Union of Concerned Scientists

FACT SHEET

Community Supported Agriculture
for Meat and Eggs

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SMART CHOICES FOR U.S. FOOD PRODUCTION

The first generation of community supported agriculture (CSA) programs invited consumers to buy shares of local farm harvests in advance and then reap the benefits in the form of fresh produce every week. These programs have grown significantly in recent years as thousands of independent small and midsize farms across the United States realized the potential opportunity in marketing their fresh fruits and vegetables directly to consumers at a fair price. And now a new trend within the CSA movement—meat CSAs or buying clubs—offers consumers one more way of providing their families with fresh, local foods produced in a sustainable manner.

What Is a CSA?

In a CSA program (generally called "a CSA" and sometimes referred to as subscription farming), a community of individual consumers interacts directly with one or more food producers. CSAs are membership-based and founded on a relationship of mutual support.[1] Members pay an annual or seasonal fee toward the producer's operating costs and, in turn, receive weekly or monthly shares of the harvest.

Estimates of the number of active CSA programs in the United States vary, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture's latest agricultural census found more than 12,500 farms marketing products through CSAs in 2007, with such farms operating in every state.[2] The National Center for Appropriate Technology estimates that CSAs supply food to more than 270,000 households each year.[3] They vary widely in size—from small farms with a few dozen subscribers to large CSAs such as Angelic Organics, which serves many hundreds of households in the Chicago area. CSAs also vary in length of subscription season (summer only or year-round), types of foods offered (produce, eggs, meat, and/or dairy products), and method of distribution (delivery or on-farm pick-up). CSA farmers often, but not always, practice organic methods.

Whether they sell primarily produce or meat and other animal products, most CSAs have several basic principles in common:

Community investment. Payment for an entire season of shares is generally made before the growing season begins (for example, vegetable growers in many parts of the country typically accept payment between January and March). This arrangement provides farmers with financial capital when it is most needed to buy seeds, repair equipment, and make other investments for the season ahead. And food dollars stay local, which strengthens communities.

Risk and reward sharing. Throughout the season, members receive as much food as nature and good farming practices provide. Sharing the burden of crop losses due to bad weather or pests helps farmers weather bad times, but when there's a bumper crop, everyone wins.

Diversity. CSAs often introduce new members to unusual vegetables, rare heirloom varieties, and unfamiliar cuts of meat. Having a guaranteed market gives growers room to experiment, and raising a variety of foods helps ensure there will always be plenty in members'

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boxes even if disaster strikes one or two crops. Many CSA farmers include cooking tips and recipes with each box to help members learn to appreciate unfamiliar foods.

Seasonality. Fruit and vegetable CSAs tend to run from spring through fall except in the warmest climates, and harvest shares are typically delivered (or picked up on-farm) weekly. Meat CSAs may operate any time of year, with shares usually doled out on a monthly schedule.

A Smarter Source for Meat

In the past few years, dozens of meat and egg CSAs have sprouted up across the country and appear to be thriving. They range from small five-acre farms with a flock of laying chickens to much larger spreads raising cattle, sheep, and hogs.

Meat CSAs have emerged in response to increasing demand for foods produced locally and with concern for the surrounding environment. As consumers have learned more about the environmental and health risks associated with raising food animals in large, overcrowded CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations), they have sought out meats produced in ways that avoid these costly problems. A growing number of livestock farmers are now raising animals efficiently by working *with* nature rather than against it.

Pasture-based farms are one example. "Smart" pasture operations not only raise a variety of animals using low-cost grasses for feed, but also improve animals' health, maximize cost-efficiency, and minimize farm pollution. Animals' health improves because they are allowed to move around outdoors, and cattle and sheep are better able to digest grasses than grain-based feed. Efficiency is maximized because well-managed pastures require less maintenance, energy, pesticides, and water than feed crops, are less susceptible to erosion, and absorb more of the nutrients applied to them. And pollution is minimized because manure, which CAFOs produce in unmanageable and hazardous quantities, can be used to fertilize pastures or nearby crops in the smaller quantities generated by pasture-based farms. Furthermore, grass-fed beef and milk are often more nutritious than beef and milk from CAFOs.[4]

2SILOS FARM, OHIO

FORMER URBAN PROFESSIONALS Denise and Cameron Anderson bought their five-acre Ohio farm, dubbed 2silos, in 2003. Raising chickens and then selling the eggs at Columbus-area farmers markets was mostly a hobby for Denise, who had grown up on an Indiana farm, but when Cameron lost his job as a Web developer, the couple—along with teenage son Peter—decided to expand their operation and team up with several neighboring farms to start a CSA. Through savvy marketing, referrals from friendly vegetable farmers, and word of mouth, 2silos signed up 33 subscribers in its first year (2008). "We have had so much interest, the CSA has really sold itself," Denise says. "I guess we filled a niche locally."

The Andersons show off some of their pasture-raised animals. ©2silos Farm

The CSA offers monthly boxes of various cuts of meat in full (20 lb.) and half (10 lb.) shares. It also features the innovative "adopt-a-hen" program, in which member families receive 40 dozen eggs, a stewing chicken, and five gallons of henhouse compost over the course of a year. Along with their pasture-raised chickens and lamb, the Andersons supply the CSA with geese and vegetables, while neighboring farms supply pasture-raised pork, rabbits, and organically raised grass-fed beef. In an effort to make 2silos as sustainable as possible, Cameron converts waste cooking oil from a local Chinese restaurant and a nearby small college into biodiesel that can be used for heating and transportation on the farm.

Business is so good that in 2009, 2silos Farm will launch a 100-share summer meat CSA as well as a new summer harvest CSA for produce, eggs, and preserves.

