

Small farms turn consumers into shareholders

Bypassing grocers, customers pay in advance for a share of a farm's bounty

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NEW YORK - For 27-year-old Ben Sippel a steady push for greater efficiency on his Ohio farm has meant tossing freshly washed batches of lettuce into the washing machine's spin cycle and tracking expenses with painstaking precision.

While such steps — sterilizing an old washing machine to run loads of bagged lettuce — aren't so unusual on small farms, Sippel's bid to hold down costs and make it as a full-time farmer began with a more prosaic gambit: Do away with the middleman.

Rather than selling to distributors or grocery stores, Sippel is among a growing number of farmers who enlist fresh-food devotees to pay in advance for their own slice of a farm's bounty.

"It was easier to go to the bank and say 'We have these people who want to buy our produce,'" said Sippel, who, like his wife, grew up in the suburbs. It was during college that he developed an interest in agriculture that tries to do right by the environment by largely hewing to organic principles.

Referred to in shorthand as a CSA, for community supported agriculture, these arrangements require consumers pay upfront, or at least make an early down payment, in exchange for a share of what the farm produces. Though exact figures are harder to come by than the lettuce, tomatoes and peppers the Sippels grow on their land, the number of farmers forging direct financial ties with those who consume their food has increased in recent years, observers say.

Estimates put the number of CSAs at 1,500 or so nationwide; in many cases, existing CSAs also appear to be growing more food for more people, some who follow such farms say.

For the Sippels and others like them, forming a CSA seemed to be the best way to carve out a living from farming.

Typically, farmers retain about 19 cents of every dollar in food they sell. The rest goes to things like processing, transportation and marketing. With CSAs, farmers aren't forced to spend as much, helping boost their earnings in many cases.

"Costs are pretty out of control right now," Sippel said, referring to demand for land and rising prices for supplies that he faces in running his 77-acre farm with his wife, Lisa.

Sippel said getting a predictable amount of money early in the season makes it easier to balance expenses. Efficiency and sustainability have become watchwords of his efforts and have allowed him some of the sure-footedness he displays in overseeing his farm in Mount Gilead, a village of about 3,300 people in central Ohio.

Buying a tie to the land

But beyond the steady money, farmers and shareholders draw satisfaction from an increased connection to the land. Consumers whose previous relationships with fruits and vegetables might have been no more intimate than the quick thumbing over one gives a vegetable at a grocery store are now signing up for more serious commitment.

Once a week or so, shareholders stop by the farm or a designated spot and pick up their allotment. The mix of fruits and vegetables — and, in some instances, meat and dairy products — often shifts as different foods become available, but each CSA shareholder is usually apportioned the same amount and variety of food.

The Sippels added 25 shareholders this year, bringing the total to 175; they charge \$560 for a share that brings about 30 weeks of food — a bit more than 20 or so weeks that is typical of many CSAs in their area.

James Sturz, a writer in New York, contends he saves money by participating in a CSA, but says the financial benefits weren't what motivated him.

"I was someone who wanted to be a healthy eater and I saw this is as my opportunity as well as a chance to participate in a farm cycle."

Andrea Beaman, a self-described holistic health counselor, said her interest in fresh, locally grown food produced without use of pesticides led her to CSAs. Beaman, who has a frying pan hanging from her living room wall signed by fellow contestants on the reality show "Top Chef," conducts classes on healthful cooking.

"The people who are eating locally now are the people who were eating organic four to five years ago," she said. "It's a natural progression."

Customers share the financial risk

While often bountiful, farming can also produce headaches and financial hardship. Unlike farmers' markets, where shoppers can bypass wilted lettuce or bruised vegetables, both CSA farmers and shareholders face risks like disease or damaging weather. Sippel noted.

This allows farmers to spread some of the financial risks of farming beyond simply depending on insurance policies.

"Part of insulating risk is the number of plantings and the diversity of crops we raise," Sippel said, noting that generally one crop a year will fail but that other harvests make up for the loss.

Sippel noted that some CSAs fail because they don't set their prices high enough or they give participants too much food, making consumers feel wasteful and hesitant to participate in future years.

Despite its risks, CSA farming can be fruitful.

Deborah Kavakos, a farmer in South Cairo, N.Y., grows fruit and vegetables for 10 of the 50 or so CSAs in New York City and this year saw the number of participants in her CSAs reach capacity months earlier than in years past.

To keep spirits high and avoid groans like "Not more broccoli!" CSA farmers tend to produce a rich variety of food. Kavakos grows about 45 to 50 crops on the 40 acres she farms with her husband, Pete. This requires an intricate dance to balance planting and harvesting.

"You're continually planting and replanting. In the morning it's mizuna (a type of Japanese salad green), by the afternoon it's transplanted back to lettuce again," she said.

Despite the hard work, she enjoys the connection with those who eat her food.

"It's absolutely the most rewarding thing that we could've been done with our lives. You get to be very friendly with everybody that's involved."

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