternative system of distribution based on community values. The economics of direct sales make this a win-win solution for farmers and consumers. The farmer gets a decent price and the consumer pays less, since there is no middleman. For the farmer, the CSA offers the possibility of a broad support group of people who genuinely care about the farm's survival and who are willing to share the farmer's risks. Consumers have the opportunity to connect with the earth, know and trust the people who grow their food and support the local economy and to transform themselves into the much more meaningful and empowered stance of a person who is taking responsibility of one of the most basic needs of a human being. The big question we must answer — will this be sustainable?"

Anthony Graham writes: "When we started the Temple Wilton Community Farm with a series of community meetings in the winter of 1985/1986, one thing we were sure of was that we were not selling anything — we were far more interested in community and in the culture in agriculture. What we were attempting to set up was a way for a community of people to support the existence of a farm through good times and bad by making pledges of financial support over the course of one year. By agreeing to support the existence of the farm our members became co-farmers. At that time we were all talking and thinking a lot about how to bring form to the ideas that were swirling around, and in one of our conversations Trauger was the one who came up with the idea that the members could also be seen as farmers and we also decided that the farmers should make pledges as members (which we still do)."

Similar to what happened in Japan after 30 years of Teikei, CSA in the US is facing something of a crisis. Across the country, CSAs that had waiting lists are having trouble finding enough members. Interesting to note is that CSAs that stick to their guns are not having trouble. Temple-Wilton, which used to be on the verge of closing, could disappear completely in the US, people who care about the farm's survival and who are willing to contribute what they can afford and then take as much food as they need, still has a waiting list. Core member Ruth Katz writes: "We at Clinton Hill CSA have been very fortunate thus far (knock wood) that our membership has held steady for the last few years. I'm aware that it can change at any time. I think one reason is that our neighborhood, for all of its gentrification, is still a bit of a food desert, with no really terrific supermarket. Honestly, the CSA is about convenience to some degree. We've kept up a long wait list, and that has been our most reliable way to fill our membership each year. We've just almost doubled our winter share membership by offering the winter shares to the wait list. We also have started offering half shares, and I think that seems to be a strong and important tool to reach people who might not have room in their lives for a full share. And we have a wonderful farmer in Ted Blomgren; his expertise has grown so much in these last 15 years."

Emilie Miyauchi of Just Foods writes: "There's been a lot of talk about how to make CSA more "consumer-friendly" and flexible. While we understand this mindset, especially in trying to compete for NYC's attention, we see this as a potentially endless pursuit. Someone else will always be there with an easier platform for food delivery, generally someone with a lot of up front capital. Our farmers and our communities can't play by the same rules as companies like Farmigo, Good Eggs, or whatever comes next to replace them. The CSA model works and is equitable only when we recognize and try to meet the real needs of farmers and share-holders. We need to get better at listening to one another, expressing ourselves, and finding ways to engage and get creative within - and with - our conflict. We need to dig down deeper into what community is and what it can mean with the understanding that for some time now and certainly going forward into a new administration, community is in jeopardy. Part of the hardest work of keeping the CSA model viable is building back community, protecting what exists, and galvanizing people around a shared sense of our interdependence, not just one another and the natural world. It is also time for CSA farms to address the tension between farm owners and farm workers to make CSA a model for healthy business and fair labor."

minimizes pollution of soil, air and water.

1. Farm members buy directly from the farm or group of farms. There is no middleman.

2. The farm provides member families with high quality, healthy, nutrient-dense, fresh and pre-served, local and low fossil-fuel food or fiber, filling the share primarily with products grown on the farm or, if purchased from other farms, clearly identified as to origin.

3. Farm members commit to the CSA, sharing the risks and rewards of farming by signing an agreement with the CSA and paying some part in advance, even as little as two weeks for those on Food Stamps.

4. The farm nurtures biodiversity through healthy production that is adapted to the rhythm of the seasons and is respectful of the natural environment, of cultural heritage, and that builds healthy soils, restores soil carbon, conserves water and energy, and is equitable only when we recognize and try to meet the real needs of farmers and share-holders.

5. Farmers and members commit to good faith efforts for continuous development of mutual trust and understanding and to solidarity and responsibility for one another as co-producers.

6. Farm members respect the connection with the land upon which the CSA grows their food and strive to learn more and to understand the nature of growing food in their locale.

7. Farmers practice safe-handling procedures to ensure that the produce is safe to eat and at its freshest, tastiest, and most nutritious.

8. CSA prices reflect a fair balance between the farmers' needs to cover costs of production and pay living wages to themselves and all farm workers so that they can live in a dignified manner, and members' needs for food that is accessible and affordable.

9. Farmers consult with members, take their preferences into account when deciding what crops to grow and communicate regularly about the realities of the farm.

10. Farm members commit to cooperation with the community of members and to fulfill their commitments to the CSA.

11. Farmers commit to using locally adapted seeds and breeds to the greatest extent possible.

12. The CSA seeks paths to social inclusiveness to enable the less well-off to access high quality food and commits to growing the CSA movement through increasing the number of CSAs and collaboration among them.
CSA: We Have a Problem

by Simon Huntley, reprinted from Small Farm Central

Since CSA migrated to the United States in 1986, this model has been remarkably successful. It has now grown to over 6,000 farms (estimated) in the United States and many more in Canada and the rest of the globe. All of this growth occurred despite the very grassroots nature of CSA, asking customers to pay up front, and the non-consumer friendly nature of the program. The current state of CSA would look like a huge success from the viewpoint of the CSA pioneers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire in 1986, however there are problems mounting in our community.

CSA still only serves a small minority of families. In my local market of Pittsburgh, I estimate that 5% of households (current and former members) have a CSA share. That is still only 5% of households. I believe that we can get there, but it will not be easy.

As I have discussed in the past, big business has noticed the success of CSA. CSA is beset with competition from alternatives for access to local, fresh food like farmers markets, grocery stores, grocery delivery concepts, and more.

Exactly 30 years from the founding season of CSA in the United States, I think we are at an inflection point. Anecdotally, many farms are reporting declining CSA sales. Though I should note that this decline has not yet shown up in our data.

Will CSA exist in its current form in 5 or 10 years? I honestly don't know. I think it could easily go either way: CSA could grow substantially or membership may continue to shrink.

I want to make sure that CSA does thrive because I love what CSA does for farmers and for eaters. With this goal, I've spent the last six months digging into the research and doing 1-on-1 interviews with eaters to understand how we can reinvigorate the CSA model.

Retention is Key

Over the past couple of years, here in Small Farm Central, we have compiled the CSA Farming Annual Report and one of the most interesting findings of this report is the average retention rate of CSA members from one season to the next. In 2014 it was 45.2% and in 2015 it was 46.1%

It took a while for me to recognize this as a huge issue. I knew that there are many things that can go wrong in a CSA, but I couldn't help but feel that there was a real disconnect between what a CSA customer thought they were going to get and what they got. Certainly, you will never retain 100% of your customers. People move, money gets tight, they try another CSA, but if your CSA is churning through half of your customers each year, you have a huge problem. Your business is on fire.

With a low retention rate, a CSA will have trouble maintaining membership, let alone growing membership to the desired scale. To me, it is about profitability. A high retention rate makes the life of the CSA farmer easier in marketing, it points to a happy customer base who will recommend the farm, and it creates conditions where farm profitability may exist.

Think of this: a new member has a huge hurdle to jump to join a CSA. They need to hear about the CSA model, then they research different CSA farms in their area, then they look to see which ones deliver near them, then they need to understand the model and which share type makes the most sense for their family, and finally then they need to reach for their credit card and make a commitment. So, clearly most potential customers never get to that last step. The ones that do are fully sold and fully committed to the idea.

Now they go through a full season and it doesn't work for them for one reason or another (I'll talk about this later in this article) and they cancel. What a tragedy for the farm and for CSA in general! We've lost another customer who likely will not come back to CSA.

Even on a macro scale, this is a huge problem. If a household tries a CSA and they are not satisfied, they decide they will go back to the grocery store, farmers markets, try a delivery service, or buy at Whole Foods. They likely will not seek out CSA again. We've lost that customer. Ouch.

As I've spent more time over the last year talking to folks about CSA, I have come to realize that in some circles, among certain eaters, CSA is known as the place where the farm dumps the produce seconds or where you'll get a whole box of kale that you don't know what to do with. This is not fair for most CSAs, but I'm afraid that the 'brand' of CSA is starting to become tarnished. If this accelerates, we are really in trouble.

However, one study from California gives me hope for these lost members. Former members were asked if they would join a CSA again and 74% said "Yes", 23% were "Unsure" and only 3% said "No".

Joining a CSA is about the Customer

If we want to see CSA continue to grow, we need to get a lot more customer-centric. I know a lot of CSAs are already trying to figure this out. First off, I suggest that you must talk to your customers more about why they join, why they quit, and spend the time to really understand that -- don't assume you know anything!

I've spent a lot of time knee-deep in the university research on CSA and doing one-on-one interviews with current and former CSA members so I'll tell you what I have learned, but there is no substitute to hearing your feedback on this part of it), but this is a terrible idea.

