America’s Next Top Farm-To-Consumer Model: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

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America’s Next Top Farm-To-Consumer Model: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

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Harvard Law School
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I. Introduction

Over the last two decades, widely publicized foodborne illness outbreaks, heightened environmental awareness, and mounting concerns about widening American waistlines have put the nation’s industrial agriculture system squarely under the public microscope. Although Congress, FDA, USDA, and state and local bodies have passed measures aimed at addressing consumer apprehension about the quality and impacts of food in an effort to restore confidence in our country’s agricultural sector, many Americans have nevertheless undertaken significant efforts to alter their food purchasing habits to reflect their newfound consciousness.

Thus, the organic food segment remains one of the fastest growing sectors of the food industry. Beyond organics, however, a new loosely organized push to re-connect producers and consumers known as the “local food movement” has emerged in the public spotlight. From the expanding number of Whole Foods markets across the country touting their locally sourced products to the burgeoning slew of restaurants emphasizing their locally sourced ingredients, Americans’ desire for local foods has skyrocketed. Documentary films such as Food, Inc. advocating for increased consumption of locally grown crops have been box office hits, while authors pushing similar messages have attained near celebrity-status in some circles. In fact, journalist Michael Pollan’s 2008 book, In Defense of Food, claimed the number one spot on the New York Times non-fiction best seller list for six weeks that year. A word describing

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2 http://www.ota.com (Organic Trade Association’s website).
3 On its website, Whole Foods writes the following: “We are permanently committed to buying from local producers whose fruits and vegetables meet our high quality standards, particularly those who farm organically and are themselves dedicated to environmentally friendly, sustainable agriculture. We are greatly increasing our efforts in this regard by further empowering our individual store and regional buyers to seek out locally grown produce.” http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/products/locally-grown/.
individuals who strive to eat locally grown foods, known as “locavores”, has even entered the American lexicon.\(^6\)

As a result of these developments, small family-owned farms have benefited from a surge in demand for their produce. A significant number of these farms embrace community-supported agriculture (CSA), a model that puts farmers and consumers in direct contact, promising to offer Americans more healthful and fresh food while guaranteeing American farmers a market for their harvest.\(^7\) Estimated at only 50 farms in 1990,\(^8\) CSA farms have exploded with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) finding more than 12,500 CSAs operating across the country in 2007.\(^9\)

Unfortunately, even as CSAs have proliferated rapidly across the country in recent years, academic research on them has been somewhat diffuse. This paper is an attempt to survey and synthesize the findings from the literature on CSA’s. I hope to present a comprehensive picture of CSA farming at a national, and, where possible, a regional and local level, with an eye towards evaluating whether CSA farming may yet pose a real if not detectable threat to the modern methods of industrial agriculture and distribution that have served as the backbone of America’s food system since the end of World War II. Particular attention is given to the results from the most recent nationwide survey of CSAs which took place in 2001 under the auspices of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.\(^10\) My analysis makes clear that there are significant benefits to CSA farming for both farmers and consumers. As such, it would not come as a

\(^7\) A more detailed definition of CSAs can be found infra Part II.
\(^8\) [http://www.localharvest.org/descriptions.jsp](http://www.localharvest.org/descriptions.jsp).
\(^10\) Although this survey was conducted nearly 10 years ago, it offers the most detailed and wide-ranging account of CSA farming across the country. Its findings are referenced heavily in the CSA literature to this day. Hereinafter, it will be referred to as the “2001 National Survey”. Daniel Lass, Ashley Bevis, G.W. Stevenson, John Hendrickson, and Kathy Ruhf, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Community Supported Agriculture Entering the 21\(^{st}\) Century: Results from the 2001 National Survey, [http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/csa_survey_01.pdf](http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/csa_survey_01.pdf).
surprise if the growth of new and existing CSA operations were to continue unabated. Nevertheless, considerable challenges remain, particularly in the areas of farmer compensation and member retention and, as such, it remains to be seen whether CSA farming will ever have the capacity and momentum necessary to unseat modern industrial agriculture as the chief farm-to-consumer model in America.

II. What is a CSA?

The exact arrangements of a CSA operation vary from farm to farm. Thus, there is no precise definition that is commonly referenced in the academic literature on CSAs. Nevertheless, the USDA’s Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, has put forth its own definition which reads thus:

“In basic terms, CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or "share-holders" of the farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production. Members also share in the risks of farming, including poor harvests due to unfavorable weather or pests. By direct sales to community members, who have provided the farmer with working capital in advance, growers receive better prices for their crops, gain some financial security, and are relieved of much of the burden of marketing.”

