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The Changing Face of Community Supported Agriculture

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As the movement to eat a more locally sourced diet has grown, food producers have become increasingly creative with direct marketing to reach a larger customer base. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has become popular because of its flexibility, risk management benefits, and potential for close relationships with customers.

For Tompkins County the current movement began in 1990, and experienced slow but steady growth for about fifteen years. During that time, vegetable shares were the predominant option, with some meat shares also available. CSAs generally adhere to several traditional principles, although in recent years the model has experienced significant evolution. The basic principles of CSA include:

- Community members agree to purchase a farmer's harvest in advance of the growing season and a farmer agrees to grow the food necessary to meet that commitment.
- All or most of the cost for a portion, or "share", of the harvest is paid up front, providing farmers with funds to purchase supplies for the season.
- When the harvest season begins, CSA members receive a share of the harvest each week.
- Opportunities for shareholders to visit the farm informally throughout the season for pickups, u-pick crops, and special events.

Over the past five years, Tompkins County has become an excellent showcase for the benefits and versatility of the CSA model. In 2012 over 3,400 customers in and around Tompkins County were enjoying a wide variety of products from area CSAs. In 2010, the number of shareholders was around 2,200, showing a 55% increase in shares over two years. This increased participation is due only in part to growth in the number and size of traditional vegetable CSAs. Many notable changes have also occurred in how CSAs are run and what products they offer. The annual March CSA Fair sponsored by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County had 15 vendors in 2011 and 30 in 2013.

First and foremost, the range of products available through CSA is wider than just vegetables and meat. New products include a variety of artisan cheeses from throughout the Finger Lakes region, berries, bread, value-added products such as prepared foods, fresh cut flowers, herbal products, fruit, apple cider (fresh and hard), mushrooms, animal fiber, and even art. This explosion in product availability is evidence that more farms are seeing a benefit to engaging customers in a more active and continuous way than just single purchases.

As more farms adopt CSA marketing options, co-marketing and collaboration between farms has given rise to organizations like the Full Plate Farm Collective, a group of several CSAs that customers can sign up for at the same time. This adds convenience for both farms and customers by combining pick-up locations for several CSAs into one location that creates good visibility for all participating farm enterprises and becomes a weekly fun event for shareholders to attend. The Full Plate Farm Collective has further capitalized on this method by aggregating produce from several mixed vegetable and fruit farms into a single, more comprehensive share. Another method of collaboration is for CSAs to partner up in order to offer multiple pickup locations, making shares available to a larger customer base.

In addition to new products, CSAs in Tompkins County have branched out from the basic principles listed above. Several have adopted a pre-paid loyalty discount model in which customers pay a set amount up front and get an additional amount as a bonus. For example, at The Piggery's farm store the minimum is \$100 and customers get an immediate ten percent boost: \$100 turns into \$110 of store credit issued on a card. Similarly, vegetable CSAs that vend at multiple farmers' markets benefit from this model because it offers increased flexibility for customers and reduces the farmer's effort spent tracking which customer has picked up their share or how many shares to pack for a given location. Shareholders who buy a pre-paid card can buy products according to their own needs and schedule.

One drawback to the pre-paid discount loyalty card is that risk is not truly shared between the farmer and the shareholder. A crop failure may cause potential shareholders to hold onto their credit for a long time, delaying their next purchase. This can mean the farm earns less from each shareholder, because the initial investment is much lower than for a traditional CSA.

Wide Awake Bakery has also opted for a different model. Breadshare members reserve a set number of loaves ahead of time and pick them up on a weekly or biweekly basis, skipping weeks when they are on vacation or don't need bread. Payment and balance tracking of breadshare members is accomplished through third-party software called Farmigo. This system works well for a bakery because of the need to know in advance how many loaves to bake for a given week. Like the store credit pre-paid card method, this sacrifices risk sharing in favor of greater convenience and flexibility for the customer.

New products and models lend themselves to an environment in which CSA enthusiasts can easily sign up for multiple CSAs, covering a large portion of their grocery needs with products such as bread, meat, cheese, and stored winter crops keeping CSAs going year round. A CSA that goes year round will need to do less marketing work to re-recruit last year's members. In Tompkins County, it is possible to eat local vegetables almost year round, between

CSAs that are offering Summer/Fall and Winter shares and the Good Life Farm, the sole farm to fill the Spring CSA niche so far. Beyond Tompkins County, the “full diet” CSA is gaining popularity. This gives shareholders some of everything and often works well with farm cooperatives with a large variety of products.

Modifications and rapid growth in the Community Supported Agriculture model over the past five years have proved its flexibility in creating symbiotic benefits for farmers, customers, and the local food economy in Tompkins County and beyond. Farms are finding that CSA often combines nicely with or even replaces other direct marketing channels such as farm stands and farmers’ markets.

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