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Growing pains

Organic farmers' harvest subscriptions face increased demand, consumer ambivalence

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Vaudois Handley makes a persuasive argument.

“This is going to be a huge business,” he said of “community supported agriculture,” a growing network of organic farms selling subscriptions to consumers. For a set amount – usually \$20 to \$45 – people receive 10 pounds or more of freshly harvested produce each week.

Handley, a La Jollan who delivers the organic goods for Garden of Eden, a coop of four California farms, lists the advantages:

You save time. “It gets delivered to your door, every Friday.”

You enjoy garden-fresh, pesticide-free fruit and vegetables.

You save gas. “People are tired of driving everywhere.”

You reduce the vast carbon footprint caused by shipping imported produce to local grocery stores. “In the supermarket, you see cherries coming from 3,000 miles away.”

All this, plus your food dollars support local farmers. What's not to like?

Well, *er*, ahem. Oh my, this is *awkward*. But there is one problem.

You.

“People tend to be quite hypocritical about the environment,” said Stephenie Caughlin, the owner of Seabreeze Organic Farm in Sorrento Hills. “They talk green. But they don't put their money where their mouth is.”

In the local farming ranks, there's a great divide. Eco-optimists such as Handley say that rising gas prices, increased attention to food safety and nutrition, and economic jitters only bolster the cause.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Stephenie Caughlin inspected corn at Seabreeze Organic Farm. Some subscribers can't handle the bounty they receive, she said.

“Even Oprah Winfrey put this in her magazine,” said JoanE Marrero, community supported agriculture director for Escondido's J.R. Organics. “If she does a show about this, forget about it.”

But it's not hard to find weary farmers who insist that anyone who views the current landscape as sunny and hopeful is gazing through green-colored glasses.

“The main complaint we heard from customers was they had so much food,” said Carollyn Reiman, who ran Fallbrook's Organic Planet Farms from 1996 until hanging up her hoe in 2003. “It kept them on their toes.

“And they had to be willing to cook. A lot of people aren't interested in cooking these days.”

Community supported agriculture, in the view of Seabreeze's Caughlin, is a lot like spinach. Leafy greens are good for you – yeah, yeah, fine, fine – but who really eats the stuff?

“I get a lot of new customers,” Caughlin said. “And I get a lot of customers who drop out.”

Baffled by baby celery

If you're a Civil War buff accustomed to seeing CSA on belt buckles and other Confederate States of America relics, hearing organic farmers chatter about CSA may sound odd. *This* CSA movement, though, is rooted far from Dixie.

Robyn Van En, who operated a farm in South Egremont, Mass., is credited with forming this country's first CSA, borrowing from European and Japanese models.

Van En, who died in 1997, is honored by Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pa. There, the Robyn Van En Center studies CSAs – sometimes called “subscription farms” because clients “subscribe” for a season or more – across the country. In 1990, 50 of these farms could be found in the U.S.; in January 2006, when the center completed its most recent agricultural census, there were 1,140.

One of the oldest CSAs in San Diego County is Seabreeze, where Caughlin has been delivering organics for more than 21 years. She has harvested a bushful of insight into mulberries, celery, feverfew and good-and-sustainable-earth romanticism.

On a spring morning, she is dressed for work in a yellow “Life Is Good” ball cap, checked tan-and-yellow Old Navy blouse, spotless white shorts and socks, faded canvas slip-on sneakers. It is a cheery ensemble, reflecting her mood. Well, one of her moods.

The vegetables and fruits? Loves 'em. “Have you ever tasted anything so fresh?” she gushes as a stranger munches a just-plucked arugula leaf.

Folks who wax rhapsodic about farming, especially in its politically correct Greener Acres form? They tick her off.

“It is so expensive and exhausting just to produce food,” she says, patrolling her astonishingly fertile two acres, home to 70 egg-laying hens, carrot patches, a cornfield, onion crop and strawberry plants, the latter planted in foam tubs stacked five deep. “They talk about fair trade for other countries? There's no such thing here.”

Those rising gas prices that are encouraging consumers to jump aboard the CSA bandwagon, especially if farmers pay to fill up that bandwagon? They have increased her costs.

The tightening credit market? That's squeezing her finances.

The public's reported hunger for organic food? Don't get her started.

Life on Seabreeze appears idyllic, especially for visitors who can plop down into a chair beneath the 70-foot poplar and soak in the view to Torrey Pines State Reserve and the Pacific. But Caughlin has no time for lounging. Inside her office, she is sorting the bills and reviewing the delivery schedule for her 120 customers when the phone rings. The caller is one of those customers.

One of *those* customers.

"That's OK!" Caughlin says into the receiver.

She listens. Then: "Well, what's your understanding of your connection to the farm?"

Listens. Then: "What are some of the things you are having trouble with? The baby celery? Did you try chopping it in a salad, or with eggs or in a stew? It's very nutritious."

Listens. Then, perhaps too quickly: "Well, it doesn't jump up and chop itself, does it?"

There's 10 minutes of this, of someone who paid good money for organic food – and who is now baffled, overwhelmed by the sheer green abundance arriving on her porch every week.

Farmer and customer agree to give it another try. But as Caughlin hangs up, her brow is furrowed.

"People don't get it," she says.

Thinking inside the box

Perhaps it's asking too much, to change a lifetime's habits in a month, a season, a year. When Joe Rodriguez Jr. told his father that he would no longer use chemicals on their farm, a parcel Rodriguezes had worked for more than 50 years, the old man balked.

But Junior prevailed, earning California Organic Certification for his J.R. Organics. That was in 1986; 22 years later, there's a sense that Rodriguez deftly anticipated the public's changing mood.