The USDA’s Office of Community Development also offers a definition of CSA which reads as follows:

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11 Gary Lamb, Vice President, Institute for Social Renewal, Community Supported Agriculture: Can it Become the Basis for a New Associative Economy?, http://socialrenewal.com/pdfs/CommunitySupportedAgriculture%5B2%5D.pdf.
“Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs directly link local residents and
nearby farmers, eliminating "the middleman" and increasing the benefits to both the
farmer and the consumer. In a CSA program, a farmer grows food for a group of local
residents (called "shareholders" or "subscribers") who commit at the beginning of each
year to purchase part of that farm's crop. The shareholders thus directly support a local
farm and receive a low-cost weekly or monthly supply of fresh, high-quality produce.
The farmers receive an initial cash investment to finance their operation and a higher
percentage of each crop dollar because of direct delivery. Both parties jointly share the
benefits and risks.”\textsuperscript{13}

The Wikipedia entry on “Community Supported Agriculture provides a slightly more
concise definition:

“Community supported agriculture, a form of an alternative food network…is a socio-
economic model of agriculture and food distribution. A CSA consists of a community of
individuals who pledge support to a farming operation where the growers and
consumers share the risks and benefits of food production. CSAs usually consist of a
system of weekly delivery or pick-up of vegetables and fruit, in a vegetable box scheme,
and sometimes includes dairy products and meat.”\textsuperscript{14}

Some academic researchers boil down CSA to a marketing strategy. As one put it, CSA
is “a marketing strategy where consumers buy ‘shares’ in the farm before planting begins and
receive a portion of whatever is available each week of the growing season.”\textsuperscript{15} Whether one
conceptualizes CSA as a marketing strategy, a socioeconomic model of agriculture and food
distribution, a community, or as some other idea, the definitions offered do contain common
threads. First, consumers pay the farmers for the right to a portion of the farmer’s harvest.
Second, that payment (or at least some piece of it) is typically paid to the farmer at the beginning
of the planting season. Third, consumers and farmers engage in some level of risk-sharing with
respect to the success or failure of the crop harvest. Finally, the exchanges between farmers and

\textsuperscript{13} James Wilkinson, CD Technotes, Community Supported Agriculture (Mar. 2001),
http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/CDP-TN20.PDF.
\textsuperscript{14} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community-supported_agriculture.
\textsuperscript{15} Cheryl Brown & Stacy Miller, The Impacts of Local Markets: A Review of Research on Farmers Markets and
Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), 90 AMERICAN J. AGRICULTURAL ECON. 1296, 1296 (2008).
consumers are typically not mediated by third parties allowing for direct contact between the two sides.

In addition to the four overarching traits just described, many supporters of the CSA movement deeply believe that the industrial agricultural system has destroyed “true farming”, the cultural activity of tending and cultivating the land.\(^\text{16}\) Those supporters argue that true farming cannot survive in a market-based economy characterized by volatile prices, escalating land costs, and natural resource and human capital exploitation.\(^\text{17}\) The commodification of crops, they assert, has provided Americans with ostensibly cheap food, the true cost of which is hidden and will be borne by future generations as fossil fuel supplies shrink and environmental degradation becomes irreversible. Thus, CSA is presented not only as an alternative approach to providing consumers with fresh, healthy produce while possibly creating some form of community in the process, but also as a radical attempt to resist industrial agriculture.\(^\text{18}\)

### III. The Birth of CSA in the USA

Unlike numerous innovations in the agricultural sector that have changed the way food is planted, harvested, distributed, and sold to consumers, CSA is not an American creation. The CSA concept is widely believed to have been introduced to the US by a European organic farmer named Jan Vander Tuin in the mid-1980’s.\(^\text{19}\) Before arriving in the US, Vander Tuin had been working on a farm called Topinambur near Zurich, Switzerland that he had established using a CSA model in the early part of that decade. Topinambur employed biodynamic farming, an

\(^{16}\) Cynthia Abbott Cone & Andrea Myhre, *Community-Supported Agriculture: A Sustainable Alternative to Industrial Agriculture?*, 59 *Human Organization* 187, 188 (Summer 2000).

\(^{17}\) Id.

\(^{18}\) Id.

approach originated out of the writings of the 20th-century Austrian philosopher and educator Rudolf Steiner, and now considered to be one of the first modern organic ecological farming systems. Vander Tuin’s curiosity in producer-consumer alliances eventually led him to visit several other farms in Europe during that time including one in Geneva, Switzerland that had been inspired by the co-op movement in early 1970’s Chile.

With his European experiences in his pocket, Vander Tuin arrived in the US in 1984. He made his way to South Egremont, MA in 1985 after reading an article in an organic gardening magazine. It was there that he met with a young organic farmer at Indian Line Farm, Robyn Van En, now widely acknowledged as the first American CSA farmer. Van En’s presence in rural Massachusetts coincided with a movement that began in the late 1970’s of young professionals leaving their jobs in major metropolitan areas of the Northeast to revitalize abandoned small-scale farms which had been languishing in the wake of the rise of large, industrial farms across the country following the end of World War II.