Hog hoop barns offer a sophisticated alternative for raising pork that does not require large pastures. These arched structures are bedded deeply with straw and offer freedom of movement that is much healthier for the animals than small confinement pens. For poultry, mobile chicken coops that can be moved easily from pasture to pasture enable producers to raise birds outdoors while also providing shelter and nest boxes.

Many meat CSA farmers are raising their animals on pasture and in hoop barns, enabling members to reap the rewards of these modern production practices.

Challenges and Benefits of Meat CSAs

Meat CSAs can be more challenging to operate than vegetable CSAs, for a variety of reasons. Meat is highly perishable, and once frozen it must remain so until the consumer is ready to defrost and cook it. CSA managers, therefore, must carefully organize deliveries and pick-up locations and times. Access to slaughtering and butchering facilities for meat CSAs can also be difficult, as large plants are often closed to smaller producers, and facilities that are open may be located far away. Another challenge is what to do with lesser-known, "exotic" cuts of meat such as pigs' feet and organ meats. To stay profitable, small producers must be able to sell every part of their animals, requiring creative marketing and a willingness on the part of members to try new products.

Members face certain challenges as well, beginning with the need for sufficient freezer space to store a month's worth of meat at a time. Most CSAs offer two or more share sizes to accommodate families of different sizes, but even with the smallest share, some

WHEN JOHN AND KASSANDRA BARTON started farming in New York's North Country, they raised sheep the conventional way, feeding the animals grain as they had been taught to do. But soon they found themselves wondering why it was so hard to keep their animals healthy. "So many of the lambs were weak and some died," Kassandra says. "We did our research and started to suspect that the grain diet was not good for their overall health." So the Bartons transitioned their 180-acre farm to an entirely grass-based system, with startling results. "It was like taking a person off a junk food diet. Now we don't need to intervene as much or use medications. The newborn lambs just pop right up and do what they're supposed to do. Plus, the flavor of meat has changed for the better."

Today, the Bartons raise animals that do best on grass: their sheep and cattle are mostly heritage breeds known for their hardiness and good flavor, and their pigs forage the same fields, eating grasses and roots supplemented with apples from the farm. Only their chickens' diet is supplemented with grain.

These young Suffolk ewes are part of the Bartons' heritage breed flock. ©8 o'Clock Ranch

Unlike most CSAs, membership in the 8 o'Clock Ranch CSA is not limited to local residents. The Bartons had been selling frozen meats over the Internet before they ever started a CSA. Now, they offer three-, six-, and 12-month memberships, with monthly boxes hand-delivered to nearby families or shipped in insulated containers to those farther away. In cooperation with two neighboring farms, they sell organically raised (but not certified) lamb, pork, eggs, grass-fed beef, and maple syrup. Goat's milk and goat cheeses will soon join the lineup.

The CSA model allows the Bartons to have a closer relationship with their customers—even those members who live in other states. "With single-order selling, we never experienced much feedback, which is really critical to helping us run the farm," Kassandra says. "It's great to hear what people like and what they'd like more of, and the CSA provides that opportunity."

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members may find themselves with more meat than they can consume.

Even with these challenges, the rewards can be great for both the operators and members of a well-run meat CSA. The arrangement especially suits small and midsize farms that raise a variety of animals and crops for feed. CSAs provide guaranteed markets for these farms and allow the farmers to market directly to consumers, which helps make it affordable for consumers to buy high-quality meat and eggs that have been produced in a sustainable manner.

Links and Resources

To find a meat or vegetable CSA in your area, visit one of the following websites:

- www.localharvest.org
- www.csacenter.org
- www.eatwellguide.org

ENDNOTES

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SONOMA COUNTY MEAT BUYING CLUB, CALIFORNIA

SONOMA COUNTY IS BEST KNOWN for its wine grapes, but thanks to an experiment conducted by the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE), its livestock producers are giving the county a reputation for quality meat as well. In early 2008, the university's cooperative extension service partnered with Sonoma Direct, a local meat wholesaler with processing capacity, to launch the Sonoma County Meat Buying Club.

The club's coordinator, Jacqueline Rotlisberger, said the UCCE's Sonoma County office was looking for a way to help local ranchers stay viable. "Grapes are important in this area, of course, but we want to ensure that other farmers can also survive and thrive here," Rotlisberger says. "We saw the success of vegetable CSAs and decided to see if it could be replicated with livestock."

Martin Albini raises 250 grass-fed lambs each year for the Sonoma County Meat Buying Club. His family has raised livestock in the county for three generations.

Beginning with a survey posted online and mailed to area residents by the county's water utility, the UCCE gauged local interest in a meat buying club. The response was overwhelming: 300 households returned the survey and 70 signed up for the first season of monthly boxes of various frozen cuts of meat. Fifteen farmers supply the club's regular deliveries of grass-fed beef and lamb, corn-finished beef, and pastured pork, which are all raised without antibiotics. Eggs, goat meat, bacon, and duck are also available by request. To participate in the club, farms must be located in Sonoma County or within 25 miles of its borders.

Through word of mouth and publicity generated by club-sponsored dinners featuring the work of local chefs, the club's membership grew to 140. Recent improvements in service include extended pick-up times and more convenient pick-up locations.

A recent grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farmers Market Promotion Program (which seeks to improve and expand farmers markets and CSAs) will enable Rotlisberger and her UCCE colleagues to run the club for at least another year. In the meantime, they will not only attempt to identify a nonprofit organization that could take over the CSA, but also develop a business plan to share with other groups interested in starting meat buying clubs.

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