It can be really easy to get stuck in the way we are doing things now or having a producer-oriented approach -- thinking, "I worked so hard to grow this food and build this farm! Why won't people join?" But it is important to remember that everyone works hard for their money and they are buying something for themselves, not for you. A CSA farm is not a charity.

What makes a CSA a CSA?

Before you think about innovating on the CSA model to become more customer-centric, you need to determine what is non-negotiable in your CSA. What makes CSA special? Because key to this process is figuring out how we retain what is compelling about CSA while making it more customer-centric. If we try to compete with grocery stores, I believe we always lose.

I did this exercise last year at the Midwest CSA Conference as I began thinking about what it would take to grow CSA memberships by 10x. You may agree or disagree with these attributes (and I'd love to hear your feedback on this part of it), but this is my concept about what makes a CSA a CSA:

1. Direct connection between one farmer and the member.
2. The majority (> 75%) of the share is grown on the farm. Any off-farm produce is clearly labeled as such.
3. The customer commits for the season and pays some amount ahead of time.

Everything else about a CSA feels negotiable to me. Within this framework there is a lot of room for innovation and we've seen a lot of innovation here at Small Farm Central as we work with hundreds of CSAs across the country. Lots of farms are trying to figure out ways to attract and retain customers.

One concept that I have left out of my definition on purpose is "shared risk" that comes up in a lot of other definitions of CSAs. I leave it out because I think it is misunderstood: there is almost never true shared risk in a CSA. It is not shared risk in terms that the member may get nothing in their box during the season. In an adversitely vegetative operation of an experienced farmer, the shared risk is that the member is being flexible about what they get in the box. For example, it may be a bad year for tomatoes due to blight, but there will likely be another crop that thrives in that same season and the customer will get more of that crop. To speak to this, I'll add a fourth tenant of CSA:

4. The customer is flexible about what is in the box each week based on what is harvested from the farm.

Why do members leave?

I have been focusing my research on the CSA members that leave because these are the people that have expressed their dissatisfaction with the CSA model by not joining again. My thinking is that if CSAs are churning off 50% of their customer base each year, over time there are many more ex-CSA members out there than current members. These are people who "get it" but were put off for one reason or another.

In Confessions of a CSA Failure published in the Chicago Tribune in 2015, Barbora Brotman writes eloquently about her first season in a CSA:

"you can't just throw the [vegetables] out — or at least I couldn't. This wasn't store-bought produce grown by some faceless, far-off corporation. These were vegetables grown by my CSA, lovely people who packed the boxes themselves and sent emails with pictures of their farm.
The Natural Farmer | Winter, 2017-18

I felt guilty about all the spoiled produce we were throwing out. I felt constant pressure to cook or eat our vegetables. I chafed at the loss of control over what foods we would get, and perplexed that you can have that much food in your house but nothing for dinner.

My summer in a CSA was a learning experience. I learned that kohlrabi doesn’t taste as scary as it looks. I learned that I really like beet, goat cheese and honey tarts. And I learned that my CSA also sells its produce at farmer’s markets.

In this specific case, it sounds like the CSA just gave her too much produce and this definitely does happen. The worst experience for a member is to get their CSA box, feel guilty about not eating it, let the food go rotten, and then throw it out three weeks later.

Be careful not to think of this in too simplistic of terms: it may not have been too much food overall. Rather, it was too much of the wrong kind of food. One high retention CSA farmer told me that he looks at what sells quickly at the farmers market to know what to put in the box. If it doesn’t sell at the market, members don’t want it in their box.

So why do members leave a CSA? What can we do to improve retention rates?

As I started my deep dive on this issue, I had theories. It’s about paying ahead. Or it’s about convenience, they want home delivery. Or it’s about wanting more choice. Or CSA is too expensive.

However, I left my theories at the door and started talking to folks. In one of my 1-on-1 interviews with ex-CSA members, I talked with an 87-year-old woman who lives alone. Her main problem was that the pickup location was on a back porch with stairs and it was too hard for her to get off the chair or to arrange for someone to pick it up. In addition, since she lives alone, she just didn’t eat enough produce to go through the entire box, so a lot of it went to waste. In this case, a CSA is probably not the best option for her. That’s OK. Remember, we’re not going to be able to serve everyone and we don’t need to.

Or there is Kathy who lives with her husband and two kids. Her main problem with CSA is that her husband is out of town every other month for work. She loved the CSA, but when her husband was out of town, most of the box would go to waste and it did not make sense for her. Perhaps if she could pick the specific weeks throughout the summer when she would get a box, CSA would work for her.

So as you can see, the problems are specific to each person’s circumstance so while there is a lot you can learn from these 1-on-1 discussions, we also need to zoom out to see the bigger trends.

There is a wonderful study out of the University of California by Ryan Galt that surveyed 1,149 current and 409 former members in 2015. I think the answers are in this study!

There is a lot of great data there including who buys CSA shares (gender, economic levels, and race), reasons for joining and more. I encourage you to take a dive through the data yourself if you are interested. One really interesting point is willingness to pay: on average members said they would be willing to pay 19% more for their share. I would like to write more about value and price in a future article.

However for now, my focus is on ex-CSA members because this is where I see the greatest room for growth, so I focused on the slide titled “Reasons for Discontinuing.” The top four reasons in the study were:

1. The product mix did not meet my needs (47%)
2. Lack of choice about products included (41%)
3. Too little diversity in products (33%)
4. Lack of choice about quantity and/or frequency (23%)

So the top four reasons in this study for members who left were all related to choice.

This was what came up in my 1-on-1 interviews as well. People wanted the ability to choose what they liked and what they didn’t like. I looked back at my CSA philosophy and I don’t see anything in there that means that everyone needs to get the same one-size-fits-all box. Some people like cabbage and other people don’t.

Choice is not part of the traditional CSA, of course. I see the standard box as a matter of convenience for the farmer rather than something that is key to the CSA model. Why do you need to love cabbage? That doesn’t mean that person does not support the farm any less. We just don’t have any mechanism to keep cabbage out of that member’s box and give it to someone else who loves it.

In addition, the feedback that you get at the farmers market is blurred in a traditional CSA. If a product is not favored by your customers at a farmers market, it’s obvious because it is what you pack back on your truck at the end of the day. In a CSA, you will likely end up hearing about it on an end-of-season survey, but the damage is already done by then and it may be easy to ignore that feedback. The product that was not favored rotated in the refrigeration and the member already has decided to shop at the grocery store or farmers market next season. So building better feedback in the CSA model is vital to improving year after year.

This comes up often in my conversations with farmers when they talk about survey data: the farmer reports that everyone loves green beans and another hates green beans. What do you do with that information? You can’t do much in the case of a prescribed boxed share. You need to get more flexible if you want to keep both of these customers. Alternatively, you can focus on the more adventurous customers who are happy with the box as it is. If you are able to find and retain these members, maybe choice is not an issue for your members.

A cross current to this “give them what they want approach” that came up in my interviews with CSA members is that CSA members value the adventurousness of being in a CSA program. Each week the box is a little surprise gift. It’s exciting to find out what is new and different, but there is a balance here. Too much adventure is overwhelming and the food ends up spoiling and ends with “veggie guilt” as one CSA farmer described it to me. To make it more complicated, each member’s “adventurous quotient” is going to be different. Some members will want just the basics while other members will cook everything you throw at them.

All of the other reasons that members leave CSA pale in comparison to the choice issue based on my research. This is encouraging because I think we can do something about choice without fundamentally changing the nature of CSA or the growing practices of CSA farms.

Always Be Educating

The issue of choice is complex because we don’t just want to give people what they know they already like – there is some chance that you can educate your members into liking beets for example. Maybe they just didn’t know how to cook them yet.

We need to remember that a huge hurdle to being successful in a CSA program is cooking. We are delivering a box of uncooked produce to a public that is not used to cooking with raw products. It’s a huge leap to take if a farmer described this to me saying, “people pay me to make their lives more difficult.”

Clearly, anything the CSA can do to educate members on what to do with the products in the box will go a long way. Videos, recipes, newsletters, cooking demos, community offers, etc. If you can come up with the cooking education can even turn picky eaters into adventurous ones over time.

It may not sound like your job as a farmer to do this kind of education with your customers, but if you want to retain the member you must focus on their success. Especially that first season is going to be a big adjustment for members, so provide as much support as you can to your first season members.

I think we can do a lot more in the cooking education end of CSA. It’s absolutely essential. There are companies out there assisting farmers with this including Local Thyme or Cook with What You Have.

CSA 2.0

In technology terms, “2.0” describes the next iteration, the next generation of a technology product. I believe we need “CSA 2.0” for CSA to thrive over the next 10 years. There likely will continue to be room for traditional CSAs in the marketplace, but to grow the number of families that participate in CSA, we need to become more customer focused. We need to serve eaters better because that is what makes happy members, keeps them coming back, and recommending CSA to their social circles.

I know change is hard, but I hope to be a part of making CSA 2.0 and helping you to be profitable with your CSA.