Informed by Steiner’s work stressing the linkage of mutual interests between consumers and producers, Vander Tuin’s and Van En’s discussions ultimately propelled them and several others to create the CSA Garden at Great Barrington in 1986 in South Egremont. The CSA was set up as an unincorporated association managed on behalf of all shareholders. The group entered into a three-year lease with Van En to use her land at Indian Line Farm for a garden and grew its shareholder membership until 1990 when a large group of members left to start another

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22 Adam supra, note 19.
23 McFadden, supra note 21.
24 Adam supra, note 19.
farm. The impetus for the mass exodus has not been detailed.\textsuperscript{25} Despite the setback, Van En pressed on and later published one of the first known manuals to lay out the basic principles of the CSA model for farmers.\textsuperscript{26}

At around the same time that the CSA Garden at Great Barrington launched, a lesser known CSA enterprise, Temple-Wilton Community Farm, was being set up in New Hampshire. The founders of Temple-Wilton had met Van En in 1985 at a farming conference in Pennsylvania and had visited the group in South Egremont to exchange ideas.\textsuperscript{27} Like the Massachusetts farmers, the Temple-Wilton founders were inspired by the writings of Rudolf Steiner.\textsuperscript{28} Instead of charging members a fixed price per share as had been done at Van En’s CSA, the Temple-Wilton farmers laid out the financial picture of its operation in transparent detail and asked its members for a pledge to support the farm, a nod to the vast range of its members’ incomes and a practice which is still incorporated by many CSA farmers.\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{IV. CSA Sub-Models}

As the difference described above between the early Massachusetts and New Hampshire CSAs demonstrates, not all CSAs are created alike. The most important organizational distinction among CSAs centers on who controls key decisions: the farmers or the members. In the former case, commonly referred to as a “Subscription CSA”, farmers effectively have complete reign over the entire farm enterprise including operations, finances, and marketing.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{25} McFadden, \textit{supra} note 21.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Id.}
\end{footnotesize}
Members are typically not obligated to volunteer at the farm alongside the regular farm workers. As of 2006, subscription CSAs were believed to account for approximately 75% of all CSAs.\textsuperscript{30} In the “Shareholder CSA” arrangement, a core group of consumer-members are the driving force behind the farm’s strategic decisions. In some cases, the core group is simply a devoted group of individual members, while in others it might be a not-for-profit organization that has decided to integrate CSA into its food security or food justice programs. CSAs operated by not-for-profit organizations make up approximately 10% of all CSAs.\textsuperscript{31} As in the Subscription CSA, full-time farm laborers do the bulk of the physical work during the season. However, in many Shareholder CSA ventures, particularly those controlled by a core group of individuals, members are required to contribute some volunteer time to the farm. Although the shareholder CSA model now accounts for a small fraction of CSAs nationally, a much larger proportion of early CSAs in the mid- and late 1980’s embraced this approach which generated “sweat equity” and promoted a feeling of common purpose.\textsuperscript{32}

Other CSA models are being experimented with as well. In one arrangement, CSA members purchase a share that entitles them to receive a basket of local products often including vegetables, meat, and dairy, assembled from a variety of producers. To offer more flexibility to members, some CSAs now offer the ability for members to choose their own vegetables from the farm’s harvest by mixing and matching. Members are allotted a specified dollar amount per week or month that they can expend on whatever is available. As with all CSAs, member fees are paid up-front to the CSA managers for the growing season.

Differences in distance between farm and shareholder homes, refrigeration possibility, trucking and storage capacity, and labor availability contribute to a variety of distribution

\textsuperscript{30} Adam, supra note 19.
\textsuperscript{31} Id.
\textsuperscript{32} Lang, supra note 20.
arrangements. One of the most common arrangements is for shareholders to pick up their shares at the farm. As urban dwellers have increased their demand for locally produced food, many CSAs have established central pick-up sites at schools, parking lots, and other areas at which members can pick up their shares during a predetermined window of time. This approach saves farmers time since they are not responsible for packing shares and also contributes to greater interaction among shareholders at pick-up sites. There is evidence that workplace-hosted CSAs are popping up around the country by touting the convenience of office-based pickups. Finally, some CSAs even offer home delivery.

V. CSA Operational Characteristics

The 2001 National Survey reported that CSA was still a nascent farming model across the country. As of that time, the average CSA farm had only been in existence for 5.7 years and three-quarters of farms were in operation for eight years or less. Regional studies in the mid-2000’s showed some variation around that average with means of 5.6, 4.2, and 4.1 years in the Ohio Valley, Mid-Atlantic, and Upper Midwest regions, respectively, suggesting that CSA farming is more entrenched in other regions of the country such as New England where it all began.

