Local Food, Local Engagement: Community-Supported Agriculture in Eastern Iowa

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the daily realities of operating a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in eastern Iowa and addresses the concept of community among growers. Popular depictions of local foods systems often emphasize the close relationships that develop between producers and consumers. This picture, however, may gloss over the necessary complexities of a healthy local food system. CSA has been promoted as a direct marketing strategy for small-scale growers and touted as a way of developing positive relationships between producers and consumers. Nevertheless, it is also important to understand that successful CSA initiatives are often reliant on a broad network of support that includes more than just growers and eaters.

Ethnographic descriptions of CSA farms presented here show how involvement by media and other organizations contribute to successful CSAs as well as an overall concept of “civic agriculture.” These descriptions also show that access to affordable, reliable labor tends to be among the greatest challenges for CSA growers. [Keywords: community-supported agriculture, local food systems, civic agriculture, sustainable agriculture]

Recent increases in food prices and food safety scares have resulted in popular discourse extolling the virtues of local food. Aside from making Michael Pollan a household name, the heightened attention to local food systems has bolstered attendance at farmers markets and increased Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) memberships nationwide. Popular depictions of local foods systems often emphasize the close relationships that develop between producers and consumers. This picture, however, may gloss over the necessary complexities of a healthy local food system. CSA has been promoted as a direct marketing strategy for small-scale growers and touted as a way of developing positive relationships between producers and consumers. Nevertheless, it is also important to understand that successful CSA initiatives are often reliant on a broad network of support that includes more than just growers and eaters.

The CSA movement in the United States began in the mid-1980s. The concept was originally developed in 1971 in Japan by a group of women who were concerned about chemicals in their food. They contracted with a local farmer and worked out a cooperative agreement, sparking the teikei movement. Literally translated, teikei means “cooperation” or “partnership,” but the common translation is “food with the farmer’s face on it” (Henderson and Van En 2007). Cooperative farming arrangements were also developing in Switzerland, where farmers had asked their customers to support the farm’s spring expenses in return for weekly shares of produce. It was this model that was proposed to Robyn Van En in western Massachusetts in 1985 when she started the first CSA in the United States1 (Henderson and Van En 2007). Four years later, there were 37 identifiable CSA farms in the United States and Canada (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995). The national directory LocalHarvest.org now lists over 1,900 CSA operations in the United States.

Van En introduced the idea of “share the costs to share the harvest” (2007:xiv) to describe a model that is based on shared relationships and risks between farmers and consumers. CSA customers, often called “members” or “shareholders,” pay farmers a flat fee before the growing season begins and, in return, receive weekly shares of product (Henderson and Van En 2007). The early payment benefits the producer in two ways. First, growers are guaranteed the sale of their produce before the season begins, alleviating the possibility that items will be produced but not sold. Secondly, the payment comes at a crucial time for vegetable growers when they are purchasing seeds,
treatments, or fertilizers and are not ordinarily earning farm income. The consumers, then, through their early investments, take on a share of the risk inherent in farming. If the harvest is poor, the amount of produce that shareholders receive will be low; in a good year, they benefit without paying more.

This paper examines some of the daily realities of operating a CSA in eastern Iowa and addresses the concept of community among growers. Much recent research on CSA has examined the challenges growers face, as they must continually market their farms to consumers (Goland 2002; Kane and Lohr 1997; Oberholtzer 2004). Anthropologists have questioned the common assumption that CSA inherently builds a “community” of growers and producers (DeLind 1999, 2003; Durrenberger 2002). Previous ethnographic work on CSA has therefore focused on the relationships between producers and consumers (McIlvaine-Newsad et al. 2004a, b; Stanford 2006). In the summer of 2008, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among CSA growers in eastern Iowa. Placed within the broader concept of “civic agriculture” (Lyson 2000), I contend that successful CSAs are reliant on community, but that their community must encompass more than just growers and consumers. Further, access to reliable labor is a more pressing challenge for these growers, not shareholder retention. CSA operations in eastern Iowa are successful, in part, because of the activities of other support organizations that share the burden of marketing and public education about local food. The broader engagement of civic agriculture addresses some challenges of CSA, particularly in attracting new shareholders and educating the public about CSA; civic agriculture is less able to address labor issues on the farm.

“Community” in CSA

The CSA model is necessarily reliant on individual relationships between customers and farmers and therefore varies somewhat from farm to farm. Some CSAs require that their members participate in the work of the farm, such as planting, harvest, or share distribution (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995). Many CSA operators deliver shares to their customers’ homes or set up a central weekly meeting place for shareholders to pick up their products. Others may require that the shareholders come to the farm to pick up shares, and possibly fill their own boxes or pick their own produce (Henderson and Van En 2006). The season length and contents of a weekly share vary based on local geography, farm capabilities, and consumer wishes. CSA farms generally offer vegetable shares, but may also include honey, maple syrup, baked goods, or cut flowers. In places with strong livestock traditions, like Iowa, animal products such as meat, eggs, or wool may be included (Gradwell 1998).