My research leads me to believe that it is fundamentally about providing more choice to members about what is in their box. There are many models out there already that provide that already.

A really simple and effective method is what I term the “market style CSA” where vegetables are put out in bulk at the beginning of the season and members are to box their own share. Most often the share is prescribed to make sure the farm has enough of each product but some farms just tell members to take a certain number of items or fill their box and then as you can see at the end of the line to let members trade an item they don’t like for one they will eat. Though this is more labor intensive because each box needs to be staffed, this tends to lead to high retention rates.
An Original Multi-Farm CSA

by Jack Kittredge

Many years ago, when the organic movement (and its farmers) were much younger, I remember hearing of a great marketing idea that was being tried in New Hampshire – a multi-farm CSA! At the time I remember thinking: “That sounds great! What a nice way to fill in for each other’s deficiencies, provide customers with crops one farmer is not so great at growing but others seem to raise easily, or manage a weekend off once in awhile.” But then I started thinking about the downsides: “I wonder what happens when two farmers both want to provide the same product, when everyone else thinks the quality of Farmer Brown’s lettuce is slipping but she doesn’t see it that way, or when I think my produce is not getting a fair share of the CSA’s income?”

One thing or another kept me plenty busy and I never followed up on that New Hampshire brainstorm. Until now. In October I realized that this issue of The Natural Farmer on Organic Aggregation was a perfect opportunity for me to check out that misty memory. Was it still alive? Had crusty New Hampshirite (that is the official term, says the Government Publishing Office, honest!) farmers managed to work together this long? Were there fatalities?

So I contacted Dave Trumble of Good Earth Farm in Weare, one of the original farmers who put the idea together, and arranged a visit to the Local Harvest CSA in Concord, NH.

This is the 15th consecutive season for the CSA, and from the start they have been housed at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Concord. It has a nice location less than 5 minutes from Interstate 93 in Weare. The organization is run by the participating farmers, currently 6 of them. All the produce and fruit is certified organic and has been that way from the beginning. Meat and dairy options have been offered at times, but none are available right now. In those cases, if no certified organic product is available the CSA may decide to allow non-organic to be sold. In the past a dairy farm brought yogurt and milk, but they were a small operation and had to send someone for the whole day so they decided not to keep coming.

The CSA was popular right from the beginning. “When we started our membership went up, up, up,” recalls David. “I wish we could have capitalized on that more. But competition has grown fierce up here, “ recalls David. “I wish we could have capitalized on that more. But competition has grown fierce up here.”

As a way to serve more people and those farther away, the CSA has added a second day when shares are delivered to a number of sites around southern New Hampshire. The satellites have helped bring in some members, but the competition is still strong. “Last year was hard for farmers because of the drought,” explains part time CSA staffer Anna Muncy, “and a lot of them didn’t get crops of many vegetables they normally raised. So we got some people who left those CSAs and joined ours because of the multi-farm aspect – we were getting product that some individual farms were not able to raise. This spring was really rough too, cold and wet, and some farms had trouble then, as well. Some CSAs delayed their opening, or even just didn’t have some items at all. So a multi-farm CSA gives the members a little protection.”

Representatives of the vendor farms are: Back row, left to right: Dave Trumble of Good Earth Farm, Steve Fulton of Blue Ox Farm, Doug Troy of Stoneridge Farm, Roger Noonan of Middle Branch Farm. Front row, left to right: Jennifer Ohler, Kearsarge Gore Farm, Carol Troy (Stoneridge Farm). Principles missing are Larry Fletcher of The Vegetable Ranch and Bob Bower of Kearsarge Gore Farm.

“Every farm being certified organic is very helpful in reaching out to new people,” adds David. “Without that it might be hard to distinguish ourselves.”

Of course all the farms also have other markets besides the Local Harvest CSA – their own CSAs or farmers markets, farm stands, restaurants, wholesale sales, etc. So in the summer it is hard to get the farmers to a meeting to make decisions, but in the winter they meet multiple times to talk about changes in prices, locations, purchases they are going to make, etc. They also talk about who is going to grow what crops and if someone drops a crop who is going to pick it up.

“At these winter meetings,” Anna explains, “we try to even out what we take from each farm, but if you have been a main producer of a crop you can’t have someone else coming in and taking all of that production from you if you are still growing it. You have some rights to what you have been growing.”

Farms get paid every week and bring an invoice for what they deliver.

The six farms that currently contribute produce to the CSA are Blue Ox in Enfield, Good Earth in Weare, Middle Branch in New Boston, The Vegetable Ranch in Warner, Stoneridge in Bradford, and Kearsarge Gore in Warner. Each of the 6 has a representative on the CSA board and some serve as officers. Everyone votes on any change in prices. The part time staff is Anna and Erin Insley, plus Dave and a bookkeeper.

Steve Fulton, who farms 10 acres plus three high tunnels at Blue Ox, says: "I have been involved with Local Harvest CSA since year one. It has been good to work with other farmers. I think that it has helped my farm's profitability. CSA is better than Farmers Markets because everything that is harvested is sold, and I don't need to pay someone to work at the Farmers Markets. CSA is a steadier source of income than restaurants and offers the benefit of direct sale prices -- which are far better than wholesale. I grow heirloom tomatoes because I have markets that pay decent prices for them. But mostly I grow hybrids because they yield very well. I have found that most people are way more interested in cosmetics than flavor!"
The farm has 7 acres and 2

.jpg

ket, I grew a garden for my own use, and always

owners. According to the owners: “We grow a full range of market vegetables and flowers, all sold locally through CSAs, farmers markets, and directly from the farm. We also raise a small flock of Dorset sheep, several pigs, and Devon cows. Throughout the year we cut cordwood, and in the spring we put out 2,000 taps for maple syrup. The entire farm is off-grid, using solar panels for electricity. We have made our living through the sales of organic produce, cordwood and maple syrup for 27 years. CSA members are welcome to come and visit us at the farm.”

I met Sarah Hansen, one of the farm workers there, when I visited Local Harvest. She was delivering produce, including some Italian giant dandelion greens she was very excited about.

“They are lots better,” she stresses, “than things you’ll find in your yard. You can make a mean dandelion pesto with these. We just need to do a little more harvesting. We have a 200 member CSA in spring and 100 in fall, but we only have some skill/training to fall back on.”

Sarah used to run the CSA before Anna and still helps out making signage and sketches of produce. “I started working on the farm five years ago,” she reveals. “I feel like if I had grown up on a farm maybe I’d want to get away and do something else. But being in a community where there are a lot of young people is very helpful. A lot of our

Many of the items at the CSA show it’s ‘market style’ by giving the customer a choice of which produce to choose.

“along with Local Harvest, and also sell to restaurants, so I grow the full range of crops. I grow a lot of lettuce, tomatoes, shallots, onions, peppers, carrots, beets, and winter squash because I have good markets for them. Before I farmed for market, I grew a garden for my own use, and always avoided chemical inputs for food safety issues. It seemed natural to extend those methods when I began to market my produce, and especially because it seemed that more people were interested in buying organically grown foods. Ten years ago I had read a Gene Logsdon book that promoted farming as a way of life and a job. Farming is both a way of life and a job. Farming is hard work and the financial rewards are low. Mostly I watch my children find the things that they love to do and encourage them with those activities.”

Bob Bower and Jennifer Ohler own and operate the Kearsarge Gore Farm with much help from their children, Sam and Abby, and a small but enthusiastic farm crew. The farm has 7 acres and 2 hoop houses in certified organic produce, 20 acres in pasture and hayfield, and 450 acres of woodlot.

Profitability, “ he concludes, “is the biggest challenge in farming — that and drainage of the fields. I ask myself several times during the season ‘why do I farm?’ because I find it very difficult to make any sort of money farming. I would not encourage young people to farm. I recommend that anyone that wants to farm get a good education in a profession or trade, like accounting, engineering, teaching, etc. so that they can afford to farm or have some skill/training to fall back on.”

Dave Trumble, who raises organic seedlings (vegetables, herbs and flowers) at Good Earth Farm and specializes in tomatoes and root crops, says: “We grow just a handful of crops for Local Harvest CSA: bedding plants, greenhouse tomatoes, onions, garlic, carrots, beets and peaches. We ran our own 100+ member CSA for over ten years before Local Harvest. Then we had two children and I became a stay at home dad. Switching from growing 40 crops to growing a smaller number of crops was the only way for me to remain a farmer.

‘Like a lot of things,’ Dave observes, ‘the best and hardest parts of something spring from the same root. Farming is both a way of life and a job. Farming is hard work and the financial rewards are low. Mostly I watch my children find the things that they love to do and encourage them with those activities.’

farming is a way of life and a job. Farming is hard work and the financial rewards are low. Mostly I watch my children find the things that they love to do and encourage them with those activities.”

Anna is a primary staffer for the CSA program.
friends are getting into farming. That way you don’t lose your community.”

Sarah says Kearsarge Gore Farm probably sells 25 or 30% of their farm product at the CSA. Roger Noonan farms on over 40 acres at Middle Branch Farm with his wife, Lori, and their two children, Heather and Jake, who are in their 20s and quite active on the farm. Lori has an off-farm job and helps with the farming; Roger farms full-time. Middle Branch Farm is currently the largest certified organic farm in NH.