33 Carol Goland, Community Supported Agriculture, Food Consumption Patterns, and Member Commitment, 24 CULTURE AND AGRICULTURE 14, 24 (2000).
34 Id. at 19.
35 Adam, supra note 19.
36 Goland, supra note 33, at 19.
37 Lass et.al., supra note 10.
Given the youth of most CSA operations, it should come as no surprise that many of the farmers do not own their farmland, but lease it instead.\textsuperscript{39} However, it appears that land use arrangements may vary region by region. For example, in a study of eight CSA farms in Minnesota, nearly all of the farmers owned their cropland.\textsuperscript{40}

The median CSA farm in the 2001 National Survey was just 15 acres and just over 70\% of CSA farms operated 49 acres or less of farmland, while the 1997 US Agricultural Census surveying a broad cross-section of American farms found that only about 30\% of farms operated in that size range.\textsuperscript{41} Indeed, CSA farms tend to be small-scale operations in stark contrast to the large-scale corporate farms that dominate the provision of fruits and vegetables at large grocery stores across the country. The typical CSA farm had just two growers working a combined 2,160 hours in a year. In addition, 68\% of farms reported hosting an additional one to four workers including laborers, interns, apprentices, etc. About half of those workers were paid a wage with other compensation coming in the form of room and board.\textsuperscript{42} Unfortunately, additional data on labor arrangements is thin.

For many CSA farms, the CSA model was one of several operations incorporated into the broader farming operation. About one-quarter of farms used less than 10\% of their cropland for the CSA operation, though nearly 15\% percent of the farms used between 90\% and 100\% of their cropland for the CSA enterprise.\textsuperscript{43} The acreage devoted to the CSA operation was negatively correlated with the total amount of cropland. Thus, it is clear that farms that focus their energies principally on CSA operations tend to be smaller farms.
In addition to CSA direct-to-consumer distribution, the vast majority of farms with CSA operations employed other methods to market and sell produce. Nearly 55% of CSA farms sold their produce direct to restaurant or retail store sales and/or at farmers markets.\textsuperscript{44} About one-third of CSA farms had an on-farm sales operation. Only 16% of CSA farms did not indicate the use of any marketing approach apart from CSA.\textsuperscript{45} These data could suggest that, for the more experienced CSA farmers, CSA farming has not been able to provide the income desired. For those farmers just beginning their CSA operations, the data hint that they may be hedging their bets on the financial return of their CSA operations. On the other hand, it could simply be the case that the marginal cost of utilizing other marketing methods is negligible (e.g. a CSA pick-up site might also be the site of a farmers market). Further inquiry would be useful to unearth the farmers’ motivations on this front.

VI. A Financial Snapshot of CSA Farms

To begin to understand the long-term viability of the CSA model, it is important to take a deeper look at the financial health of farms that incorporate the CSA concept into their farming operation. As described \textit{supra} in Part V, the CSA is just one of several approaches employed to generate revenue. According to the 2001 National Survey, nearly half of CSA farms offered shares to their members for 20 to 24 weeks with an additional 20% of farms provided shares for 25 to 29 weeks.\textsuperscript{46} The average “full” share was reported to feed 3.7 people, while the average “half” share served 2.1 people.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} Id.
\textsuperscript{45} Id.
\textsuperscript{46} Id.
\textsuperscript{47} Id.
The typical CSA farm sold about 56 full-shares and 47 half-shares per season to their members at $429 and $282, respectively.\textsuperscript{48} Prices around the mean in the 2001 National Survey were tightly clustered suggesting little variation despite the common practice of offering sliding scale prices to low-income members. As for income generated by the CSA operation, median income was reported to be $15,000 per season, while the mean income was about $33,500.\textsuperscript{49} This disparity reflects a strong pull on the figures by a number of very large CSA operations as well as the presence of many small CSA operators who may be experimenting with CSA or simply may have a limited demand for shares.

The 2001 National Survey authors also inquired about gross farm income to better understand the extent to which the revenue from a farm’s CSA operation accounted for the farm’s overall financial fitness. Gross farm income which includes all of a farm’s revenue streams showed a bi-modal distribution with 17% of respondents reporting $50,000 to $99,999 (the mode category chosen) in annual income while 16% reported gross farm income of only $10,000 to $19,999.\textsuperscript{50} The data reveal that there is a strong positive correlation between CSA income and gross farm income.\textsuperscript{51}

Most striking, however, is the degree to which CSA farms appear to be financially outperforming their non-CSA farm counterparts. For example, more than 60% of CSA farms had annual gross farm incomes of $20,000 or more whereas only about 40% of non-CSA farms achieved those incomes.\textsuperscript{52} In addition, more than half of CSA farmers reported non-farm of less than $10,000 and non-farm income was negatively correlated with CSA income.\textsuperscript{53} This is

\textsuperscript{48} Id.  
\textsuperscript{49} Id.  
\textsuperscript{50} Id.  
\textsuperscript{51} Id.  
\textsuperscript{52} Id.  
\textsuperscript{53} Id.
significant given that, as a whole, CSA farmers and non-CSA farmers across the country have increasingly come to rely on off-farm income for financial sustenance. As a study of eight CSA farms in Minnesota revealed, the farmers at only two of those farms surveyed reported that they were fully able to support themselves, while the rest conceded to taking on full and part-time jobs off the farm during the winter.

Although the CSA model appears to provide farmers with at least some financial benefits compared with non-CSA farming operations, operating a CSA in the black is no easy feat to master. To take a hypothetical example, assume that a CSA has 100 members with each share selling for $300 with half paid to the farmers at the beginning of the growing season and half paid at mid-season (a typical payment structure). Assuming that the farm does not have carryover funds from a previous year, the farmers will then have $15,000 of “interest-free” money with which to begin the season.