The CSA model shortens the commodity chain, effectively putting consumers and producers in direct contact with each other. As a result, there is a dual interpretation of the significance of the CSA movement. On the one hand, CSA is seen as a useful marketing strategy for growers, where they are paid in advance for their product. On the other hand, some have suggested that the relationships between farmer and consumer constitute a form of community, where risk and obligation is shared (Lamb 1996; Wells et al. 1999). The process of “community building” is implicit in much of the literature, both scholarly and popular, on CSA. The alternative nature of production and distribution supports the idea that “a CSA is a way to bind people into a tight social group together through the shared effort, travails, and gratifications of producing their own food” (Durrenberger 2002:42). A 1999 study in Iowa suggested that “CSA as a community-focused food systems model transcends the conventional boundaries between producer and consumer and rural and urban” (Wells et al. 1999).

Elizabeth Henderson, who worked and wrote with Robyn Van En writes, “the essence of the relationship is the mutual commitment: the farm feeds the people, the people support the farm and share the inherent risks and potential bounty” (2009:3). Carol Goland argues that “CSAs are a political and philosophical statement about the relationships that should inhere between producers and consumers, between people and the land, in short, the relationships that form a community of people, embedded in place” (2002:22).

The above statements suggest that CSA is inherently a form of civic agriculture, a term coined by sociologist Thomas Lyson (2000) to better describe small-scale and local farming operations. Lyson writes that “civic agriculture is the embedding of local agricultural and food production in the community” (2000:62). Lyson argues that directly linking producers and consumers increases the “agricultural literacy” (2000:62) of the community, which has concrete economic benefits for both producers and communities. DeLind (2000a, b), however, points out that Lyson’s view of civic agriculture still focuses on economic
relationships and benefits. She contends that true civic agriculture needs to also encompass the non-profit as well as the for-profit components of the community. Thus a CSA is not, in and of itself, civic agriculture. Rather, it is the broader community involvement and engagement with CSA that creates civic agriculture.

Despite the positive rhetoric surrounding CSAs, the level of shareholder commitment can be a challenge for growers. Most CSAs lose 40–50 percent of their shareholders each year (Goland 2002; Kane and Lohr 1997; Oberholtzer 2004). This high turnover rate frustrates some growers, as they must constantly rebuild their shareholder base. In particular, the level of member commitment to the farm frequently disappoints those growers whose CSA model includes shareholder labor. Lois Stanford writes, “despite the CSA literature on core groups and membership activity, growers still assume the overwhelming leadership responsibility of maintaining the CSA organization at the same time that they work in the fields” (2006:197). Laura DeLind and Paul Durrenberger, have also found that the idea of community is often overstated in the popular literature and that, as Durrenberger (2002:42) writes, “members do not really care much about participating in CSAs in any way except getting their food.” Laura DeLind (1999, 2003) writes about the dilemma of CSA as an economic model that purports to build community. She argues, “to expect that CSA is ‘about community’ can create disappointment and exhaustion on the part of both farmers and members” (2003:203). At its most basic level, CSA is an alternative marketing strategy where producers can renegotiate the economic realities of farming. In doing so, there are often wider ecological and, perhaps, collective community benefits. But to suggest that the underlying principles of CSA will inherently change the face of American consumerism and agriculture is an overstatement.

Local Food Activists in Eastern Iowa

Iowa City is located in east central Iowa and is home to the University of Iowa. With a population of 62,220, Iowa City is the sixth largest city in the state. The University is the largest employer, though several major corporations round out the city’s diverse economic base. Although Iowa is well known as a state dominated by industrial agriculture, Iowa City has a thriving local food movement. The twice-weekly farmers market is consistently well attended and the member-owned grocery cooperative is thriving.

The activities of two organizations focused on food and agriculture along with local media attention have increased public awareness of local food and CSA. The Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA) and Local Foods Connection support growers and reach out to consumers. Local news media has also been instrumental in promoting local farmers and their products to the general public. The involvement of these organizations contributes to a broader knowledge of local food in the area and provides concrete benefits to producers. Further, it is this broader engagement that leads to civic agriculture.

The INCA was started in 1995 by a group of growers interested in selling to local markets. The group was awarded a grant by the Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education program, part of the US Department of Agriculture extension service. Their first coordinator was a CSA grower from north central Iowa. The organization has a long history of supporting new farmers and promoting CSA as a good model for small farmers. While INCA welcomes input and information from diverse sources, they are primarily concerned with supporting farmers. Their annual conference in February is well attended and includes workshops for growers and activists on topics such as how to start a CSA, direct marketing strategies, and health insurance. INCA’s work especially supports farmers who direct market their products to local consumers. The group hopes to strengthen local and regional food networks by opening up new business opportunities for growers and providing more options for consumers.

Another significant actor in the local food movement in Iowa City is Local Foods Connection. Started in 1998, LFC is a charitable organization, funded through private donations, that provides CSA shares to low-income families in the Iowa City area. As part of its mission, LFC also engages in CSA and local food promotion in the community. LFC began when founder Laura Dowd worked on Sorensen Family Farm, a large CSA discussed below, to pay for her own CSA share in 1998. Laura and farm owner Jean Sorensen developed the idea of an organization that would improve access to organic, local food for low-income families while also directly supporting local farmers. In its first year, LFC purchased one CSA share, which was donated to a domestic violence shelter. In 2008, LFC purchased 45 shares, which were distributed to both families and social service agencies within a 50 miles radius of Iowa City.
A major mission of LFC is education, both for clients and the public. LFC provides training and assistance with preparing what are often unfamiliar vegetables. The office offers several activities, including movies, books, and a regular newsletter, that encourage the consumption of healthy food. When clients participate in activities they earn points, which can be redeemed for kitchen equipment. LFC also regularly engages with the public to raise awareness of local foods. Laura Dowd frequently speaks at diverse forums such as the University of Iowa College of Medicine Future Physicians for the Environment Meeting, the University of Iowa Center for Human Rights, and the Alpha Kappa Psi Service Fraternity Meeting. LFC also frequently sponsors events such as workshops for children and, most importantly, the annual CSA Fair in Iowa City.