“I farm organically,” Roger states, “because it makes economic sense and I believe in the process. When the focus is on building the soil with compost to feed the plants, instead of relying on bought-in petroleum based, chemical inputs, organic farming makes the most sense. I discovered this back in high school when I found my grandfather’s copy of the 1949 book, The Organic Method on the Farm by J.I. Rodale. The book talked a lot about composting and that was very interesting to me. At Marlboro College in VT, a school full of farmer/back-to-the-land types, I was introduced to Plowman’s Folly, by Edward Faulkner. That book focused on the depletion of soils from traditional farming methods that destroyed soil structure and made up for it with chemical inputs; Faulkner explained how natural farming not only builds soil but creates healthy plants that resist pests. It completed the picture for me. Organic farming is more about soil building for me than the pesticide issue. After college I went on to do several other things and then started to farm about 10 years ago.

“I grow a full range of vegetables because I run a full season CSA on my farm,” he continues, “as well as grow for Local Harvest. I raise potatoes, winter squash, peppers and tomatoes both for Local Harvest and for some wholesale accounts – if I can focus on several crops instead of all the crops, I can become more effective and reduce the cost of production. That is a plan for the future. We also grow lots of hay for sale and for our beef and pork production.

“I encourage my kids to farm,” he adds. “People are becoming more aware of their food and that’s important. People need to be connected to the place they live and eating the food from the farm next door or down the road is a great way to do that. I am eager to see the farmer have a valued place in society once again.”

Doug and Carol Troy started Stoneridge Farm nine years ago as a way to live a more rural lifestyle and allow their children to experience another side of life.

“There are a lot of reasons to farm organically,” they explain. “The concept of being sustainable and caring for the land is important to us. As a family farm, everyone in our house spends an enormous number of hours in the field and with our products, along with eating the fruits of our labors every day. Therefore it is essential that our fields are safe and we are comfortable with the way we grow. Organic was the clear decision. Growing organically seems to make sense from a business perspective. In a world where most of our conventionally grown food comes from government subsidized farms and imports, a small farmer needs to do something different in order to succeed, and we felt that the path of growing the most flavorful products would enhance our chance of success. It is also nice to know we have a positive carbon footprint. Not everyone can say that in today’s world.”

At Stoneridge they grow a wide variety of crops, but specialize in fruits and flowers.

“We picked fruits,” Doug and Carol continue, “because we have a family of fruit lovers, and we grow a considerable selection of flowers because they are fun and different. Farming is a challenging occupation, just like any small business, but when you add in the weather, bugs, and economic challenges, it seems to be a bit more risky than most businesses. One of the things you learn early on at a farm is that you are never caught up on your work. If you are finished planting, you need to weed, if you are finished weeding, you need to water, then you need to tend to pests and so on, it just goes forever. You could add ten people and still be behind so you must always be prioritizing your work.”

“One of the rewards of farming” they agree, “is that we get to work outside in the fresh air in a place we like to be. There is always a new challenge on the farm, and when we are able to meet that challenge it is rewarding. And like most family businesses, we get to spend time with our family.”

Larry Pletcher of the Vegetable Ranch will be farming on 8 to 10 acres next year. He was the president of NOFA-NH and feels strongly about organic production: “I started to farm organically because I am concerned about the health effects...
of pesticides and persistent chemical fertilizers. I believe that organic produce is better tasting and healthier for the consumer. I grow a wide range of produce – over 40 different vegetables – because it would be dull to grow only a few items. Also, diversity means that I will have food to offer despite current challenges such as blight or bad weather. No matter how bad the weather is – some selection of vegetables will love it.

"Do I make a livable profit," he asks? "Not an easy question. For the last eight years I have always made a profit. But for the first few years I would not have been able to live only off the farm profits. I was fortunate enough to be able to invest early profits into farm infrastructure. I think we have now arrived at a point where the farm is financially sustainable. Farming is all about scale – not so large as to be industrial or tempted by shortcuts – but large enough so that proceeds from crop sales will be enough to support a family. I would encourage anyone’s children or grandchildren to continue farming – but only if they loved it.

"I have been a grower for Local Harvest CSA," he adds, "since its inception. It has helped my farm be more profitable by providing a definite market for a broad range of produce. More importantly, the CSA provides income early in the season when crop sales are scarce. In my view, a mix of different markets is as important as a wide selection of crops. CSAs and farmer’s markets play different roles in marketing produce, but are both critical to a profitable farm."

Larry estimates that 20% of his sales come from the CSA. His main market is Concord Hospital, where the Vegetable Ranch supplies the food service and sells an organic share of produce each Tuesday for $18 that anyone can pick up.

"A lot of the employees have a card that they swipe through the cafeteria line," he explains, "so they can buy our share that way. That has been pretty good for us. We’re doing about 45 shares that way. We also sell to A Market in Manchester, the Concord Coop, some restaurants, and a kid who is starting to get a food hub started out in Bradford, near us. They have been buying stuff every week."

Local Harvest shares are sold in three seasonal groups and come in up to three sizes, depending on the household’s interest in vegetables.

The Summer share runs for 18 weeks and comes in 3 sizes. A basic share gets you 5 to 6 items per week and costs $385. A standard share provides 7 to 9 items each week and costs $570. A full share, for the veggie consuming family offers 11 to 13 items for $810.

A Spring share of only three weeks is for those who love greens and can’t wait to be eating veggies after a winter off. Two sizes include a standard share at $89 or a full share at $135.

The Fall share lasts 5 weeks and the standard one is priced at $155 while the full is $232. In addition to any share, you can preorder one or two loaves of organic bread for $5 each.

The CSA runs on Wednesdays with the farmers coming between 12:30 and 2:00 to drop off and the members picking up their shares from 2:30 until 6:30. Three rows of tables are set up, with the first row containing the items for a basic share, the second row the items for the standard share, and the third the full share items.

The first step in the weekly process is determining how many shares will be picked up. Members are
asked to let Anna know before Friday if they will be picking up their share the next week. If they are timely, they can get a double share for a later week to make up for the ‘vacation’ week missed.

Then on the weekend Anna sends Dave Trumble the number of shares that will be picked up for each site, each day, and each share size. The farmers also send Dave a list of all the crops that they are going to have available on Wednesday and Thursday.

“They’ll say I’m going to have 50 eggplants or so many pounds of this,” explains Anna. “Then Dave sits there and looks at what everyone is offering and how many we need and does matching magic. He sends the list out to everyone and they bring what he ordered.

“Of course Dave doesn’t necessarily take everything that’s offered,” the continuing. “If 50 of something is available he might take 40 so we can give people more choices. This CSA is set up like a market style CSA. That means people go through and make some choices. They might have a number of baskets where they need to take either one thing or another.

“Then, every Tuesday morning,” Anna continues, “we send out a newsletter about what we’re bringing, after we touch base with everyone. So people who come on Wednesday have at least one day notice, and 2 days for Thursday people we deliver to. That way they have some time to consider what they want to buy if they are going to the store. For choices we note we how many of something we will bring, so folks know to show up early to be sure they get one of the 20 cherry tomato bags that week. There is definitely a difference in coming here at 2:30 versus 5:30.”

The Wednesday pickup is a real social occasion with people greeting each other and discussing weather, politics, and the state of the produce. As for that, I was amazed how good the produce looked. Large, uniform, clean and appealing vegetables were everywhere if I was in a photo shoot rather than a CSA. Options were clearly labeled when there was a choice, with plenty of each one available—at least when the first customers showed up just before 2:30.

When customers first come in they sign off on a list. That way the CSA can keep track of members who don’t come for several weeks so they can find out if there is a problem. Any produce left at the close of day is donated to a food bank.

“We have a lot of people who come right away,” says Anna. “They like to have the first choice of what to pick. They say: ‘No, I don’t want any of this and I like the peppers in this bag.’ Some people really, really like those choices, and other people are like: ‘Give me a bag of vegetables.’ Some people don’t like choosing which bag of peppers to take. They say: ‘Well, which bag of peppers is better.’ And we say: ‘They’re all good. We didn’t bring the bad peppers!’”

The swap table today is quite popular. I see a number of items on it after a few customers have been there—different items than the random vegetables initially thrown in to get things started. People regularly trade out items in their shares with stuff on the table.

“We have members whose reasons for joining,” says Anna, “are all over the map. Some do it because they want to eat better, some want to support local, others like the CSA idea, we have a lot of families—that is the number one group, also people in one person households, then some in their early twenties and all ages in between. But the most average is a family unit.

Of course not everyone who joins stays as a member,” she continues. “There is a lot of competition for CSAs in the area, also lots of farmers markets. There are also a lot of people who don’t cook and don’t eat at home. And some people don’t like that they can’t take home exactly what they want. They don’t eat all the vegetables in the share. Then some move and some like it so much they start growing in their yard!”

I talked with some of the buyers.