It appears that many inexperienced and also some experienced farmers focus on that “interest-free” loan, while overlooking the administrative challenge of managing 100 fifteen-dollar accounts during a typical 20-week season. Administering the CSA accounts is an enormously time-consuming and thus very expensive endeavor. A farmer can generally borrow the equivalent $15,000 at an annualized interest rate of 12%, thus costing around $900 for the first six months. The mid-season payment of $15,000 to the farmers is, in effect, compensation for vegetables received in the first half of the season and thus does not represent any particular advantage over non-CSA marketing systems. In short, in this hypothetical example of a CSA with 100 members, the use of early-season money is worth $9 per member. That amount is the

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54 Id.
55 Cone & Myhre, supra note 16, at 189.
56 Adam, supra note 19.
57 Id.
58 Id.
maximum that the farmer can spend per member to cover overhead, administrative costs, and other costs before the major financial benefit of the CSA model is wiped out.\(^{59}\)

VII. Atypical American Farmers: A Portrait of CSA Farmers

The 2001 National Survey showed that CSA farmers are a young group relative to all farmers nationwide. Both the median and mean age of the principal farmer at the CSAs surveyed was around 44, with almost two-thirds of principal CSA farmers under the age of 50.\(^{60}\) This finding does not appear to vary region by region with the average age of Upper Midwestern and Ohio Valley CSA farmers both at 45 years of age.\(^{61}\) The secondary and tertiary farmers of the CSAs in the 2001 National Survey were a few years younger, on average, than their principal farmer counterparts.\(^{62}\) The age findings of these studies are particularly important in light of the national conversation over the last decade lamenting the ageing American farm-worker population.\(^{63}\) As of 1997, the mean American farmer was 54 years of age, ten years older than the corresponding CSA farmer.\(^{64}\) In short, while other models of farming struggle to replenish their human capital ranks, CSA farming seems immune to this general trend, a feature that no doubt bodes well for its long-term viability.

In addition to being young, many CSA farmers are fairly inexperienced. On average, the principal farmers in the study had been farming for only 13 years.\(^{65}\) The secondary and tertiary

\(^{59}\) Id.

\(^{60}\) Lass et.al., supra note 10.

\(^{61}\) Tegtmeier & Duffy, supra note 38, at 4; Woods et. al., supra note 38, at 4.

\(^{62}\) Lass et.al., supra note 10.


\(^{64}\) Lass et.al., supra note 10.

\(^{65}\) Id.
farmers were even less experienced, both with a mean of 10 years of farming under their belts.\textsuperscript{66} When combined with the average age findings, the survey suggests that these farmers did not become farmers immediately after completing their educations. Many would appear to have embarked on other professional and career endeavors first before turning to farming. One study of eight CSA farms in Minnesota in the mid-1990’s confirms this contention by noting that many of the farmers had previous experience in education and community activism or organizing.\textsuperscript{67}

Along racial/ethnic lines, CSA farmers are an extraordinarily homogenous group. Approximately 97\% of principal CSA farmers characterized themselves as “White/Non-Hispanic”.\textsuperscript{68} No known research has examined this racial/ethnic homogeneity. This is an area that remains ripe for study.

On the other hand, gender diversity is a common characteristic of CSAs. While principal farmers were skewed 60\% to 40\% male-to-female, that same ratio was essentially reversed for the secondary and tertiary farmers surveyed.\textsuperscript{69} The participation of women in CSA operations stands in stark contrast to the heavily male-dominated American farming industry on the whole.\textsuperscript{70}

Perhaps the most striking demographic statistic found in the survey was the level of educational attainment of CSA farmers. A majority of principal farmers possessed a college degree with an additional 23\% having completed a graduate degree. More than two-thirds and approximately one-half of secondary and tertiary farmers, respectively, also either possessed a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{66}] Id.
\item[\textsuperscript{68}] Lass et.al., \textit{supra} note 10.
\item[\textsuperscript{69}] Id.
\item[\textsuperscript{70}] Id.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
college or graduate degree. These findings make clear that CSA farmers are typically individuals who likely could have explored any number of career options, but instead chose to devote themselves to farming. CSA farmers undoubtedly have the intellectual aptitude needed to learn from their mistakes and thus to continuously improve their operations.

VIII. Is CSA Farming Sustainable: The Farmers Speak

Putting aside the financial numbers of CSA farming, the 2001 National Survey also asked CSA farmers to qualitatively evaluate the performance of their CSA operation and its impact on their overall farming operation. The responses to these questions shed light on the everyday satisfaction and concerns of those engaged in CSA farming. On questions concerning financial aspects of the farm as whole (CSA and non-CSA operations), consensus emerged on some questions, while opinion diverged sharply on others. For example, almost 50% of farmers were either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with their own compensation as compared to only approximately 25% who were satisfied or very satisfied, with the remainder neutral. A strong majority of 68% were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with their financial security including health insurance, retirement, etc.