The CSA Fair in Iowa City is a significant event for both growers and customers. Usually held in February or March, CSA growers are available to answer potential customers’ questions and sign up new shareholders. In 2008, some small farms sold out their shares within the first 30 minutes of the fair. The fair attracted media attention in Cedar Rapids, 30 miles to the north, which brought several potential customers looking for CSA farms that would serve the Cedar Rapids area. LFC also produces a brochure that lists all of the CSAs that serve Iowa City. The pamphlet is available at the fair, around town, and on LFC’s website. All of the farmers who participate in the fair and are included in the brochure consider it a significant source of new customers. LFC has taken on a large share of the work involved in promoting local foods and individual farms.

Finally, the local media has paid quite a bit of attention to local food and CSA. In particular, the Cedar Rapids Gazette food writer published a regular column on her own experience with Sorensen Family Farms during the summer of 2008. The first of these columns ran just before the CSA Fair, which contributed to the significant turnout from Cedar Rapids at the fair. Those growers who deliver in the Cedar Rapids area were especially in demand, and several growers reported receiving more calls than usual as a direct result of these stories.

**CSA in Eastern Iowa**

During the summer of 2008, I conducted interviews with the eight CSA growers who serve Iowa City. I also worked on several of the farms and observed at multiple sites where shareholders picked up their weekly produce. Variable weather conditions always challenge farmers, but 2008 proved to be a particularly harsh season. Record winter snows and spring rains resulted in major flooding throughout the state. Most of the growers I spoke with were affected in some way, and one was forced to end his share deliveries completely after the third week. The Iowa City CSAs are diverse, ranging from 19 shareholders to 250 and most have multiple delivery methods. Shareholders generally have the option to pick up at the farm; some farmers do home delivery; some have central drop sites in and around Iowa City. Share prices vary considerably, and the price of a “standard” share ranges from US$275 for a 16-week season to US$450 for a 22-week season. Additionally, several growers offer multiple share sizes or an early spring share along with a standard, full share. Only two CSAs are certified organic. Although most growers practice organic methods, they do not necessarily find that organic certification would significantly benefit their business.

Most of the CSA farms around Iowa City are owned and operated by one owner; one farm is owned and operated by a private school. The school farm feeds the students and faculty through most of the academic year. The CSA is a useful way to support the farm and market the school in the summer. Another CSA, Community Garden, is solely work based. The goal of this farm is to support local food initiatives, restore the land, which was intensively farmed in the past, and build a community farm. Community Garden consists of a group of 15–20 individuals who share the work of the farm as well as selling at local farmers markets. Community Garden is listed as a CSA in local literature, but it does not sell shares of produce. Only one grower’s income is primarily supported by CSA, and even this one supplements CSA income with other farm activity. Most growers engage in multiple strategies, both on and off their farms. Some do custom farm work or have acreage in conventional row crops. Some also have partners who work off the farm to provide benefits and extra income.

I present here ethnographic descriptions of three CSA farms in Iowa City, which represent the variety of CSA models in the area. Walnut Acres Subscription Produce is a small CSA fully operated by the owners. Sorensen Family Farms and Century Farms are larger CSA operations. These cases show how producers look beyond their relationships with customers to
form a broader community of growers. They are involved in farming organizations, non-profits and, in some cases, develop reciprocal relationships with other growers, contributing to an overall civic agriculture. These cases also show that one of the major challenges of operating a CSA is labor. Vegetable production is extremely labor intensive and growers are constantly adjusting their procedures to make their operations more efficient.

**Walnut Acres Subscription Produce**

Frances and Tom Baumgartner, now both in their late 50s, grew up on small, diversified Iowa farms. Both of these farms are now designated Heritage Farms by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship’s Heritage Farm Program. This program certifies farms that have been owned by the same family for more than 100 years. While Frances worked full time as a nurse and Tom worked for the city of Iowa City, they planted extensive gardens each year and kept chickens for fresh eggs and meat. Through the years, Frances and her mother occasionally sold items at various farmers markets. Her mother would bring baked goods and Frances would bring garden produce. Although they were usually successful, Frances always found the extensive preparation time frustrating, particularly on slow days when she would come home with unsold produce. She has also sold extra strawberries and cabbage on local radio farm sales when she had excess. Frances notes, “when you think about it that way, I guess I’ve been kind of dabbling in this in different ways all through the years.”