Catherine Wittliff has been sharing her share with a friend for four years. “I’m happy with it,” she says. “I like supporting local and I like organic. It is a big treat to come here. There is great quality and you are forced into trying new things—stuff I’ve never had like the kohlrabi, the bok choi, garlic scapes. They send an email to me so we kind of know what is coming up. But I usually try to do my grocery shopping after coming here. It is just my husband and myself at home. My kids are out of the nest. We eat mostly at home, we don’t go out even once a month. My husband travels and has to eat out then. So coming every week is a lot for us. That is why I share it. I love this kind of thing. This is the only CSA I know of in the greater Concord area.”

A woman who refused to give her name and declined having her picture taken said: “I’ve been a member for 7 years. It is really important to support local farmers. I probably spend more on fresh local produce because I purchase this. I think you end up paying a little bit more. But you end up with really nicely looking leeks compared with what you get in the grocery store. When I started out there were four of us at home, and now there are only two. But we eat a lot of vegetables. I don’t use kale, but I put that on the swap table. This time of year we eat salad or grilled vegetables like eggplant. My daughter is coming home and wants kale, which is not my favorite (groans). But we have to support the farmers. Why? Because I don’t want to be buying all my produce from somewhere where that I’m not sure how they are taking care of my vegetables. I don’t want goats in the same field from which I’m getting tomatoes. These people are very nice, very caring. If you have any problems they always try to deal with them. It is a nice place to do business!”

Troy has been a member for 2 years. “I get healthy vegetables that last longer than the day you bring them home,” he announces gleefully. “I believe in vegetables that last longer than the day you bring them home, “ he announces gleefully. “I believe in supporting the little guy and you get a healthier food this way than you are going to get in the grocery store. I’m buying for my wife and myself. And some of the stuff we can’t eat we will share out with other people.”

Bill and Kathleen are a married couple who have been members for six years. “We like that it is organic and local both,” they say. “It is a good deal and we are supporting the community. We just cook for the two of us. We weren’t organic eaters but we heard about it and decided it was a good idea.”

Debbie has been a member for four years. “I thought if I joined I’d be forced to eat more vegetables,” she recalls. “I’m a fan of local, but organic I could give or take—at least when I joined. I’m now getting a little more concerned about the idea, so yes. I like the system generally, but I wouldn’t mind more flowers. I get them wherever there is an opportunity. They do dried flowers in the fall. For the most part I buy for two of us, but I get the full share. It is sometimes a challenge to eat it all (laughs). I don’t eat out. I never have. I’m over in East Concord so it is a pain to come over here. I know they have a delivery there, but I like to pick what I’m getting. We were typically eating potatoes, onions, peppers, tomatoes, celery and cucumbers before we joined. Now I know what to do with leeks, I roast beets, I buy eggplants.”

Richard didn’t want to talk but said he had been a member several years. “I lose track how many,” he sighs. “I’m very happy with it. I have trouble using it all, it is just me. I cook at home mostly and I like to support the local economy. It is really nice stuff—high quality.”

On Thursdays the farmers deliver again in the morning and the staff pack about 100 bags for members at the delivery sites. “We take them to all the different sites where members pick up,” explains Anna. “We have three here in Concord, one in Bedford and one in Hooksett. Kearsarge Gore farm has a van that can take the 30 or 35 bins that we need to pack all the shares into. We share the delivery. We also have a share distribution at a state office building that is only for state employees—we don’t publicize that. We can get people that work there but live 45 minutes or more away. These are people who are...
Essential Products for Healthy Farming!
Nutritional and Performance Solutions for Soil and Crops
Plant-Sure • Regenerex
N-Dure • Phyto-Guard

Meeting the needs of all growers with innovative products for fruit and vegetables, row crops, vineyards, greenhouses and pastures.

Grazier’s Essentials™
Complete Free Choice Pre-Mixes Allow Your Livestock to Choose What’s Best

Desert Dyna-Min™
Trace Minerals For Healthier & More Productive Livestock

Aqua-Nox™
Water Additive for Animal Health

Lame Horses? You Need Limber Res-Q™

Call 877-393-4484 for the dealer nearest you!
www.agri-dynamics.com
Food hubs—businesses that actively manage the aggregation and distribution of source-identified food products—are receiving continued, growing attention from diverse stakeholders who see food hubs as vectors for economic growth and social and environmental change. As consumer desire for local and regional foods continues to grow and evolve, food hubs are increasing in number and adapting to shifting demand from intermediated local and regional food markets. The 2015 National Food Hub Survey and its predecessor, the 2013 National Food Hub Survey, represent a broad effort to aggregate national-level data on the characteristics and impact of food hubs. Together, these surveys represent the beginning of a longitudinal database from a large, broad national sample of food hubs.

The 2015 survey findings came from 143 hubs around the country and indicate that as new food hubs continue to open for business, more established food hubs continue to operate and thrive. One-third of hubs completing the survey began operations in the last two years. Three-fourths of surveyed hubs across the nation are breaking even or better. By comparison, a little over two-thirds (68%) of food hubs were breaking even or better in 2013. We think this change represents an important threshold that demonstrates the food hub model can be financially successful across a variety of legal structures and geographic or customer markets. Our findings suggest that financial success coexists with mission-related success.

Key Findings from the Report

- Food hub suppliers and customers are almost entirely regional. More than 9 out of 10 food hub farm or ranch suppliers are located within 400 miles of the hub, and 3 out of 4 food hub customers are located within 400 miles of the hub.
- Food hubs are good for small and medium agricultural operations. More than 9 out of 10 food hubs source exclusively or mostly from farms and ranches with gross sales less than $500,000. Food hubs have, on average, nearly 80 farmer and food business suppliers.
- Food hubs strive to increase community food access and improve health outcomes. More than 87% of food hubs work to increase access to healthy or fresh food as part of their daily operations and programs. More than 95% of food hubs work to improve human health in their communities or region as part of daily operations and programs.

Almost all food hubs expect that business will continue to grow, but not without challenges.

- Food hubs are addressing challenges that include compliance with the Food Safety and Modernization Act (FSMA). Forty-six percent of hubs already require producers to show proof of food safety regulation compliance. The percentage of hubs requiring Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification increased 8% since 2013, and fully two-thirds of hubs either prefer or require GAP certification.
- Food hubs turn to communities of practice and networks for information. Almost half of hubs rely on informal networks and/or formal networks and communities of practice to learn and share business ideas. Formal communities of practice are the most highly ranked information source.
- Food hubs are concerned about maintaining product supply and keeping up with business growth. Securing more supply is a concern for more than half of surveyed hubs; however, less than half of those concerned think they can address this problem within the next year.

Managing growth can perhaps be seen as a desirable problem to have. Yet without adequate capital and delivery, staff, and warehouse capacity, each of which was mentioned as a barrier by at least 40% of hubs, growth can quickly become a

---

**Food Hub Revenue**

- 2015 Survey: Food Hub Revenues for 2014 Calendar Year (n=115)
- Over $7,000,000: 8%
- $2,000,001-$7,000,000: 8%
- $1,000,001-$2,000,000: 19%
- $500,001-$1,000,000: 25%
- $200,001-$500,000: 25%
- $100,000 or less: 19%
- Under $100,000: 19%

---

**Percentage of Food Hubs Carrying Exclusively Local Product Categories**

- Egg (60) 91%
- Meat and poultry (48) 91%
- Milk and other dairy products (68) 85%
- Processed produce (71) 82%
- Grains, beans, and flour (66) 76%
- Fish and seafood (21) 62%
- Coffee/Tea (40) 55%

Note: n is shown in parentheses for each product category. Exclusively local was not defined in the survey. Based on hubs’ answers, it appears that hubs defined exclusively local as locally grown and/or local final stage processing.
LOVES farm-fresh produce, yoga, hiking and tax planning.

The word “taxes” may not bring a smile to most people’s face, but Jamie Johnson isn’t most people — she’s a tax consultant for Farm Credit East. And as a consultant, she loves helping our clients maximize their deductions, stay up-to-date with current tax law, and ensure that they never pay more than they should. That means planning well before it’s time to file, forecasting your end-of-year liabilities and developing strategies to keep your tax burden to an appropriate minimum.

Preparing taxes may not be your idea of a good time, but with a Farm Credit East tax consultant in your corner, you can be sure that you’ve put in place the most beneficial tax arrangement for your business — because WE ARE YOU.

Our associates love what they do. How about you?
Send us your selfie at FarmCreditEast.com/MakeMe LUA

FARM CREDIT EAST
800.562.2235 • FarmCreditEast.com/TaxPlanning
New and Used Washing, Grading, Planting & Harvesting Equipment
For Any Size Operation

**Hydra-weeder**
Replaces up to 10 people per row!

Demulcher: throws the straw off the crop between the rows

Single & Multiple Row Units
Hydraulic operated
Expandable Toolbar construction
Row Spacings from 12in and up

**INVERNESS FARM**
Growing Traditional Grains with Nature in a Sustainable Way
We deliver
Robert L. Crowe 113 Vandewater Rd. 518-673-2455 Canajoharie, NY 13317

**THE TREE FARM**
For Fruit Trees, Nuts, Berries, & Unusual Fruits
www.matt.hilfman.org
802-454-2674
Proudly in Platefield, VT

**AN INNOVATIVE CENTER FOR HEALTH & HEALING**
SUCCESSFUL TREATMENT FOR LYME DISEASE

**OUR APPROACH**
Our holistic, non-toxic approach removes obstacles through natural cures and fortifies the immune system so it can effectively battle the infectious syndrome causing Chronic Lyme Disease.