"People are more concerned about their health than they have ever been," said JoanE – yes, that's really her name – Marrero, the farm's CSA director. "Everybody wants clean water, clear air, clean food."

Still, J.R. Organics was surprised by how many people wanted paid subscriptions to the farm's produce. Formed last September, the new CSA program now has more than 150 clients. "It has grown faster than we anticipated," Marrero said.

Increased demand also overwhelmed Be Wise Ranch, Bill and Marsanne Brammer's organic operation in the San Pasqual and Santa Fe valleys. Be Wise's CSA subscriptions are sold out for the quarter ending in mid-June.

J.R. Organics offers four-week trial subscriptions (\$118) and, after that initial period, prepaid 12-week deals (\$177 for biweekly boxes, \$354 weekly). Boxes always contain 11 items. A recent shipment included a four-pack of lettuce heads, considered a single item; a head of red romaine; patsoi, an Asian green; spring onions; cucumbers; summer squash, beets; basil; blood oranges; Gala apples; and strawberries.

Deliveries are made to central locations around San Diego and Riverside counties.

Unlike “wannabe CSAs” – Marrero's term for outfits that fill boxes from various sources – J.R. concentrates on its own crops. “We grow about 90 percent of what's in our box,” Marrero said.

Handley can't make the same claim, as the organics he delivers come from four farms, including J.R. Organics. The other three: Budwood in Fallbrook; Sage Mountain, Hemet; and Smit Orchards in Linden, near Stockton. The box he delivered to 25 families late last month included lettuce, broccoli or Swiss chard, onions, baby cale, Italian and eight ball squash, cucumbers, spinach, oranges, cherries, apriums (an apricot-plum hybrid), avocados, lemons and Oro Blanco grapefruit.

The cost: \$42 a box.

“That's enough for one person for one week,” Handley said.

But if that person lacks an extensive repertoire of veggie-intensive recipes, the box – and the commitment it represents – may be too much.

“A lot of people come and go, yes,” Marrero said. “Excellent customer service is very important. You are not just building a business, you are building a community.”

'Labor of idiocy'

This community relies on farmers – or brokers like Handley – being able to charge a fair price and earn a fair profit.

But what happens if expenses rise? If, for instance, gas prices reach \$6 or \$7 a gallon? “You are not going to get these farmers to drive to farmers markets” or delivery points, Caughlin says. “They'll stay at home and sell in their communities.”

And what happens when this generation of farmers retires? Caughlin will turn 60 this summer; she has no kids. Even if she did, it's unlikely she would encourage anyone to follow her into a profession she calls “a labor of idiocy.”

From her hilltop farm, she can see the future. It looks like a battalion of Spanish-style single family homes marching across ridge lines, into valleys, across plains.

On her farm, you can find marjoram, oregano, pineapple guava, beets, leeks, lemon verbena. You'll seek in vain, though, for a glimpse of hope for the CSA business model.

“Look at the cost of land, the cost of water, the cost of fertilizer,” Caughlin says. “I'm loyal to the customers I have. But the sustainability of all of this depends on my being able to find other avenues of income.”

She plans a bread oven, for baking classes. An artist's studio, for painting classes. Quail, to expand her egg business.

The work is hard but not without its rewards. On this hectic day, Caughlin steals a few seconds to cluck at the baby ducklings, savor a juicy strawberry, catch a fresh breeze.

“I'm an optimist by profession. Every time you plant a seed, it's hopeful. Every time you let a hen sit on an egg, you are hopeful,” she said. “But I'm a pessimist by experience.”

Creamy Corn and Vegetable Soup

6 servings

4 cups fresh corn kernels or 2 (10-ounce) packages frozen, thawed

2 cups nonfat milk

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 large onion, diced (about 2 cups)

1 medium red bell pepper, seeded and diced (about 1 cup)

1/2 pound zucchini, diced

2 cups low-sodium chicken or vegetable broth

2 plum tomatoes, seeded and diced

3/4 teaspoon salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1/2 cup fresh basil leaves, cut into ribbons

Put 2 cups of the corn and the milk into a blender or food processor, and process until smooth. Set aside.

Heat the oil in a large soup pot over medium-high heat. Add the onion, bell pepper, and zucchini and cook, stirring until the vegetables are tender, about 5 minutes. Add the remaining 2 cups of corn and the broth and bring to a boil. Add the pureed corn and tomatoes and cook until warmed through, but not boiling. Add the salt and season with pepper. Serve garnished with the basil ribbons.

Per serving: 180 calories, 4 g fat (1 g saturated), 8.5 g protein, 33 g carbohydrates, 4 g fiber, 2 mg cholesterol, 365 mg sodium.

(From Ellie Krieger, Food Network.)

Asian Spinach Salad With Orange and Avocado

4 servings

2 tablespoons finely chopped shallots

2 tablespoons seasoned rice vinegar

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

2 teaspoons minced peeled fresh ginger

1/4 teaspoon (generous) Asian sesame oil

Salt and pepper, to taste

1 navel orange

6 ounces baby spinach leaves, washed

1 avocado, halved, pitted, peeled, cut into 1/2-inch wedges

Whisk first 5 ingredients in large bowl. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Set dressing aside.

Cut off peel and white pith from orange. Cut orange into 1/3-inch rounds; cut rounds crosswise in half. Add spinach to dressing; toss to coat. Add avocado and orange; toss gently.

Per serving: 153 calories (65 percent from fat), 11 g fat (1 g saturated) 0 mg cholesterol, 14 g carbohydrates, 2.5 g protein, 6 g dietary fiber.

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