Farmers’ financial ability to cover their annual operating expenses, however, varied with almost 50% of farmers surveyed said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to do so while a substantial minority of 30% reported being unsatisfied or very unsatisfied in this regard. Opinion was split when it came to farmers’ views of their financial ability to build and

\[71\] Id.
\[72\] Id.
\[73\] Id.
\[74\] Id.
maintain physical farm infrastructure with almost 40% either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied and 34% satisfied or very satisfied.\textsuperscript{75} A more even divide was reported by farmers’ in their attitudes towards compensation for their other workers with 33% either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied and 34% satisfied or very satisfied.\textsuperscript{76}

When asked about the effect of the CSA operation on the farm as a whole, strong majorities reported that the CSA improves or greatly improves many aspects of their farm. For example, nearly 73% said that CSA improves or greatly improves their financial ability to meet annual operating expenses, 56% said that CSA improves or greatly improves their stress level/quality of life, and 64% reported that it improves or greatly improves their community involvement.\textsuperscript{77} Taken together, the survey numbers suggest that farmers are drawn to CSA farming not for the salary and benefits, but rather for the quality of life, community involvement, and environmental stewardship benefits that they reap from their work. If farmers are still unable to adequately compensate themselves as they gain more experience, the question remains whether or not that toll exacted on them will begin to outweigh the other benefits that CSA farmers value.

**IX. The Impact of CSA on Consumers**

CSAs not only have a substantial measurable effect on the farmers, but also considerably impact members. To understand the financial benefits, if any, of CSA membership, researchers have focused on comparing the cost of a CSA share to an equivalent basket of organic produce purchased at a local supermarket. A 1998 study examining three CSA farms in Massachusetts

\textsuperscript{75} Id.  
\textsuperscript{76} Id.  
\textsuperscript{77} Id.
found that the supermarket produce cost 1.5 to 2.5 times more than the CSA comparator share.  

A 2003 study comparing the lowest priced organic produce from local supermarkets to the cost of two CSAs in New York found that CSA members saved money at one of the CSAs, but only saved money at the other if they took advantage of pick-your-own opportunities offered by the farm during the season.  

In addition to the financial advantages of CSA membership, consumers appear to derive significant psychological and health benefits from CSAs. In one 1996 study examining members of an Illinois CSA, consumers were found to derive a high level of satisfaction from social and “club” benefits. Similar results were reported in a study three years later concluding that CSA customers gain positive utility directly from picking up produce from the farm and indirectly from cooking and eating meals at home using their CSA bounty. Two studies, one in 2004 examining four CSAs in Pennsylvania, and the other in 2007 observing several CSAs in Minnesota and Wisconsin both found that CSA members had improved their diets relative to their pre-CSA eating habits by increasing the variety and quantity of vegetables consumed.

X. The Demand for CSA: A Case Study in New York

A more in-depth study attempting to catalogue the myriad drivers of consumer demand for CSA shares was conducted in 2006 at the Roxbury Farm CSA in New York, at the time the

81 Brown and Miller, supra note 15, at 1298.
82 Id.; Oberholtzer, supra note 38;
second largest CSA in the country with nearly 650 members. Researchers were able to survey 38\% of members and focused on the reasons why members initially joined the CSA and then asked those members how their experience with the CSA changed the importance of those reasons. In so doing, the investigators sought to test and, if necessary, augment a traditional microeconomic demand analysis for CSA membership that would predict CSA demand as a function of: the price of a bundle of vegetables from a CSA farm, the price of a substitute bundle of vegetables, the price of complements such as travel costs to the pick-up site each week, member’s income, the number of potential consumers, consumer tastes and preferences, marketing, word of mouth, expectations around the variety, quality, and quantity of produce, and personal health reasons. However, due to the difficulty of measuring many of these variables, CSA researchers typically focus exclusively on a comparison of the price of a CSA share with an equivalent at a local supermarket as described in the previous section of this paper. The Roxbury Farm researchers sought to provide a more nuanced picture of the motivations of CSA members.

Like CSA members in many parts of the country, the members of Roxbury Farm CSA were relatively affluent with almost one-third of respondents having a gross annual household income of $80,000 or more. As for the reasons that members first signed up for the Roxbury farm CSA, 99\% reported that receiving fresh vegetables was either very important or important in their decision, while 93\% selected the same responses when asked about the importance of receiving organic vegetables. Slightly more than nine out of ten respondents felt the same way about supporting a local farm, while 89\% stated that concern for the environment was either

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84 Id. at 52.
85 This statistic seems to be consistent across the country. In Oberholtzer’s study of mid-Atlantic region CSAs, nearly one-third of respondents reported household incomes over $100,000. Oberholtzer, supra note 38.
86 Polimeni, supra note 83, at 52.
important or very important to them in their decision to join the CSA. Few members felt strongly when asked about the value they placed on working on a farm, learning how to grow vegetables, or providing their children with access to a farm. Interestingly, only 45% of members indicated that risk sharing with the farmer, one of the key differentiating aspects of the CSA model, was important or very important to them upon enrolling, while a similar number said that price was a factor in their decision.