**IF YOU HAVE UNEXPLAINED...**
- Aches & Pains
- Head Aches
- Forgetfulness

**YOU SHOULD GET TESTED FOR LYME DISEASE**

**Monother Educational Classes** - Contact us for Schedule & Topics
Book your FREE 15 Minute Phone Consultation Today!

978.449.9919

**GROTON WELNESS**
ADULT & PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY • OSTEOPATHICS • MEDICAL • SPA • CAFÉ

802-454-2674
SAs and Aggregators: Threshing Things Out

by Steve McFadden
Posted by Rodale Institute

Community is not a warm and cuddly marketing concept attached to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). It is, rather, a defining element in the past few years, some middlemen food businesses have appropriated the term “CSA” to describe what they are doing, without involving community. This practice is leading to confusion and concern.

Initiated in America in 1986, CSAs are constellations of local farms, food and people who are united in an agro-solar relationship for the health of people and planet, and their growing popularity has caught the attention of entrepreneurs. Many food delivery businesses have been started that claim to be alternative food delivery businesses. What they all re-introduce the middleman into the local economy, standing between the farm and the people.

In the context of this trend, the term CSA is in danger of following the word “natural” down a mushy pathway to the real meaninglessness.

Food hubs and grocery delivery services focused on local food are providing an innovative and important service to a growing demand. With sophisticated web portals and tantalizing discounts, they will likely find increased market share in the years ahead.

Historically, processors and distributors held the power and dictated the terms to farmers. Aggregation businesses create markets for small-scale farmers, but primarily benefit middlemen, while once again re-legitimating the risk of production to farmers and asking little or no commitment from consumers. However, sharing the risk of farming and building community are keys to CSA.

Points of Distinction

In a world with widely corrupted natural resources and increasingly extreme weather patterns, local farms and food appear destined to continue coming to the forefront. Across America, communities large and small are embracing local agriculture and establishing pathways and programs to boost regional food production.

What interested people in CSA at the start nearly 30 years ago was a fundamental recognition that our relationship to our land and the way we use the land will determine the future of the earth. Thus, ultimately the problems of agriculture and the environment belong not just to farmers, but to all people. In the end, no one can escape responsibility for the well-being of the earth.

CSA was intended to provide a direct pathway for every person and every household to participate actively through a web of relationships with each other, farmers and farms.

Many CSAs continue to build upon the essentials of the original vision and to innovate from that base of relationship, but much of this is lost at businesses that advertise themselves as CSAs. Low price and convenience are powerful motivators.

When I spoke with Marcia Ostrom, associate professor at Washington State University and a member of their Small Farms Team, she said, “A typical CSA provides produce from a single grower. This does not allow for the variety and selection many people desire, especially when produce options become limited during winter months.”

She observed that small, individual farms cannot produce the necessary volume required for some new markets, while commodity farms are not designed to produce the necessary quality. Farms of the middle, on the other hand, have both the capacity and flexibility to collaborate with each other and with other supply chain partners to respond to these expanding markets. As a result, food aggregators and food hubs have emerged. Sixty years ago, there was infrastructure to support family-scale farming; with the dominance of industrial food chains, that withered. Food hubs are part of rebuilding that infrastructure. The USDA is actively promoting the concept and says there are now more than 220 food hubs spread out across more than 40 states.

Food hubs coordinate all parts of a community-based food system, with an emphasis on efficiency. They aggregate food from local farms and market to schools, restaurants, retailers, and hospitals. They also coordinate supply-chain logistics and network with distributors, processors and buyers.

As USDA secretary Tom Vilsack said in a May 2013 speech, “Skyrocketing consumer demand for local and regional food is an economic opportunity for America’s farmers and ranchers. Food hubs facilitate access to these markets by offering critical aggregation, marketing, distribution and other services to farmers and ranchers.”

Many observers regard food hubs as the center of the new rural economy.

One such hub, a Kansas City food business called The Hen House Markets, is promoting a CSA model.

“CSA is much more than just a weekly delivery of food,” he says. “As CSA becomes a household name, “ he notes, “we’re seeing more and more versions of ‘CSA style’ businesses. CSA is about more than just selling a box of vegetables. It’s also would find the direct connection between consumers and farms, and making sure that connection is nurtured. Aggregation takes all of that out. The potential for connection is lost. Is that really a CSA?”

Defining Terms

The USDA long ago published a general definition of CSA, but it is rarely noted. However, as of January 1, 2014, California’s Department of Food and Agriculture has established an official legal definition of CSA (see below). The definition, which has a profoundly bureaucratic ring to it, bans use of the CSA term by anyone buying from wholesalers or not requiring advance payment.

The Community Alliance with Family Farms (CAFF) has formed a California CSA Network to link the over 250 CSAs in that state. CAFF organizer Rachel Petit said the use of the term CSA by aggregators definitely has been a problem in her state. She said the new legislation makes a clear distinction, but that it’s too soon to know what kind of difference it will make.

The food industry has just scratched the surface of locally grown” as a marketing concept, but seems intent on digging deeper. As the business aspect of local food grows in size and strength, will the community dimension of CSA continue to wither? That question will be answered not just by farmers, but also by the individual human beings who constitute the community.

Official Definitions

The USDA defines CSA as “a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmer becomes, either legally or practically, the community’s farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production.”

California’s legal definition of CSA restricts use of the term. If there is a middleman, you cannot call it a CSA under Article 6. Community-Supported Agriculture 47060. For purposes of this article, the following definitions apply:

- “Community-supported agriculture program” or “CSA program” means a program under which a registered California direct marketing producer, or a group of registered California direct marketing producers, grow food for a group of Californians. Consumer shareholders or subscribers who purchase contract to buy a portion of the future crop, animal production, or both, of a registered California direct marketing producer, or a group of registered California direct marketing producers.”

Journalist Steven McFadden is the co-author with Trauger Groh of Farms of Tomorrow (1990) and also Farms of Tomorrow Revisited (1998). He is the sole author of a dozen other works, including Profiles of Wisdom. He is the author of The 8th Fire. His website is chiron-communicati

Winter, 2017-18  The Natural Farmer  B-19
Field Goods – a Hudson Valley Subscription Service
by Jack Kittredge

Field Goods is a subscription-based service that delivers produce year round from small farms to employees and consumers at workplaces and community sites in the Eastern New York area. It is located in Athens, NY, a small Hudson River town in Greene County. Besides providing consumers with convenient access to local produce on a regular basis, the service tries to motivate them toward a healthier lifestyle. Field Goods has been recognized for hiring workers with disabilities, supporting agriculture and creating jobs in an economically disadvantaged area.

The organization was founded by Donna Williams in 2011 and has grown rapidly since then. Williams had been employed in the food industry but had to lay off with the business downturn in 2008. Using her familiarity with food-based businesses, she looked around for opportunities in that field. While taking a job with the Greene County Industrial Development Agency to assess an incubator program for new farming ventures, she saw an entrepreneurial opportunity. There was demand for fresh local food and a lot of people that want to start farming, but there wasn’t a scalable distribution system for small farms.

So Williams, 52, founded Field Goods as a farm-to-office subscription food delivery service. She raided her own savings for start-up cash and got a $25,000 micro-enterprise grant from the county. She worked with a few local farmers at first, delivering the produce herself to her 60 customers in an old station wagon.

Since then Field Goods has come on a long way. The company now delivers to about 3,500 subscribers at 510 workplaces and community centers in eastern New York State and the metro NY area including western Connecticut and northern New Jersey. She employs 33 full and part-time workers at her 18,000 square-foot cold storage warehouse and reports that sales have been doubling every year.

Regional food hubs, either for-profit or nonprofit entities that aggregate and distribute food from local farms, are springing up all over the country, according to Modern Farmer. But these are CSAs, which tend to serve relatively small numbers of people who generally have to pay upfront at the beginning of the growing season.

While CSAs work really well in either urban areas, where people pick up their order within walking distance of home, or in rural areas, where they typically drive right up to the farm, Donna says: “The reality for the rest of us folks is that we’re not going to a farm.” So she decided to ‘suburbanize’ the CSA concept and make it a whole lot easier for people to eat their vegetables. The program delivers to about a hundred public and private sites around New York City, for example. A private site (such as the New Rochelle City Hall on Wednesday afternoons) is for employees or members at an institution or firm, and a public one (such as the Scarsdale public library on Wednesday afternoons and evenings) is for anyone who joins.

Subscribers pay by the week – $15 for the smallest bag up to $30 for the largest – and if they want to put their deliveries on hold, they can do so. They can also add on locally produced specialty items to their weekly delivery, such as fresh-baked bread, cooking oils, butter and cheese. Typically, there are about seven or eight different items in the bags each week.