In 1998, Frances was beginning to become unsatisfied with her job as a nurse. When her children were young, she had been involved with the local extension and 4-H programs for several years. She also served on the Farm Bureau Board as well as the Sheep and Wool Growers Board, so she constantly kept up with current farm literature. In 1999, Frances received a mailing from the extension promoting CSA as a useful direct marketing plan for small farms. She was immediately interested, knowing that it was a model that would mesh well with her background in gardening and local foods. Her husband, however, was not convinced. He thought it inconceivable that people in Iowa would pay in advance for a box of vegetables. Frances realized that as people who grew up on farms and continued to grow much of their own food, she and her husband were unusual. She did not think it unreasonable that people who lacked the time or ability to produce for themselves would be willing to pay for a steady supply of fresh, local vegetables. Despite her husband’s misgivings, she was ready to try a CSA. She cut back her hours at the hospital and started with one share in 2000 just “to see if I could do it.” Within two or three years, the CSA income was paying for the property taxes. By 2007, she had 37 shares and in 2008 she had 51 shares. Frances ultimately found that the CSA was a good economic niche for the two of them. Her major economic frustration with farmer’s markets was alleviated, as all the produce is presold, and it is work that they can do together.

Walnut Acres provides 51 shares of produce on a small area. Frances estimates that they have only one acre in vegetables and one acre in orchards. From those two acres, she produces potatoes, onions, sugar snap peas, lettuce, spinach, broccoli, cabbage, bell peppers, sweet corn, green beans, carrots tomatoes, asparagus, okra, kohlrabi, beets, horseradish, cucumbers, summer squash, strawberries, raspberries, peaches, and plums. They use their small space efficiently, planting consecutive crops in each space. She also grows several varieties of herbs in containers around the house. She likes this arrangement because she can monitor the plants closely, and herbs, like fruit, serve as a useful way to fill out the shares if other crops are thin.

In 2008, Walnut Acres charged US$275 for a full 16-week share of vegetables, which works out to US$17 per week. Frances does not guarantee a specific size of share each week; she refers to share sizes in terms of “baskets.” Thus, if she has a large group of shareholders, she can adjust the basket size accordingly. Additionally, she keeps track of customers’ likes and dislikes. She says, “This is not an exact science, so if something comes out a little uneven, and we have a little plot of spinach left but not enough for everybody we give it to the ones who like spinach.”

Over the past eight years, the couple has settled into an annual routine, though procedures are constantly being tweaked as they become more efficient. Frances sends out their “agreement sheet,” or contract, early in the year to the past year’s shareholders. As long as she has “a few” people signed up early in the year, she feels she is able to order seeds, ideally in time to qualify for an early-purchase discount. She always plans for “more than last year” but rarely thinks about concrete numbers each year. The baskets can be any size, as she makes no guarantees on weight or volume each year. In 2008, she had three weddings in her
family to prepare for, so she had intended to sell only 10 or 12 shares. However, as more and more people called, she realized that the bills from the family weddings were significantly increasing and the extra income would be a great help. Ultimately, Walnut Acres wound up with 51 shares in 2008.

Tom retired from his city job in 2006 and now helps with the CSA full time. Although Frances manages the bulk of the business, including all the planning and bookwork, she notes that it would not succeed without Tom’s help. He does most of the plowing, maintenance, and heavy labor. This arrangement works well for the two of them, and Frances does not intend to increase the size of the CSA to the extent that it will require more than two people to manage. Currently, they are able to take on enough work that they are able to manage a fairly large customer base, though as they age health considerations could change that in the future. If their ability to work decreased, she would decrease the size of the CSA accordingly, rather than hire extra labor to maintain the current size of the CSA.

Despite a significant increase in shares, Frances feels that 2008 is the least stressful year she’s had with the CSA. She attributes the smooth transition to three changes she made in their operation this year. First, they are only delivering three days each week. They have always done primarily home deliveries, with a few shareholders picking up their shares at the farm. However, in the past they have delivered on a day that suits the customer. As a result of this strategy, they sometimes delivered shares every day of the week in opposite ends of their territory. This year, however, they divided their range up into three broad areas. They targeted one area per day and informed customers the day they would be in their area to do the delivery. Frances was surprised that no one complained about the change in policy. She notes that they have probably saved a lot of gas as well as time, but they have not calculated their savings.

The second significant change involved starting later in the season. Typically, they have made their first deliveries in the second week of May each year. In 2008, however, the spring was exceptionally cold, and they were unable to get into the gardens until April. As a result, they made their first deliveries during the first week of June. Frances was surprised to find that just a two-week delay made a major difference in the early weeks of the season. Iowa springs are generally unpredictable, and CSA shares are frequently light in May. Pushing back just two weeks allowed her to deliver fuller baskets, which improved her overall outlook on the season.

Third, she made an effort to include more fruit. Despite warning shareholders that fruit should not be expected as the bulk of the share, fruit products are a popular way to fill out the basket overall. Sometimes, such as in very dry years, fruits will thrive better than vegetables. In 2008, for instance, she started with cherries in the share baskets. Shareholders are very positive about fruits and this can offset disappointment if vegetables are scarce. Frances’s diversified model serves her well. In a difficult year, her wide variety of produce ensures at least some successes.

In 2008, about half of her 38 shareholders returned. Frances has noticed an overall increase in interest in local foods during the eight years since she started her CSA. Despite not advertising at all, the Baumgartners consistently increased each year. She attributes this to increased media attention, what she calls the “green movement,” and the work of Local Foods Connection. She usually fields a few calls from interested people as early as January or February. Frances and Tom do not attend the annual CSA fair. However, the information for Walnut Acres Subscription Produce is included in the brochure put out by Local Foods Connection. The LFC publications are her major source of new shareholders. The fact that listings in LFC’s brochure and on the website come at no cost to CSA farmers, is significant in that, in Frances’s case, she does not have to do any marketing or shareholder recruiting on her own.

