



What is a CSA: Community Supported Agriculture in the Adirondacks and the North Country

By Alessandra Wingerter, St. Lawrence University, January 2008

As I sat down to milk my first cow at Essex Farm, I thought to myself “How is it that my family consumes a gallon of milk a day, and yet, this is the first time I’m milking a cow?” Maybe it’s my suburban childhood that has let this disconnect continue for so long. Or maybe I had never really been that interested before. But perhaps the overwhelming reason for my separation between me and my food is that our food system is broken.

Walk into any grocery store and one sees a vast variety of shapes and colors of produce, just waiting to be prepared for a meal. However, we know very little about these products and where they come from. A sticker informs us that these carrots are from California; this apple has come from Washington State. Our food has traveled thousands of miles to get to our mouths. And we can’t ask the farmer how he or she has grown them. We don’t know if they’ve had a successful or disappointing growing season. We can’t visit the farm where our produce is being grown, breathe the fresh air, nor run our fingers through the very soil it is grown in. There is an emotional and social disconnect between us and our food.

However, CSA creates the link between farmers and consumers in a very intimate way. CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture. The concept, although still foreign to many, has its roots in Japan’s *teikei* farming which is often translated to mean “food with the farmers face on it.” It also has origins in Switzerland, of which travels there inspired Jan Vandertuin, together with Robyn Van En, to create America’s first CSA in 1985. Jan and Robyn’s Indian Line Farm, of Massachusetts, as well as Trauger Groh’s Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire became the pioneer CSA farms of America.

The name “Community Supported Agriculture” was agonized over by Van En and her cabal, yet it was decided upon because it conveyed the necessary message of the commitment between farmers and their members in a succinct way. Initially, Van En intended “Community Supported Agriculture” to transpose to “Agriculture Supported Communities” (“CSA to ASC”). However, that idea is difficult to matriculate into everyday language and the “ASC” part of the nomenclature has faded, yet the concept is held strong still by some farmers.

CSA was born out of that disconnect between the farmer and the consumer. Often, by the time food reaches our mouths it has already been washed, processed, packaged and traveled thousands of miles. On average, our food travels 1,500 miles to get to our plates. In addition, the money that we pay for that food rarely makes it way back to the farmer; instead, it is invested in the aforementioned resources. By creating a community of people who are willing to pay for their food at the beginning of the growing season in return for a weekly share of vegetables, CSA eliminates the separation we have with our food.

While many CSAs also sell their products to other venues, such as farmers markets, the desire of family farms still remains and is protected by CSA. Members understand that by paying at the beginning of the growing season, they are mitigating the financial burdens a farmer may face with the start up costs of seed, equipment and other costs.

Membership participation differs from farm to farm. On one end, some CSAs require members to work on the farm as part of their payment. “Subscription” CSAs lay on the other end of the spectrum; the farm crew does most of the work and members receive a weekly box of vegetables. These also tend to run for a few months rather than the whole year. However, most CSAs fall somewhere in between these two models and provide weekly newsletters, recipe swaps and potlucks throughout the season.

One may find any range of CSA models in the Adirondacks and North Country. There are many subscription CSAs, both large and small, for those who wish to eat locally but may not have the time or desire to visit the farm. Furthermore, if one is new to the idea of CSAs, there are many who just run in the summer months and that offer individual shares if one is hesitant to commit. On the other hand, there are CSAs that offer year round shares often either requiring time spent on the farm or some type of educational component revolving around the food members receive. Another model of CSA that we may see more of as CSA popularity grows are multifarm CSAs, which combines produce from several farms into one CSA.

Gauging the success of a CSA can be difficult. Some look at the number of members of a CSA and how many months food is provided; others examine the overall satisfaction level of members. These two variables play off each other. For instance, a large CSA can be seen as very successful because it is able to produce great amounts of local food for a number of people. However, as a CSA grows in members, it becomes harder to educate them about the food they are receiving. Hard earned food may go to waste in the colder months, as people are unaware of preservation techniques.

Unlike some small farms, most CSAs in the Adirondacks and North Country are currently thriving. Marketing the farm is hardly an issue, even for a brand new CSA. Word-of-mouth is generally the most utilized tool; however, posters in local business windows and e-mails can't hurt. Organizations like Adirondack Harvest and Garden Share are also of assistance because they make it easy for residents to find nearby CSAs. Most CSAs of the Adirondacks and North Country have waiting lists and members commonly return year after year.

It is an exciting time for CSAs; in the past five years or so there has been a renewed interest in local food. Though many people are still unaware of the disconnect between their food, CSA is slowly bridging that gap. Whether that means eating locally or volunteering on a nearby farm, any small part will help us realize what we've been missing. # # #

[Click here](#) to see a chart profiling the CSA farms in NNY with approximate number of members, cost and size of shares, and season and sites of availability for CSAs' products.

The barn at Black Kettle Farm