Field Goods picks what goes in the bag, so it can react to what’s in the field – which is a real benefit to farmers. “We don’t have to have the perfect peppers,” Williams says. “That’s incredibly valuable to farmers because the waste in the field is a lot less.”

One of Field Goods’ most popular items is the “fingerling” sweet potato. In fact, there’s no such vegetable – these are sweet potatoes that haven’t matured fully and wouldn’t make the cut in a giant supermarket. But people love them, says Donna. “They’re really ugly and funky-looking.” Field Goods also provides a market for quirkier specialty crops, like escarolias, a cross between a shallot and an onion, and kale sprouts, a brussel sprouts-kale hybrid.

The company has purchased more than $4 million in local food products and works with a network of 80 farmers in the region. Adam Hainer runs Juniper Hill, a 40-acre certified organic farm nestled in the Adirondack Mountains in Wadhams, NY. Working with Field Goods has enabled him to scale more quickly than he could have by just supplying his CSA customers with produce. His business used to taper off after the busy summer season, but now Field Goods provides a market well into the fall and winter for the farm’s root vegetables.

“We were struggling to find a large enough market to scale up our business,” he recalls. “Along came Donna and we had the opportunity to go from 10 acres in production to 40 over the next couple of years.”

To help manage the complexity of organizing such a business, Field Goods applied for a USDA Agriculture Marketing Service Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) grant. Congress created LFPP in the 2014 Farm Bill as a sister program to the AMS Farmers Market Promotion Program to, in general, be used for intermediary supply chain activities that support local marketing, including aggregation, processing, storage and distribution. Field Goods became one of AMS’ first LFPP recipients. Williams used the two-year, $50,000 LFPP grant to pioneer a new piece of software called “In The Field.”

This software helps Field Goods maintain and improve its relationships with producers by making collaboration easier. These relationships are essential to Field Goods’ success because their model relies on trust and cooperation. In The Field allows producers to more easily share information, such as crop availability and desired price, and makes it possible for Field Goods to manage orders and request specific products. By reducing the costs of managing the supply chain and increasing transparency, this new tool lets Field Goods continue to partner with a broad range of local producers even as they scale up the business.

Another important decisions Donna made early on was to approach local employers and market Field Goods as a corporate wellness benefit. She promoted diet as the best way to prevent health problems, and her program as the best way to build a healthy diet for workers: “Field Goods keeps them out of the grocery store. You lose when you go to the grocery store. You’re gonna walk out with those cookies.”

Employers such as Albany Medical Center, baby food maker BeechNut Nutrition Corp., Blue Sky Studios in Greenwich, CT, and FujiFilm, with locations in Stamford, CT, and Valhalla, NY, have joined. Three of those signed on for ‘BEETCamp,’ a 10-week wellness program where the company subsidizes their employees’ weekly Field Goods subscription. Workers also get a newsletter with recipes and nutritional information.

“We have tried dozens of wellness programs and none has come close to the popularity and impact of Field Goods,” said Carolyn Gordon, director of benefits at Fujifilm Holdings America Corp.

A research team at the Sage Colleges studied whether a Field Goods subscription to a weekly delivery of local produce has a positive impact on maintaining a healthy diet. Among the significant findings of the program, according to Dr. Rayane AbuSabha, professor of Nutrition Science at the colleges in Troy, NY, were:

- Eating Healthier – after about 3 months, 40% of subscribers reported that they are eating healthier and eating more vegetables than before they joined.

- Eating a Greater Variety – subscribers increased the variety of the types of vegetables they ate, adding on average two new vegetable categories to their diet.

Happier with Diet – after just 3 months, the percentage of subscribers reporting they were extremely satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of their diet increased by 50%. The percentage dropped from 84% saying their family’s diet needed improvement initially to just 20% after 3 months.

Spent Less on Food – weekly subscribers report spending about $20 per month less on groceries.

“We’re getting more and more people hearing about us and calling us,” Donna remarks. “A lot of small companies and regular people say they hear about us and ask ‘can you come to our company’... And we say, ‘sure.’ She is presently evaluating the Boston market as a base for expanding out the program to neighboring states.
The Intervale Food Hub

by Jack Kittredge

The Winooski River rises in Barre, VT and drops 400 feet until it flows into Lake Champlain just north of Burlington. The loops and bends of the river in the flat land surrounding Burlington actually form the city’s eastern boundary. One of those loops encloses the 700 acre site of city bottomland called the Intervale.

Native Americans long hunted and foraged in the Intervale, settling there seasonally because of the rich alluvial soils. Over 400 years ago Samuel de Champlain recorded extensive cornfields there. One hundred and fifty years later Ethan Allen built a homestead there and formed the Onion River Land Company with his family to sell Intervale Land. Almost a hundred years later the Central Vermont Railroad laid track there and Burlington formed a major junction in the system running from Montreal to New York City.

During these years the Intervale supported a number of farms as well as the town dump. But by 1980 the farms and even the dump were abandoned, and the Intervale was a dangerous place, used primarily as a dumping ground for tires, old vehicles, and garbage.

The value of such rich soil at the center of the city ultimately attracted far-sighted planners, and the area was zoned to exclude industrial and residential development. A non-profit Intervale Center now manages much of the land, having restored 350 of the original 700 acres by leasing them for private farms, or running programs such as a conservation nursery, a food hub, and a farm incubator on them.

The Food Hub was established in 2007 with the mission of advancing the local food system by creating different business models to get more local farm food to the public. The hub is a for-profit business under the umbrella of a non-profit, the Intervale Center, that buys product from local farmers, combines it, and sells it wholesale to local stores and restaurants. But they also combine it into baskets designed for weekly programs such as a conservation nursery, a food hub, and a farm incubator on them.

Bobby Young, operations manager at the hub, relates how it all began: “When we first started, the Intervale got a grant and the goal was to find out and develop what farmers needed. So we got them together and hands down the farmers said ‘we need more markets, more sales’ It wasn’t equipment or storage. It was more markets. So we designed this system for a retail market for smaller scale producers. They were mostly organic, too, and still are. I think only three of our 30 or so producers are not organic. One is an orchard, one produces mushrooms, and the other produces using an IPM regimen.”

The idea at first was to eventually turn the hub into a producer cooperative owned by the farmers, says Bobby. But it turned out that while the farmers liked another market and the opportunity to sell straight wholesale, they didn’t want any ownership. They said: ‘You do it. We trust you.’

What they developed to expand farm sales was a way to aggregate the product of various farms and make it available to buyers in a way which a traditional CSA can’t.

“When we first started bringing farmers in,” recalls Bobby, “we had a schedule of what we wanted when and we had a bidding system where the farmers would sit around and bid on who would supply what to us. Now we have enough history and solid networks that we know who can produce what for us. There are a lot of growing pains from working with small farms and innovating all the time. But we have a very experienced team. We get a lot done in a small place with a small number of people.”

About 75% of the vendors Bobby buys from are farmers, the rest being area food businesses which make processed products like bread or bean products. So far he has prioritized smaller farmers as suppliers. Each year in February and March Bobby will spend about 40 hours of crop planning time with the farmers. Based around certain recipes and meals the hub would like to feature, Bobby will work with the farmers and tell them what he needs, and when — say a certain amount of broccoli the last week in September. Some of the farmers would grow for that goal. As the season develops things may change, so he stays in touch and is ready to adapt if he has to. The plan versus the actual is often quite different. But for the most part what he is looking for in his projections of product and volume work out. If he finds someone with a product he likes and they can only produce part of what he needs then he needs to find the rest elsewhere.

*There are so many factors which come into play for purchasing,* he sighs. “There is availability of product — if something is behind schedule because of the weather and not ripening up, I have to scramble to hold slots open and move them around. But we sometimes have marketing and outreach connected to our plans, so I then can’t make substitutions and have to get the product from someone else if our farmer doesn’t have it. For most of our items I have backup growers I can go to, which wasn’t true five years ago. We are seeing a lot more supply, a lot more season extension.

*In terms of our core network,* he continues, “our most distant supplier is in Shoreham, which is an
Teddy Gamache wraps home delivery baskets for storage in the cooler until the truck returns to pick them up hour and a half away. Or maybe it is Butterwork's yogurt up in Westfield. Late in the season we pull a good amount from Deep Root Coop. We also get a lot of stuff out of Quebec. If we really are scrambling we'll pull from New Hampshire, Massachusetts, the Pioneer Valley. We've gotten mushrooms from Maine."

The hub also surveys their farmers regularly. One of their strong findings is that the farmers really enjoy meeting with others once a year in the spring to finalize the cropping plan.

In addition to these packages, you can also sign up for monthly deliveries of chicken, ground beef, sausage, bean burgers, tortillas and beans, wild salmon and white fish.

According to Kendall Frost, marketing manager of the hub, Vermont Bean Crafters is an example of a processor that does a really good job and which the hub has helped succeed. They make bean burgers, falafel and many other bean products. Maple Wind Farm is the primary source for their beef, pork and chicken. Most of their meat is not organic but is pasture-raised non-GMO.