Despite her earlier involvement in farming organizations, such as 4-H and the Farm Bureau Board, Frances is not highly involved in such organizations now. She has attended meetings for Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) but is not a member. She is very interested in what other CSA farmers are doing, and she suggests that she might be able to solve some of her on-farm problems quicker if she knew how other CSA growers were managing similar issues. Additionally, Frances is happy to send some customers on to other area CSAs if her operation does not suit their needs. She recognizes that there is enough demand that she is not competing with other farmers for customers.

Sorensen Family Farm

Jean Sorensen’s family purchased Sorensen Family Farm in 1994. She, along with her husband and four children, started farming by contracting to raise 1,000 feeder pigs.² She was home schooling her four
children when she received a pamphlet, written by Robyn Van En that explained the CSA model. A CSA seemed like a good economic choice and a good way to have her children involved on the farm. She, along with two other growers, started the CSA in 1997 with 18 shareholders. Jean, 54, now manages the CSA under the name Harvest Share and has 250 shareholders. She works with several different growers to fill shares for the six separate drop sites each week. Jean owns 10 acres of land, six of which are used for vegetable cultivation. She also keeps a flock of 40 ewes, which she rotationally grazes through the summer. The ewes lamb in February and she direct markets them in the early spring. She likes having livestock on the farm, as the manure is useful for compost. This system also allows her to time the work of lambing so that it does not interfere with her busy summers.

The growth of Harvest Share has been slow and steady. Starting in 1997 with 18 members, within five years she had increased to 60 shares. This is the maximum that she and her children could do until they purchased a small tractor with a cultivator that allowed them to double and take on 120 shares. She was surprised how significantly she was able to increase and now advises CSA farmers to mechanize sooner, rather than later. She still manages with only one tractor, but recognizes that a second tractor would make her operation even more efficient. Currently, using one tractor for both cultivating and mowing requires a lot of time to change from one piece of equipment to another. A second tractor that could be devoted to mowing would eliminate that lost time.

Harvest Share offers two share sizes, regular and large, as well as additional flower or bread and egg packages. The regular size share, which is the most frequently requested, cost US$370 in 2008; the large cost US$635. These prices includes a US$30 delivery fee, which is removed if the customer wants to pick up the share at the farm. Jean notes that the delivery fee does not entirely cover her fuel cost for delivery. The 2008 share price is a 20 percent increase over the previous year and is still lower than what Jean feels is necessary to fully cover her costs. Jean argues that one of her obligations to other farmers is to charge a fair share price. Because the CSA is her main source of income, she ultimately has to charge what is necessary to support her livelihood. She suggests that all CSA farmers, whether the CSA is their main source of income or not, should maintain a high enough share price so as not to undercut other farmers.

Harvest Share is the only CSA in the Iowa City area that includes multiple growers. Jean casually, without any written contracts, makes arrangements with various other farmers who might be better equipped to grow some particular items. She purchases sweet potatoes from a local farmer who primarily wholesales his products, but found it difficult to get rid of the “seconds,” those potatoes that were not the optimum size or shape for wholesale. Jean agreed to buy his defective sweet potatoes to include in the CSA box. She works often with another farmer, Karen Logan, who grows her corn and potatoes while Jean starts Karen’s seeds and grows her kale and collards. She works with a producer who provides turkeys that she distributes to her shareholders in the fall and one who might provide garlic in a bad year. Jean believes that this cooperative strategy creates a true “community of farmers,” and she points to the fact that she has no written contracts with anyone to further bolster her claim.

Harvest Share delivers three days per week, at a total of six separate sites. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are delivery days. The work begins early, no later than 7:30, to harvest enough for each site. The process of planting, weeding, harvesting, and cleaning vegetables is extremely labor intensive. Each vegetable is individually picked, cleaned, and packed before it goes to the shareholder. When a farm is responsible for nearly a bushel of produce for 250 people per week, that labor is significant. Leeks, for instance, are stripped of their outer leaves and trimmed by hand then bagged in groups of three. Jean estimates that the farm processes 800 leeks per week. These alone take several people most of the morning to complete. Zucchini and summer squash take two people to harvest properly. One person carries a large tray, while the other harvests the vegetables, wipes them off, and puts them in the tray. It is a slow, hot process with clingy vines and bright yellow fruits that are surprisingly difficult to see. Tomatoes are picked gently by hand, and all stems must be removed before putting them into a bucket. One errant stem can pierce a neighboring tomato and ruin the batch. Green beans are very popular among shareholders, but are so labor intensive to pick that Jean regularly wonders if they are worth the bother.

Labor is the most significant and consistent challenge at Sorensen Family Farm. Jean uses a combination of intern, volunteer, and paid labor. She started an intern program in 2000 where she would
provide room and board and a small stipend in return for a summer’s worth of labor. She has had varying success with interns and reports that it has become a significant strain on her family to have people staying in her house each summer. Increases in fuel and food costs have also made it increasingly expensive to house interns. Jean also encourages members to volunteer at the farm, and offers a discount for consistent help during the season. In 2008, she had three individuals request a work/share arrangement, though only one was still helping as of August. Jean reports that it is rare to find a member volunteer who makes a significant contribution to the workload. She finds that most members are not interested in helping on the farm and are perfectly willing to pay the full share price without any expectation of volunteering.