To understand whether the CSA membership experience has altered the views of its members, the researchers then surveyed members on the importance of these same factors with respect to their continued participation in the CSA. Researchers noticed an uptick in the number of members answering “important” or “very important” across nearly every factor. For example, 97% of respondents felt that supporting a local farm was either very important or important to them now that they are a member, an increase of six percentage points. Nevertheless, the factors that ranked lowest in importance to members when they decided to join the farm remained at the bottom despite increases in the number of people reporting that those factors were now important or very important to them.

With the information in hand, the study authors concluded that recidivism of members must be incorporated into the demand model given that being a member of a CSA may require a difficult lifestyle change since shares during the growing season may have an overwhelming quantity as well many unfamiliar or disliked vegetables. They assert that if CSA members do not learn and/or value the changes they undergo by participating in a CSA, they will eventually
leave. Thus, the study authors suggest that CSA demand of an individual interested in joining a CSA for the first time will be a function of the traditional microeconomic factors laid out above as well as the labor requirement by the CSA (if it applies), environmental awareness, social conscience (i.e. support for local farms), and desire to share risk with farmers. That individual’s demand in the second year is then a function of the same variables but in the second year those variables are a function of the individual’s “learning” from the first year of experience with the CSA. Many CSA farms facilitate this “learning” process for their members by publishing newsletters and putting on events at the farm or cooking demonstrations at the pick-up sites. While the authors’ research is far from complete, it presents a starting point for economists to begin to develop generalized theories of CSA consumer demand that account for the multitude of considerations in the typical individual’s decision to join or renew a CSA share.

XI. CSA Member Retention Challenges

Indeed, despite the evidence from the Roxbury Farm CSA study that members’ views of their CSAs become more positive over time, member retention is a major problem faced by some CSAs. Membership turnover of 50% or more is not uncommon and is often even higher than that figure during the early years of a CSA operation.

In an oft-cited study of member retention, Goland examined a newly formed CSA with 38 members. The members were surveyed in the spring prior to the first pick-up and then surveyed again in the fall at the conclusion of the CSA season. The questions were focused

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93 Id. at 56.
94 Goland, supra note 23, at 17.
around the variety and quality of produce they expected/received, reasons for joining, and cooking/eating habits. Although the sample size was small, the response rate was quite high.

Consistent with responses in other studies noted in earlier sections of this paper, the most important reasons cited by CSA members for joining the CSA were access to fresh, in-season, and organic produce as well as health reasons and issues of trust (i.e. knowing where and how their food is grown). In the spring, members indicated that they expected high quality produce while at the same time recognizing that the produce they receive might be a bit dirty or have insect marks.

Unfortunately, by the end of the season, more than half of the members were disappointed with the CSA. Only 20% had their expectations matched or exceeded. More than two-thirds reported that they were unlikely to renew their CSA subscriptions for the following year. In fact, the following year the same farm had a mere eight members. It appeared that some shareholders were frustrated by the quality of produce, noting that the same farm harvested higher quality produce that it only sold at its roadside farmstand. For many, the chief complaint was that they received too many vegetables that they and their families did not enjoy and thus a lot of food went to waste. Moreover, with the exception of vegetarians, the study showed that the kind of items supplied by the CSA did not constitute the mainstays of the members’ dinner dishes suggesting that members struggled to incorporate the CSA vegetables into their home cooking.

According to Goland, the member retention issues were not endemic to the farm studied, but rather “the two-thirds who say they will not join again is typical of CSA retention rates.”

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95 Id. at 19.
96 Id.
97 Id. at 21.
98 Id. at 20.
Indeed, Oberholtzer’s 2004 survey of CSAs in the mid-Atlantic region showed an average of 53% retention from year to year forcing many farmers to spend time on recruitment despite their desires to devote a majority of their time to producing food.\textsuperscript{99} Unfortunately, no research has been done on a \textit{national} scale documenting CSA members’ experiences longitudinally to more clearly understand the reasons why members do or do not renew their shares and the ways in which newsletters, cooking demonstrations, farm parties, and other interventions by the farmers impact shareholder recidivism.

\section*{XII. The “C” in CSA}

Throughout scholarly works exploring the CSA movement, the idea of “community” or “community-building” remains a strong undercurrent. As Cone and Zhyre explain, modernity including capitalism, industrialism, and the chronic revision of social relationships in light of new technology and information have created a sense of detachment or “disembeddedness, a loss of certainty that makes it difficult for people to construct a secure and fulfilling narrative of self.”\textsuperscript{100} Modernity, in their estimation, has led many to yearn for a real sense of community to help people construct these narratives. Thus, they write, “effective CSAs have the potential for ‘re-embedding’ people in time and place through linking them to a specific piece of land and an awareness of the seasons.”\textsuperscript{101} Ideally, CSA membership provides individuals with “a connection to the land, to a community, and to a cosmic sensibility that has been lost through the dynamics of modernity.”\textsuperscript{102}

\begin{footnotesize}{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{99} Oberholtzer, \textit{supra} note 38. \\
\textsuperscript{100} Cone and Zhyre, \textit{supra} note 16, at 188. \\
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{id.} \\
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{id.}}\end{footnotesize}
Romantic aspirations aside, evidence suggesting that the “community” element of CSAs is not very high on the priority list for members abounds. The decline of the community component of CSAs runs directly parallel to the shift in CSAs from the shareholder-based model to the subscription model, a shift which has undoubtedly been driven by Americans’ increasingly busy schedules.  

