

The Natural Farmer

Eating in Connecticut - Spring 2002

by Becky May

As I write, I am listening to George Winston's CD, *Winter into Spring*, reflecting on the season past, the one at hand, the one to come. It has been almost 6 years since my husband and I did a year's experiment in buying only locally grown foods for our home (see *The Natural Farmer of Winter, 1994-95*). This article is about the steps we've taken since that first year and some of possibilities for the near future.

By way of a little background, our reason for experimenting with exclusively Connecticut based grocery shopping was to take the pulse of our state's agricultural health. Our reason for doing that I'll excerpt from the original article: "In a nutshell, local agriculture helps preserve and promote open space, land/people balance, and smaller scale farming. This means less soil and water depleted in any one area, fewer pesticides needed to protect huge monocrops or preserve food in extended transit, and less fuel used to transport food."

We had a number of friends who approached this through self-sufficient farming but we are otherwise employed city dwellers who share the goals but not the means of local production on a subsistence scale. We also felt impatient and discouraged relative to the massive social/political/economic overhaul that both friends and experts (some of whom overlapped) were suggesting as required to effect a long-term local food system. Of course, they are more than likely correct. But we were desperate for a taste of the Promised Land, a tangible talisman, and a test of its first person worth in light of the work that will ultimately be required by many to realize the larger goal.

Our first year of experiment was mostly preoccupied with gaining access to and developing recipes for the variety of foods necessary to sustain health and morale through a complete cycle of seasons. Our major work since then has involved education about the underlying issues and increasing avenues of access so that the scope of the project could extend beyond a couple of fanatics such as ourselves. A few highlights include speaking on a local radio and television talk shows, teaching an after school course, and catering a few communal functions from family holiday meals to receptions at our synagogue. This article will focus on another project, a winter CSA, that I hope will catch the fancy of a few readers and generate a few seedlings of its own.

It began with a friend, farmer, and fellow NOFA member, Wayne Young of High Hill Orchard in Meriden, CT, sharing the difficulty of making ends meet in the agriculturally challenging economic climate of Connecticut where homes are more profitable to grow in our rocky soil than vegetables. I countered with my woes as a consumer facing another season end and the prospect of a winter's worth of withdrawal from local produce.

"Why don't you do a winter CSA?" I said brazenly throwing down a garden glove size gauntlet. (I was afraid to even broach the subject with my summer CSA Farmers as most seem desperate for their well deserved break, at least from the demands of distribution, by first frost.)

"Why don't you organize it for me?" he countered, pitchfork poised defensively by his side. (Well I can't swear to there being an actual pitchfork but it sounded too good to resist)

Never mind that I'd just had my first baby just weeks before. Never mind that he hadn't planted anything with this in mind. Well, to misquote an oldie but goody, stubbornness or perhaps foolish pride may well be as much the mother of invention as necessity.

So, it went like this.

Wayne is primarily an orchard grower so he had the right kind of fruit and facilities for cool weather harvest and storage. He knew a few wholesale farmers with some surplus fall/winter crops like potatoes and onions to supplement the stock he grew for his seasonal farm stand. He purchased the last gleanable greens from the summer CSA farmers for whom he supplies fruit. I coordinated advertising, registration and share days (10 am-1pm) in exchange for a free share. We solicited help from members in making reminder phone calls and unloading truck/clean-up on share days on a purely volunteer basis. Without requiring any requirement of labor contribution we always had plenty of offers for help.

We figured on four monthly share outs because that's the longest we could reasonably keep the produce in saleable condition in the informal environment of his walk-in cooler. Monthly pick-ups were possible because the products were not dependent on being freshly harvested for either quality or crop rotation. Monthly pick-ups also allowed for less person power on both the administrative end and the driving demands of members. Wayne's farm constituted one obvious share site but was a little remote to appeal to the majority of members, especially with the likely prospect of encountering at least some winter driving conditions. We set up a satellite site at first in a generous community center (Thanks Never Ending Bookstore/Rainbow Recyclers!) and later in my urban home/driveway closer to where many members lived. I also found it more convenient to have the use of my own facilities between customers and had more flexibility for late-pickups, family responsibilities etc. purposes.

We priced the produce against local markets and arrived at a starting fee of \$120.00 for a season ranging from mid-November to mid-February. Since that time we have increased membership by a \$5/year which seems to work for both Wayne and members. I think an updated analysis is probably in order. A goal of 50 shares was determined to be the best compromise of manageability and profitability. We reached that number easily the first year but have struggled a little in subsequent years mostly through attrition of empty nesters, matriculating graduate students, and a few who eventually gave up on anything involving turnips!

The two local summer CSA's in our area agreed to let us use their mailing lists. (Thanks Mill River Valley Gardens and Mad Mares!) We also used posters, NOFA Newsletter/Conference and word of mouth. We offer full shares, fruit only shares, half shares, and organized a swap for members who wanted to tailor their share. We also experimented with specialty shares like a Thanksgiving fixin's package that brought in some folks who just wanted to try it without the full 4 month commitment. This also served as outreach to a wider audience by advertising through some small local grocers for whom a one time thing was non-competitive with their regular sales, didn't violate their distributor contracts and enhanced their own seasonal turkey promotions. We also experimented with supplementing some all

season CT products such as eggs, cheese, beeswax candles, mushrooms, honey, jam, pickles, greenhouse products on a individually ordered basis. This we found to be a little more tricky because of the decentralized sourcing, accounting implications and diverse handling regulations. Nevertheless, it was fairly popular and I believe is worthy developing further.

Selling the shares is only half the job. Supporting our members is the other, and in some ways, more critical half. We are still learning how to inform and build confidence about the storage, rationing and preparation of the sometimes unfamiliar or less favorite species that are the realistic bulk of a New England fall harvest (turnips, for example). These efforts range from recipe sheets to various share day antics that include much back patting and high-fiving, member to member testimonials and last resort displays of vegetative machismo.

By nature I am an initiator not a maintainer. After four years and various attempts to pass the baton by bribe and begging, my successor, Kathleen Rooney stepped to the plate this season. Despite my vigorous efforts to lose my own job, I can remember few more satisfying days in my life than those that began on those chilly Sundays mornings, moving masses of produce with the help of some hearty souls to appreciative and enthusiastic eaters, knowing the cycle of growth and consumption was complete in my small, winter-quieted corner of the world. (And you know what? I'm not going to fix that sentence no matter what menacing green, squiggly line my grammar check program has inserted to threaten me!)

Now I am trying to make good on my premise/promise that leaving the role of coordinator would free me up to encourage the spread of this peculiar but dear-to-me creation – the exclusively winter CSA. I would be happy to share our templates and advise anyone interested in putting a group together. I especially encourage non-growers to consider giving it a go so it's not all on the shoulders of our front line farmers. Or perhaps I'll pursue that most elusive of prospects – the spring CSA! Any takers? I can be reached at (203)-624-2798.