CSA in America

PHOTO COURTESY OF WABI SABI FARM

Ben Saunders of Wabi Sabi Farm in Iowa, serving a 150-member CSA.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXBURY FARM

Working with seedlings at Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook, New York.

New Models Emerge as Market Expands

by KATHERINE BELL

A traditional Community Supported Agriculture farm is a farm that sells its produce ahead of the season to consumers who buy shares in the coming harvest. These consumers become subscribing members in the local farm and share the risk of crop production – good or bad – with the farmer. The cost of farm operation, the total number of months in the harvesting season, variety of crops offered and productivity of the soil all influence share price.

The farmer receives working capital in the preseason, and in return members receive a weekly box or bag of fresh produce throughout the harvest. A direct relationship is forged between farmer and consumer.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has hit the mainstream in America. Virtually every urban hub has at least one farm offering a CSA arrangement, and some cities have several area CSA farms. On Saturdays, mothers can be found taking their kids to the CSA pickup station to get the family box of produce. However, CSA economic structures are ever-changing. The original ideals and underpinnings are much in the background, and CSA cannot be said to be the sole salvation of small family farms. It is instructive to delve into the history of CSA as well as to consider the various models now emerging in gaining a full answer to the question: "Is CSA working in America?"

> CSA success starts with close attention to consumer wants and preferences.

HISTORY OF CSA

In the mid-1980s in America, CSA came to the fore against a backdrop of a major decline in small farms. Big corporate agriculture as well as real estate developers continued to buy many small farms. Two farmers, Trauger Groh and Jan Vander Tuin, brought their experience with biodynamic farming in Europe to New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner had given voice to the idea of a spiritual side to farming, and biodynamic farmers incorporated the spiritual practices of working in harmony with nature. In biodynamics, care for the soil, plants and livestock takes into account impact on the overall ecosystem, and pollution is greatly minimized. Although Steiner died in 1925, his ideas made headway in Europe in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

Out of Vander Tuin's meeting with Robyn Van En and others, the CSA Garden at Great Barrington, Massachusetts, was established. And out of Groh's survey of German biodynamic farming plus the practice of weekly delivery of produce boxes at Camphill Village in New York, the Temple-Wilton Community Farm was birthed. This was 1986, and these first American CSAs embraced new forms of property ownership including land trusts and land leases, new cooperative relationships over strict employer-employee economic arrangements and a new economy based on meeting community needs.

Van En used Vander Tuin's phrase, "Community Supported Agriculture," and it stuck. Van En went on to lead a fast-growing national movement as a speaker, organizer, teacher and advocate. She directly pioneered around 200 CSA operations. She founded CSA of North America in 1992, and

through her conferences and workshops, raised awareness of human connection to the land. She also tapped a hunger for community and promoted keeping food dollars within the local economy. A sudden asthma attack in 1997 ended her life at age 49 and ended what CSA historian Steve McFadden labeled "the first wave" of the CSA movement. The seeds of the new economic and community ideals were as much a part of the CSA movement as was the new market of contracting each season to sell directly to food buyers.

The "second wave," according to McFadden, saw the number of CSAs grow to between 1,500 and 1,700 farms as of 2004. Of note though is that many CSA farms failed. These failures happened primarily due to asking too low of a return and lack of expertise in running a CSA. Today in the "third wave," the number of CSAs has grown to about 6,500. According to Erin Barnett, director of Local Harvest (*www.localharvest.org)*, a support organization that hosts the largest existing database of CSAs, the number of CSAs continues to grow but more slowly than in years past. Traditional CSA today is one model among many of buying direct from the local farm. It is a labor-intensive model well suited for some but not for all.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXBURY FARM

Snow peas at Roxbury Farm. Roxbury has more than 1,000 CSA members.

CSA MODELS

As far as different CSA models, it is important to note that public demand for food straight from the farm is increasing. The public cares about where their food is coming from and food freedom issues. They want organic at better-than-retail grocery prices. CSA is a major part of the buy local campaigns across the country. Barnett groups the various emerging models into two camps.

"One kind has the farmer plus a core group of members," she said. "They share the risk and work of farming, they embrace community, and they hold to the original philosophical ideals of CSA. The second kind holds onto CSA merely as a way of marketing their farm produce. The farmer is strictly a businessman. In the CSA movement today, CSA as a marketing concept outnumbers CSA as a partnership between core members and farmer 10 to one."

The changes in CSA are happening in response to consumer demand.

Many consumers want more choice than a standard box of vegetables each week. Some farmers allow their subscribers to mix and match produce or simply sell their products farmers' market-style. A number of CSA farms add on other goods such as eggs, meat, cheese, honey, fruit, preserves, homemade bread and baked goods, soaps and herbal products and even crafts. Sometimes CSAs partner with producers of specialty items. Other forms of multiple farms partnering in a CSA have developed to build a more viable scale of operation. To meet the desire for convenience, CSAs often have multiple drop-off points.