Similar to a standard CSA, everybody gets the same thing. On the week I visited in September the share included potatoes, carrots, beets, leeks, peppers, broccoli, and mesclun for the produce part. For protein for the Omnivore share it included sausage made by Maple Wind Farm and a vegetable broth made at Joe's Screamin' Ridge kitchen.

Bobby is proud of the help the hub has given to start-up farmers. Being year round, the hub has encouraged the growth of storage crops for the winter and the season extension. The guy who grows their sweet potatoes, for instance, was starting fresh and the hub was one of his first accounts.

Hub staff have developed a coordinated system for aggregating and delivering each week. Each delivery consists of the entire Vermont Vegetable Package plus local meat (beef, chicken, pork or wild fish), dairy (cheese, yogurt or butter) and specialty products (maple syrup, honey, frozen berries, sauerkraut, pesto and other sauces, broth).

The Natural Farmer Winter, 2017-18

The hub was one of his first accounts. Sweet potatoes, for instance, was starting fresh and the season extension. The guy who grows their sweet potatoes, for instance, was starting fresh and the hub was one of his first accounts.

Hub staff have developed a coordinated system for aggregating and delivering each week. Each delivery consists of the entire Vermont Vegetable Package plus local meat (beef, chicken, pork or wild fish), dairy (cheese, yogurt or butter) and specialty products (maple syrup, honey, frozen berries, sauerkraut, pesto and other sauces, broth).

The Natural Farmer Winter, 2017-18

The hub was one of his first accounts. Sweet potatoes, for instance, was starting fresh and the season extension. The guy who grows their sweet potatoes, for instance, was starting fresh and the hub was one of his first accounts.

Hub staff have developed a coordinated system for aggregating and delivering each week. Each delivery consists of the entire Vermont Vegetable Package plus local meat (beef, chicken, pork or wild fish), dairy (cheese, yogurt or butter) and specialty products (maple syrup, honey, frozen berries, sauerkraut, pesto and other sauces, broth).

The Natural Farmer Winter, 2017-18

The hub was one of his first accounts. Sweet potatoes, for instance, was starting fresh and the season extension. The guy who grows their sweet potatoes, for instance, was starting fresh and the hub was one of his first accounts.

Hub staff have developed a coordinated system for aggregating and delivering each week. Each delivery consists of the entire Vermont Vegetable Package plus local meat (beef, chicken, pork or wild fish), dairy (cheese, yogurt or butter) and specialty products (maple syrup, honey, frozen berries, sauerkraut, pesto and other sauces, broth).
The economics of Intervale’s Food Hub are interesting. They purchase about $325,000 to $330,000 worth of product per year, with the majority of that being produce. The smallest farmer they deal with might sell them one to two thousand dollars annually, while the biggest account might sell $40,000. Prices paid to farmers are pretty comparable to what other buyers pay. Some items are high value, others not. Some change their price as the season proceeds. When the hub sets a share price they have to fix an average since the contents of the basket vary somewhat over the seasons. They try to keep it at what a consumer would pay in a coop or store for the same items. But in order to give a fair price to the farmers the hub negotiates a price with most of them which is somewhat above what they would get in traditional wholesale.

Determining the quantity of food in a basket is also complicated. Surveys show that the majority of hub members are two-person households. When Bobby analyzes the servings per basket the benchmark is to have a dollar per serving of a vegetable. The Vermont Vegetable Package has 2 sizes, one averages $25 per 30 servings, the other $29 per 30 servings. A $25 to 30 servings of vegetables is the USDA recommendation for one active adult. So from there, if you are cooking a lot for yourself, one person could eat this much food. Of course staff know people don’t cook every meal at home, they like to eat out, sometimes they don’t have a serving of vegetables with every meal. So splitting it between 2 people is really manageable.

The hub is mostly looking at 25 to 35 or 40 year olds as members, young professionals, mostly couples, sometimes young families. They also reach a pretty wide range of socio-economic levels and membership is pretty reflective of Burlington people of different backgrounds and incomes still value healthy local food.

“We take SNAP benefits,” says Kendall, “but very few people take advantage of that payment option, even though we offer a discount for paying that way. Of course the Intervale Center has a gleaning program that offers a no-cost CSA-style subscription program for 16 weeks in the summer. So people who qualify for SNAP have a great opportunity for access to fresh vegetables. Our interns and volunteers manage that.”

Because the hub is not a farm, they are not exempt from the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). As a facility they need a hazard analysis plan. The Vermont Hub tracks protocols to protect vegetables from different backgrounds and incomes still value healthy local food.

“We take SNAP benefits,” says Kendall, “but very few people take advantage of that payment option, even though we offer a discount for paying that way. Of course the Intervale Center has a gleaning program that offers a no-cost CSA-style subscription program for 16 weeks in the summer. So people who qualify for SNAP have a great opportunity for access to fresh vegetables. Our interns and volunteers manage that.”

Most of our farms are below the FSMA threshold,” says Bobby, “none that I know of are doing half a million dollars or more or are doing full wholesale. But we are considered like a restaurant or grocery store, so we have to comply. We have a very informal agreement with our farms – a checklist which we ask them to sign and send back to us every year. So splitting it between 2 people is really manageable.

“We have to think carefully about what is local. The hub is mostly looking at 25 to 35 or 40 year olds as members, young professionals, mostly couples, sometimes young families. They also reach a pretty wide range of socio-economic levels and membership is pretty reflective of Burlington people of different backgrounds and incomes still value healthy local food.

“We generally look for certified organic,” she continues, “but it is not a hard and fast rule. Especially with meat and dairy some production methods are pasture raised and non-GMO, but not organic. Organic grain is very expensive and price is also a consideration. So some of our cheeses are not certified organic. Apples and fruit are also hard to get organic, but most of the rest of our produce is. It is really item by item.”

Hub staff do an evaluation every season of their customers to ask them about the experience and what they would like changed. They’ve never asked the customers whether they would rather have the hub buy local or buy organic. That would be interesting to see, agrees Kendall. But she feels most of the members trust the hub to make the best decisions in the market because they know more about the issues and tradeoffs. At the Intervale Center, she asserts, “we really are experts on Vermont growing practices.”

Another question the hub is facing is whether to move more in the direction of prepared foods and meal kits as is now being offered by Blue Apron and many other companies.

“This is sort of a newer development for us,” states Frost. “Packages where we do some curation – putting together ingredients and preparing them with the vegetables – really speak to us and we get really great feedback from members. We don’t actually chop the vegetables, but get pretty close to that. We send out lots of recipes to help people think of ways to use the food. I’m not sure they feel there is too much to gain for them to get meal kits. It probably makes more sense for us to actually cook the food for them as a next step. We would deliver it cold but it could be warmed by a microwave and ready to eat quickly. That seems to make more sense than all the individual components of a meal packed together and then cooked at home. There is a lot of packaging when you try to do that for all the spices, oils, salad dressing, other extras. What level of preparedness makes sense for us to do for people is the question.”

One of the most interesting developments at the hub this year is the response of subscribers to direct home delivery. After several years of rapid growth, food hub sales in 2014 reached a plateau.

“Our trends in worksite and public site deliveries were either flattening out or even declining sales wise,” said Teddy, “so we piloted 14 weeks of home delivery and saw a tripling of our sales. We hadn’t really been able to bring many new farmers along until we started this home delivery option, but the response has been strong and we may grow our farmer base to serve that demand.”

The hub now actually has a house-to-house delivery route in the near north end of Burlington. What was interesting with this progression into home delivery was finding that the single person size was too much food for a single person, and that families don’t need as much variety but can use more volume.

Another astonishing fact was that they didn’t need to charge extra for the home delivery service!

“The cost of home delivery is comparable to the cost of delivering to our bigger sites,” says Teddy, “those with 15 or 20 baskets. Because we focus on the near north end of Burlington, anything north of Burlington High School, it is a concentrated island for delivery and doesn’t cost that much compared to group delivery. We figure it costs maybe $1.50 per basket for delivery to a big site, and maybe it is $1.65 for home delivery. It is to a point – about 6 minutes each – where it seems to make economic sense.”

About 50 baskets are currently direct delivered to near north end homes. They are stacked and shrink wrapped so they can be rolled into the cooler to wait until the truck returns from other deliveries for this late afternoon trip.

“We leave the share on the front steps right now,” says Kendall, “but going into the winter we will explore other options. We figure to give each customer a tote to live at their home. Then we will drop the share off in a shiny silver thermal insulated bag into the tote. The bag will give about three hours of thermal protection to the food. If we drop this off in the afternoon between 3:30 and 7:00 pm, it will work for most people.”

The home delivery program has been so successful that the hub is now offering it throughout Burlington. Delivery is scheduled to start the week of October 30.
Intervale Food Hub staffers Teddy Gamache, Bobby Young, Kendall Frost and intern Melissa Cattalargo stand in front of the Burlington, VT Hub’s refrigerated delivery truck.

This newspaper contains news and features about organic food and farming in the Northeastern US as well as a Special Supplement on Organic Aggregators.