In Minnesota, for example, a “sense of doing something with a community” was ranked only 10th out of 16 reasons given by members to explain their interest in their CSA farm. In Maryland, as a member of one of the largest CSAs in the state lamented, “This CSA started out as a volunteer group. When we merged [with another CSA], we gained a lot of institutional and financial support, but lost the real community management and involvement. We used to be completely run by shareholders and we would get up to 100 people at a farm festival. Now community involvement is minimal.” In short, it appears that many CSAs resemble commerce, more than they do community.  

Nevertheless, it remains true that no matter what version of CSA a farm chooses to operate with, the CSA model indeed puts producers and consumers in direct contact with each other. Some scholars have suggested that these exchanges alone constitute a form of community based on shared risk and reward. As one author put it, the CSA “is a way to bind people into a tight social group together through the shared effort, travails, and gratifications of producing their own food.” Another described CSAs thus: “a political and philosophical statement about the relationships that should inhere between producers and consumers, between people and the

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103 Lang, supra note 20, at 22.
104 Cone & Kakaliouras, supra note 67, at 30.
105 Lang, supra note 20, at 20.
106 Id.
107 Brandi Janssen, Local Food, Local Engagement: Community-Supported Agriculture in Eastern Iowa, 32 CULTURE & AGRICULTURE 4, 5 (2010).
108 Id.
land, in short, the relationships that form a community of people, embedded in place.”\(^{109}\) The phrase “civic agriculture” has been coined to describe small-scale and local farming operations as “the embedding of local agricultural and food production in the community.”\(^{110}\)

Beyond the relationships formed between farmers and consumers, the support of other local organizations, particularly not-for-profit organizations, and of local media outlets appear to be critical in at least some geographic areas to building strong communal bonds that help to make some CSAs highly successful. Without this broader participation, according to one scholar, true “civic agriculture” does not exist.\(^{111}\)

In Eastern Iowa in and around Iowa City, two organizations in particular are believed to have made an important difference in fostering public awareness of CSA programs. The first, The Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA) was founded by a group of farmers looking to sell directly to local markets and was funded through a grant from the US Department of Agriculture’s Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education program. INCA’s primary goal is to support farmers by strengthening local and regional food networks through opening up new business opportunities for growers.\(^{112}\) On the consumer end, an organization called Local Foods Connection (LFC), funded through private donations, has helped to bring CSA shares to low-income families and social service agencies. LFC also provides training and assistance to assist recipients in the way of preparing unfamiliar vegetables, while also engaging with the broader public at sponsored lectures and CSA fairs.\(^{113}\) Media attention in local newspapers is also believed to contribute to the popularity of CSAs. In short, an unspoken consensus has emerged in Eastern Iowa that the job of educating the public about CSAs should not be borne by the

\(^{109}\) id.

\(^{110}\) id.

\(^{111}\) id.

\(^{112}\) id. at 6.

\(^{113}\) id. at 7.
The farmer should be focused on growing, the consumer on eating, and other groups on promotion and education.\textsuperscript{114}

XIII. Conclusion

With heightened public awareness focused on the dominant industrial agriculture food system, the call for alternative means of producing and consuming food in this country has become increasingly strident. At the forefront of the thrust for reassessing that system has been the “local foods movement” which has invested heavily in strengthening ties between farmers and consumers.

The explosion of CSA farms from the first two in New England in the mid 1980’s to over 12,500 nationwide in the past two decades has been a direct result of this amplified American consciousness. As noted above, CSAs share a number of similar characteristics, but operations nonetheless vary from farm to farm. CSAs offer consumers the ability to interface directly with the farmers who grow their food, while providing farmers with a guaranteed market for their produce even if mother nature chooses not to fully cooperate in one way or another during the farming season.

The growing popularity of CSAs suggests that fundamental change in the US agricultural sector may be on the way. The financial outlook of CSA farming, while not entirely rosy nonetheless appears to outperform that of farming in this country on the whole. Moreover, CSA farmers are a well educated group of individuals. As such, provided that these farmers gain additional experience at running their operations, it stands to reason that their bottom lines will see further improvements. Even if those improvements do materialize, farmer disappointment

\textsuperscript{114}Id. at 15.
with the ability to compensate themselves combined with the headaches of shareholder turnover and the fading of the community-centered aspirations of the CSA enterprise may yet halt the advance of CSA farming. Only time will tell.