Certain CSAs require members to work on the farm including planting, weeding, harvesting, packing and delivery. In addition to different labor arrangements, funding arrangements differ, too. Farmers and subscribers may develop a budget and then divide the budget by the number of shares, or simply price their produce based on market value plus weight of the purchase. Other CSA farms use a system of pledges that vary according to member income to support the farm and farmer. Subscription payments may be made in one lump sum or installments.

Judy Scriptunas, program manager at the Robyn Van En Center, a national CSA resource center under the Fulton Center for Sustainable Living at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, observes, "I am actually seeing a shift away from the shared risk model. More farms are offering buy down credit options where the member deposits a certain amount of money up front and then places an order online for specific produce. The member is not committed to weekly shares or paying for produce he or she doesn't want. The farmer still has prepayment for the produce,

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXBURY FARM

Pigs enjoy squash at Roxbury Farm.

but the consumer is not really sharing any risk."

Another model is that of third party brokers who take over the sales side for a number of local farms. These brokers or aggregators combine stock from a number of farms and sometimes truck in non-local vegetables and fruit. To counteract deceptive use of the term Community Supported Agriculture where non-local produce is sold as local, the California state government has ruled that the term CSA may not be employed unless sales actually originate with local farms.

Of the CSAs still holding to the traditional model, those with a committed core group who help with the labors of distribution, payment collection, festivals, budget details including paying the farmer, legalities, farm promotion and the finding of share buyers can be among the most successful and profitable. However, in keeping with the trend to operate strictly as a business, these core group CSAs are a minority today. McFadden is a voice in favor of a committed core group. He says, "Farmers can't run both the farm and the CSA end."

As far as land arrangements, placing land in trusts to conserve land for farming dates back to the beginning of CSA. A significant tenet of CSA is that of ensuring land remains accessible to local farmers who want to work it. The 2014 Farm Bill resulted in over $1 billion expressly for land conservation.

Scriptunas said that in her state of Pennsylvania, the Agriculture Department now has an easement purchase program under which are approved purchases of 4,500 farms and more than 500,000 acres. Other states have similar programs. Land put in a trust for farming can be valued on the basis of its use as a farm. On another front, real estate developers are developing communities around organic farms because of the CSA influence, known as Development Supported Agriculture or DSA. Also, the impact of Big Ag Organic on CSA remains to be seen.

FACTORS OF CSA SUCCESS & FAILURE

Raw economics is the force dictating the changes in CSA, as it becomes primarily a marketing strategy among other strategies such as U-pick, farmers' markets, the roadside stand, cooperatives and sales to natural grocery stores that buy local. A studied look at the factors of success versus those of failure is key to deciding for or against starting a CSA program. For some, the life of direct subscription sales to food buyers with all of the activities of sharing life on the farm is a life to thrive on. For others, the labor involved is too extensive.

CSA success starts with close attention to consumer wants and preferences. First, the high quality and superior taste of local organic vegetables and fruit keeps renewal rates in the 60 to 80 percent range. Growing crops suited to local tastes is a part of success. Next, food buyers like the push from their CSAs to eat healthy. Also, convenient pickup arrangements are a must for busy families and individuals. It helps if members live nearby, and food buyers like hearing from their CSA and CSA community via newsletters, blogs and social media. Communication via the Internet allows farmers to gauge customer sentiment year-round. Media as well as events are part of the educational arm of a successful CSA.

CSA chef Pat Mulvey of localthyme.com says that CSA members need to be taught meal planning based around seasonal produce. They need to be introduced to new and less familiar vegetables. Sharing how to cook, i.e. sharing specific recipes, is

a great help to CSA families. Education on storage and the shelf life of different perishable vegetables is also helpful. Some CSAs offer programs for school children and community groups of all kinds. This practice helps build a loyal following – community happens around potlucks, festivals and educational events.

The factors that lead to CSA failure revolve mainly around the actual offering in the weekly box. Members do not like to waste food. Also they do not renew when they get too many vegetables they don't like. Food buyers want choice and a suitable quantity of food each week. Mulvey sees customers objecting to prices that are high for what actually gets eaten. Because of hectic work and children's schedules, families often conclude that the time pressure and labor of processing a whole box of vegetables every week is too much for them.

EXEMPLARY CSAs

Roxbury Farm is an exemplary CSA. Located on 300 acres in Kinderhook, New York, Roxbury sells vegetables and grass-fed pork, lamb and beef to more than 1,000 subscribers. Roxbury is a biodynamic farm, and farmer Jean-Paul Courtens attributes Roxbury's success to "building relationships while investing in the land, animals and people who eat our food. The most important part is growing exceptional food."

