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Solidarity through Community Supported Agriculture

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Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently launched a new initiative called “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” (USDA, 2009). The slogan of the program is “Every family needs a farmer; do you know yours?” The irony of this “new” initiative is that one hundred years ago, before the USDA industrialized agriculture through the “Green Revolution,” almost every family knew their farmer and knew their food. One half of the nation’s population resided on farms, and most farms grew the majority of their own food, as well as their neighbors’ food. In this not-so-distant past, most people knew exactly where their food came from: the soil, sun, water, and air that surrounded them; and the labor of their friends, family, neighbors, and work animals. Family and neighbors were tied together by a common resource base and frequently shared meals. Entire communities worked together to pull in the season’s harvest, neighbors toiling side-by-side in the fields, their future and prosperity bound together by a shared dependence on the bounty and vagaries of Mother Nature.

One hundred years ago, solidarity was a way of life in America. Farms and their surrounding communities engaged in a de facto form of shared risk and shared rewards. Farms depended on their community to assist with planting and harvesting. Communities in turn relied upon their local farms to provide the food they needed to survive the winter. When farms suffered crop losses due to severe weather or pest outbreaks, the entire community rallied to support them. When farms experienced bumper crops, the neighborhood was invited to participate in the ensuing feasts. Before the advent of the highway system and long distance transportation of food from massive industrial farms, every farm was in essence a community supported farm.

Shared Risk, Shared Rewards

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a form of shared risk and shared rewards. By investing in a CSA share, consumers provide a form of insurance and protection against catastrophic losses, thereby helping to keep small farmers in business even during the most difficult growing seasons. Farming is inherently a challenging and unpredictable profession; Mother Nature may some years deliver ideal weather, minimal pests and diseases, and bountiful harvests, but in other years can devastate entire crops with pest and disease outbreaks, hailstorms, and floods or droughts. During good years, a CSA farm shares its profits with CSA members in the form of large quantities of fresh produce at below market prices. The farm makes less money from a CSA than from market sales during these years, but is provided the financial security of receiving CSA payments at the beginning of the season, while purchasing seeds, animal feed, equipment, and other necessary supplies. In poor years, CSA members help the farmer carry the burden of the crop losses experienced by receiving smaller shares and perhaps paying higher than the average market price for their produce. By assuming this risk, the CSA members help keep farmers afloat and maintain the farm's financial solvency by providing a source of income even when market sales may be low. Averaged over a number of years, CSA members generally receive more produce for lower prices than consumers at farmers markets, and CSA farmers have the security of a stable source of income even during calamitous growing seasons that might bankrupt other small producers.

Distant Threats

Unfortunately, the 2009 growing season was neither easy nor productive for farmers in Maine. The weather was unusually cool and cloudy, with record high precipitation, providing optimal conditions for disease and pest outbreaks and less than ideal growing conditions for many plants. In particular, late blight struck farms and home gardens in Maine in an unprecedented epidemic, affecting the region months earlier than normal. The blight epidemic devastated organic tomato and potato crops throughout the state, infecting an estimated 90% of organic tomato plantings and 50% of organic potatoes (Dill, 2010 and Sideman, 2010). Ironically, the late blight fungus was introduced to Maine by a Georgia-based plant nursery, Bonnie Plants, which ships their products nationwide to big box stores like Home Depot, Lowe's, and WalMart (Lambert and Johnson, 2009). The fact that a plant nursery located thousands of miles away was the source of economic hardship for countless Maine organic farmers demonstrates the dangers inherent in an industrialized food system that relies on transporting plants thousands of miles, along with any diseases or pests they may carry. While our small, local farms are working hard to protect our state's food security and preserve our environment by producing healthy, organic food, large factory farms from other states have threatened our agricultural economy and endangered our food security.

Unite for Local Food Security

Ultimately, if we are concerned about food security for our children and grandchildren's futures, we must take responsibility as a local community for feeding one another and ourselves. The industrial agriculture system that produces the vast majority of our nation's food has been implicated in repeated and fatal incidences of food contamination,

and is one of the leading causes of water pollution in lakes, rivers, and coastal zones across the United States (U.S. EPA, 2010). This agricultural system is also responsible for approximately 19 percent of our economy's fossil fuel consumption and 37 percent of our nation's greenhouse gas emissions, producing only one calorie of food energy for every 10 calories of fossil fuel energy used (Pollan, 2008). As citizens concerned about the health of our families, the preservation of our environment and natural resources, and the consequences of a finite supply of fossil fuels, together we can achieve food security and improve our community by supporting the small, organic farmers who are working to redefine American agriculture.

However, these small family farmers need our help. They are constantly in competition with factory farms that can produce food for far less money due to the use of cheap labor and federal taxpayer subsidies and are covered against catastrophic losses by large insurance companies. To insure themselves against irreparable losses during tough years, small farmers rely upon the assistance and support of their consumers, many of whom they interact with directly and know on a personal basis. By knowing our farmer and investing in their future, we can also know our food: where it comes from, how it is grown, and the manner in which its production sustains our health, protects our environment, and ensures the vitality of our future. We must continue to demand and expect these essential goods and services from our small, local farmers. But we must also stand in solidarity with our farmers when the capriciousness of Mother Nature or the damages wrought by factory farms threatens their livelihood. As you are considering whether to renew your CSA membership this year, or perhaps enroll as a first-time member, know that the farmers you support are growing food for your health, your environment, and your family. As Thomas Jefferson once said, "While the farmer holds the title to the land, actually it belongs to all the people because civilization itself rests upon the soil." Claim your shared ownership of this common resource by supporting your local farm and investing in their CSA.

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