Her third option for labor is paying individuals an hourly wage. Ultimately, she finds that her children are the best source of labor she has. As of 2008, she had one son in college and one in high school who helped full time in the summer. Her two older children have also made significant contributions to the farm in the past. She pays her children on a sliding scale; the more hours they work, the higher their pay rate. Even her son who is in high school and would rather be doing activities other than working on the farm is more efficient and reliable than most. She also has one consistent half-time person (20 hours per week) who worked through the 2008 season. A third individual worked early in the summer, before leaving to work on flood relief efforts in Cedar Rapids. Ultimately, Jean’s goal is to hire a full-time assistant manager who can stay out in the gardens during the season. Jean feels she is most efficient when she stays in the processing barn and oversees the packaging as items come in from the gardens. Having a person in the fields full time, overseeing the labor would be most beneficial.

With 250 shares, Harvest Share is among the largest CSA operations in the state of Iowa. With 50 more shares than last year, Jean has noticed the extra work required to manage such a high number. However, changes in space and equipment made 250 shares manageable. Before 2008, she stored all of her produce in refrigerators before they were delivered. She knew that a walk-in cooler would add significant storage space and improve her efficiency. Because a cooler costs about US$4,000, Jean would need a loan to purchase one. She was reluctant to do this. She then received a tip that a local Pizza Hut was closing and would give their walk-in cooler to her if she would haul it away. She agreed and has been pleasantly surprised at how much it has improved her operation. Additionally, she now uses the long, open barn that previously housed pigs to process vegetables for delivery. The current barn is closer to the vegetable gardens and is larger than the barn that she used in the past. Jean notes that without the new space for processing and the walk-in cooler, 250 shares would be nearly impossible for her to manage. Like other farmers, she finds that small changes in procedure or the addition of one new piece of equipment may significantly improve efficiency and allow for more shares.

Jean has found that her customer base has changed over the years she has been in business. Initially, her shareholder retention rate was quite high. In fact, she still has several shareholders who have been with her since she began in 1997. This year, after an article in the Cedar Rapids Gazette that advertised Iowa City’s annual CSA fair, she was receiving close to 10 calls per day about the CSA. She attributes the sharp increase in shareholders to this local media attention. However, she wonders how long most of these new shareholders will be with her. In the past, most of her new customers signed on as a result of other shareholders’ recommendations. Jean wonders if media attention, while useful to initiate people into the CSA process, promotes the same level of customer loyalty as a personal recommendation.

Jean feels that part of her mission as a farmer and a citizen is to educate people about the realities of food production. She consciously avoids bagging vegetables together that are perfectly uniform. When bagging potatoes by weight, she does not put all like sizes together, but purposely includes small and large potatoes. She wants her customers to realize that produce is not perfectly uniform in size and color, despite what they see in the mainstream grocery stores. Jean is also affiliated with Local Foods Connection, which frequently organizes farm visit days where shareholders can observe and participate in life on the farm. Jean sees these initiatives as a valuable way to educate the public about food production. Jean deliberately works to strike a balance between satisfying her customers while maintaining an efficient operation. She suggests that too much attention to the customer, for instance customizing boxes for shareholders based on likes and dislikes, not only will lead to burnout for the grower, it undermines the shared experience of risk and reward for the customer. She believes that the
CSA model, which requires more work and risk sharing from the customer, may help to change customer perceptions about food buying. Tailoring share boxes to shareholders’ specifications puts too much pressure on the producer and not enough emphasis on the customer’s obligations.

In retrospect, Jean feels that her progress up to this point has been relatively slow. Because her farm was one of a small group of CSA operations to start up in Iowa in the mid-1990s, she had few role models. Her learning curve has been slow and she did not have the benefit of an experienced mentor. Currently, Jean is highly involved in local farming organizations including PFI and INCA. She regularly speaks at conferences and meetings about her experiences and freely offers advice to new farmers. This is another role that she feels is part of her overall mission, but she is also ready for other farmers to share some of the burden of promoting CSA and local foods. While Jean is happy to help new farmers start up and believes that there is more than enough business to go around, she is somewhat resentful of other farmers who do not give back to the farming community. She would like to see more growers share their experiences and be involved in networking organizations to mentor other farmers.

**Century Farm**

David Evans purchased his farm in 2006 from his aunt. He is the fifth generation to own the 80 acres, which has been in his family for over 150 years. The land had primarily been used for alfalfa, and had not been chemically sprayed. David’s family had a saying, “corn and beans, your farm’s in New Orleans; grass and hay, your farm will stay.” When he purchased the property, he also realized that it would be relatively easy to obtain organic certification because it had not been farmed conventionally in many years. David, now 32, holds a degree in animal ecology from Iowa State University, and spent two years in the Peace Corps in Tanzania after he graduated. His role in Tanzania was essentially that of an extension agent, specializing in animal husbandry. When he returned from the Peace Corps, he hoped to start a small farm, possibly a goat dairy. However, he interned at a 160-member CSA in southern Wisconsin, which served as his introduction to CSA.