Ben Saunders of the 150-member Wabi Sabi Farm in Iowa sells mainly through a CSA but also through a co-op. For Saunders, success has come from "keeping the administrative work really simple in order to devote time to actually growing food and cultivating the connection between members and me, the farmer."

Another CSA that utilizes CSA as one strategy among many is Full Belly Farm in northern California. Full Belly has 60 employees and grows more than 80 different crops year-round. Full Belly also sells wool. They also engage in educational outreach in their promotion of organic farming.

In the Midwest, Angelic Organics has become very successful through embracing both biodynamics and CSA after an earlier financial failure. Angelic Organics practices sustainable, organic farming and includes a nonprofit educational outreach to share their vision: The Learning Center. Angelic is now at 850 subscribers. Angelic's John Peterson remarks on the size of their CSA operation: "Our biggest challenge is having warm relationships with as many shareholders as we need to run a viable CSA. We pack 2,200 boxes a week and serve thousands of families. This size makes it possible to employ many people and pay a living wage plus take care of buildings and equipment. Our size suits us, but it's not a suitable size for cozy relationships with all of our shareholders."

In the south, a great example of utilizing diverse marketing approaches is Ambrose Family Farm in Charleston. They are a U-pick farm and run a market and café. The Ambrose CSA offers five share size options and 25 pickup locations plus add-ons of meats, cheeses, prepared foods, shrimp, eggs, honey and gifts. And finally from the nonprofit world, the Western Massachusetts Food Bank and Hartford Food Bank and Food Bank Farm run a 600 member, 60-acre CSA operation. Hartford distributes fresh food to 420 programs including soup kitchens, food pantries and shelters. They also supply elderly programs and childcare centers. This CSA offers sourdough bread, organic eggs, tofu, goat cheese, salad dressings, granola, beef, lamb, chicken and more – even biodegradable detergents.

Grow Hartford's Dan Gregory believes, "A good CSA balances the economic needs of the farm and customer satisfaction. Plenty of farms overvalue their CSAs by giving too much produce or undervalue their produce in terms of cost or capacity. A successful CSA doesn't lose money and customers are happy with quality, quantity and variety of produce."

Gregory summarizes CSA trends this way: "We often hear how CSAs are a mutual partnership between the farmer and the consumer. If the farm has a bounty, then the CSA member shares the bounty. If there is a loss, then the member shares the loss. This line of thought gave rise to the CSA model, but it is not enough to sustain it. Undervaluing or overvaluing philosophies will make it harder to remain viable where the CSA is the farmer's bedrock of income. Ultimately, CSAs are simply another way of selling produce and customers want their money's worth."

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXBURY FARM

Early brassicas ready to transplant at Roxbury Farm.

POLITICS & PUBLIC POLICY

Not only do CSA farmers have to please consumers, they have to stay abreast of politics and public policy to fight for a favorable economic environment. The Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance (*farmandranchfreedom.org*), is one organization in the fight to support independent family farmers and win protection for a healthy food supply.

In the 1980s, big corporate agriculture companies became the major financiers of land grant universities in the wake of federal cutbacks, and the government price supports in place also favor Big Ag at the expense of small farmers. And on the horizon are the new rules under the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

"All farms will have to follow the Produce Rule which deals with agriculture, water, manure and compost and conservation practices," said Scriptunas. "Compliance is going to be costly, and there is concern that many small farms will not be able to meet this burden. The rules make a distinction between farms and facilities where facilities would have to register with the Food and Drug Administration and face new requirements and follow revised Good Manufacturing Practice requirements (GMP). Facilities are defined as operations engaged in manufacturing and processing, packing and holding. The definitions are quite confusing."

CSAs may have to limit their offerings to avoid being labeled a facility. CSAs face state environmental regulations, too. As for labor, Scriptunas, continues, "Farms that allow members to pick their own produce or accept labor from members in exchange for part of their share price must establish 'relationship status.' Are they considered employees? If so, federal and state labor laws apply. Federal laws, including OSHA, FIFRA, FLSA, the Migrant and Seasonal Workers Act and the Immigration Control Act may apply to CSA workers or they may be exempt if classified as an agricultural operation."

Barnett notes that some farmers admitted in the Local Harvest 2014 survey they had to take off-the-farm jobs to support their "farming habit." Thus, in some economic cases, farmers themselves are subsidizing the price of food. Much lobbying is needed.

Even with the current political climate, CSA does have a bright future. Training and apprenticeships for CSA exist, and there are webinars and schooling in CSA available. The Fulton Farm at Wilson College, for example, provides a laboratory in CSA farming. In the words of McFadden, "CSA is working. There is delivery of healthier foods with fewer contaminants. Food with no synthetic chemicals."

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXBURY FARM

Purple loosestrife, Queen Anne's lace, goldenrod and groundnut at Roxbury Farm.

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