Unlike many farmers who start their CSA as a small part of their overall farm strategy, David has aggressive plans to make the CSA his primary income. He started the CSA in 2007, in partnership with his aunt’s CSA. Between the two of them, they had 37 shareholders. In 2008, no longer in tandem with his aunt’s farm, David increased to 100 shares. In 2008, in addition to the CSA, David also sold carrots, chard, celeriac, parsnips, and salad mix wholesale to the food cooperative in Iowa City and sold at four farmers markets each week. Additionally, his wife works off the farm. While his long-term goal is to focus on CSA as a sole income strategy, David thinks that selling at farmers markets is a good publicity strategy for the CSA. The markets are convenient drop sites for shares, and David is able to sell more produce to market customers. David anticipates that he will continue to attend some farmers markets each week, even after the CSA is large enough to support his family.

With 100 shareholders in 2008, Century Farm is a relatively large operation and the second largest CSA serving Iowa City. Despite the tendency of CSA operations to be small when compared with a conventional industrial farm, providing a full week of produce for 100 families requires a large and diverse operation. By the last week in May of 2008, he had planted over 70,000 plants for the CSA as well as an acre of asparagus. Five thousand onions had been planted, as David estimated that each shareholder would need at least two to three onions per week.

Century Farm offers several share options, including a salad share, full share, and a fall share. The fall share is primarily directed at college students, as David’s farm is in a small college town with an active local food movement. This share starts in late August and goes through October. The salad share, in 2008, operated as a smaller version of the full share for the entire season. In 2009, the farm will offer a salad share for four weeks in the spring, a full or half share for 20 weeks in the summer and a fall share for the final 10 weeks. In 2008, a full share cost US$400, in 2009 the full share will cost US$550. David priced the shares by looking at others in the area. He notes that his cost is significantly lower than some of the larger CSA farms in southern Wisconsin that charge over US$800 for a certified organic share.

David began Century Farm with the intention of building a CSA that would support his family. The farm had very little infrastructure when he bought it. Before the 2008 season, he put up a greenhouse and a large shed with a walk-in cooler for processing. He also invested in equipment such as an irrigation system and a barrel washer for potatoes and other root vegetables. Unlike other farms that have started small
and expanded slowly each year, David hopes to have 500 shareholders within the next five years. With a 10-year-old son and a new baby due in March, he views the CSA as his main income opportunity to support a growing family. Like other growers, David tailors the farm procedures to maximize efficiency. Root vegetables, for instance are harvested and bunched together with a twist-tie in the field. The harvesters, then, need to know how many plants are in the field so they can calculate the number of vegetables that will go into each bunch. The bunched vegetables are brought into the packing shed and laid out on a table where they are sprayed with a power washer. They are then moved to a large tub filled with water and an organic approved sanitizing solution. After they are sanitized, they are rinsed in a second large tub of clean water. The vegetables are then counted into crates, which are stored in the walk-in cooler before they are finally packed in the share boxes.

Century Farm primarily relies on wage labor. David hired one full-time person to serve as an assistant and hired several part time employees. Several students from the local college have worked at the farm, and have proven to be a reliable and consistent workforce. Although David interned at a CSA, he is not in favor of hiring interns at Century Farm. His own internship experience felt like captive labor, where he was underpaid and significantly overworked. He prefers to pay an hourly wage, despite the significant expense. The floods of 2008 required him to lay off one employee and reduce the hours of several others.

Early in the season, David declared that with their infrastructure and irrigation, they were safe from anything other than hail or tornadoes. The floods, however, caused more damage than he could have predicted. David replanted several crops as many as six times. After the initial rains that came in June, the fields dried up briefly. Just as a new planting germinated, the farm was hit with another eight inches of rain in less than one day. When the rain finally subsided, the soil was compacted and difficult to work with. David estimates that the weather cost him around US$50,000 in lost income and extra labor. His entire carrot crop, much of which was to be wholesaled, was lost. Many of the crops that he expected would be staples in the CSA share boxes were significantly damaged or lost completely. Snow peas, for example, which had been a consistent addition to the CSA boxes in 2007, were only productive enough to provide each shareholder one bag for the entire season.

Century Farm does more self-promotion than most of the other area CSAs. During the 2007 season at farmers markets, particularly in Iowa City, he advertised his CSA for the 2008 year. He started a mailing list based on his farmer’s market customers and e-mailed a brochure in January of 2008 about the upcoming season. He did not participate in the Iowa City CSA Fair in 2008 and was not included in the Local Foods Connections pamphlet. However, he has since made contact with the organization and plans to be included in 2009. David is hoping to have a total 225 shareholders in 2009.

David is involved in several farmers’ organizations and enjoys the camaraderie with other growers. He attends the annual Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service Conference in Wisconsin and he is involved with PFI. He has given talks at conferences about CSA and organic methods and he, like most of the other growers, does not see a high level of competition for CSA shares in Eastern Iowa. He and his wife also attended the Terra Madre slow food gathering in Turin, Italy in the fall. David maintains good relationships with other growers in the area and hopes to become more involved in farming organizations in the future.

**Conclusion**

Despite previous research, which suggests that shareholder retention is one of the main concerns among CSA farmers (Goland 2002; Kane and Lohr 1997; Oberholtzer 2004), that is not the case in Iowa City. Overwhelmingly, most of these farmers see the cost of labor and infrastructure as the biggest impediment to CSA growth. Large, industrial farms are capital intensive but require little labor. Despite the small number of acres in production, CSAs require significant labor to be successful. Richard Pirog, Marketing and Food Systems Initiative Leader at Iowa State University’s Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, suggests that a CSA requires 100–150 shares to secure an income of US$20,000 to US$30,000 annually. Craig Chase, the Value Added Marketing Specialist for the Iowa State University Extension, further notes that an individual can only manage around two and a half acres of vegetables. Even a mid-sized CSA requires designated space for starting seeds and processing and boxing produce. The growers in
Eastern Iowa constantly make adjustments in their operations to improve efficiency, such as rearranging delivery schedules or using new space for processing. Ultimately, growers who want to make CSA a significant part of their income need to be prepared to invest in outside labor. For some growers, such as the Baumgartners, this is not a realistic option, as they have no interest in becoming an employer. The advantage of CSA for these growers is that the workload can be accomplished on their own time with little outside intervention.

Iowa City differs from other areas in that the process of educating the public about local food and promoting CSAs has been spread beyond farmers and consumers. The success of CSA in the area can partly be attributed to media attention and the activities of volunteer-based non-profits. It is this broader involvement that contributes to a true civic agriculture. Certainly, CSA is fundamentally an agreement between producers and shareholders where the commodity chain is shortened so that consumers interact directly with producers to purchase their food. Laura DeLind (2003:194) writes, “ideally, each is aware of, and attends to, the needs of the other, creating in the process a bond of trust and responsibility. Adjectives like ‘partnership,’ ‘collaborative,’ ‘mutual,’ and ‘shared’ are used repeatedly to describe the CSA relationship.” However, DeLind also points out the challenges in creating this community of shared responsibility between producer and consumer. It is difficult to maintain a solid community of producers and consumers when 40–50 percent of the consumers leave the CSA each year. Cynthia Abbot Cone and Ann Kakaliouras (1998:29) note, based on their interviews with CSA shareholders, that “community refers more to community of interest rather than to community built on mutual relationships of rights and obligations, on reciprocity.”

In Iowa City, CSA growers rely on a broader community of support, beyond just their customers. This engagement of external organizations creates civic agriculture, which has real benefits for producers. In particular, Iowa City producers see benefits in shareholder attraction and education; however, civic agriculture has been less successful in solving the problem of labor. In 2008, all but one area grower was included in the CSA brochure put out by Local Foods Connection. These seven growers receive most of their new customers directly from this publication. Growers, then, are able to maintain a steady stream of new customers, without doing any advertising on their own, despite the fact that shareholder turnover remains high. The farmers in Iowa City suggest that financial support is primarily what they expect from shareholders, not time spent working on the farm or otherwise engaging in promoting the CSA. Most farmers agree that it is difficult to train members to work, and often members only have time to visit the farm on the weekends, when the farmer would rather be having a day off. Instead, these farmers in eastern Iowa look for community among their fellow growers. They are involved in farm organizations that support alternative marketing strategies and some, like Jean Sorensen, have reciprocal relationships with other growers. Further, the work of INCA and Local Foods Connections serves to mentor new farmers and share the burden of promoting CSA.

CSA, to remain successful, requires a diverse group of involved activists who are more than just farmers and consumers. Steve MacFadden contends that an alternative farming and food movement must include a broad array of participants. “While farmers must be among these leaders, they cannot stand alone, outside the communities where they toil. They must have the active involvement and support of their neighbors in many different ways. Community supported farms offer one important range of possibilities for this to happen” (1997:15). A successful local food system requires broader involvement by media and activists. Ultimately, the CSA model is more complex than a simple relationship between growers and eaters. This complexity does not undermine the importance of CSA, nor does it suggest that local food systems have no place in the overall concept of “community.” CSA farms do offer a strategy for farmers and consumers that critically reacts to the forces of globalization by allowing both producers and consumers to opt out of the commoditization process inherent in the industrialized system (Cone and Myhre 2000). Local food systems are one way that individuals, as producers or consumers, attempt to build sustainable ecological and economic systems in their own backyards (Kloppenburg et al. 2000).

We need to broaden the view of “community” in CSA. If community means sharing work and responsibility, there is plenty of each to go around in the local food movement. In her research, Carol Goland asks whether the grower is “fairly burdened with the additional responsibility of educating consumers” (2002:23). In eastern Iowa, the consensus seems to be that it is not entirely the responsibility of the grower to educate the
public about CSA. The successes of CSA in the area can only partly be attributed to the relationships between growers and consumers. While these relationships are important, the success of CSAs is also ensured by the wider civic involvement in CSA promotion and education. These roles are best filled by other individuals and organizations who can take the burden from the farmers while the farmers and shareholders each fulfill their own roles: growing food and eating it.

Notes

1. Jan VanderTuin, a gardener and activist who had worked on organic, cooperative farms in Switzerland, originally proposed the CSA model to Van En.

2. It seems that “civic agriculture” might attempt to solve labor problems on the farm. The growers I spoke to, for instance, sometimes take advantage of farm workdays organized by Local Foods Connection, one of the non-profits discussed in this paper. However, they were also often dissatisfied with the quality of work provided by volunteers. Thus the civic engagement discussed here seems primarily beneficial in terms of public awareness and marketing. The issue of labor and civic agriculture would benefit from further examination.

3. Pseudonyms are used for all growers and their farms.

4. Jean slowly reduced her pigs operation as the CSA increased. By 2008, she no longer had any pigs on the farm and was able to use the former big barn as a staging area for the CSA. She commented to me that it would be nice to have “a few” around, as they are useful for cleaning up scraps and providing fertilizer.

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