

**DIRECT MARKETING OPTIONS: FARMERS MARKETS, RESTAURANTS,
COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE AND THE ORGANIC ALTERNATIVE**

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As we approach the Millennium numerous opportunities are opening wide for small scale farmers serving local markets that have profound implications for agriculture and overall agricultural policy. Indeed, in a reversal of the long term trend of small farmers going out of business these local markets, driven by a rapidly growing consumer demand, are increasingly able to support larger numbers of farmers and specialty food operations in their locales. While roadside stands and Farmers Markets have been the traditional means for farmers to address and serve these markets, considerable additional demand -- and opportunities -- are coming from upscale restaurants and from consumers themselves, organized into Community Supported Agriculture (or CSA) projects. Add to this the increasing interest in Organically grown food -- where the market has been increasing at a sustained rate of over 20% a year for the past decade -- and direct marketing efforts that have been officially relegated to the lowly status of "niche agriculture" is taking on greater prominence all around the Country. The fact that this demand is deep and consumer driven means that local agriculture can longer be ignored by the publicly funded land grant research and extension programs or state and federal agricultural initiatives.

As a long time, small-scale farmer in the Saratoga Springs, New York area I have been basing my entire livelihood on such markets since 1976. One of my own personal measures of success is that all my markets are now within a 10 mile radius of the farm and the majority of my time is able to be spent farming, not running around marketing.

Ruckytucks Farm, named for the geological rock formations or "rocky tucks" particular to the area, is certified organic and produces some 140 specialty herb and vegetable varieties for top area restaurants and a 75 family CSA project. I stopped going to the highly popular, but labor intensive Farmers Market in town over 12 years ago in order to better meet the demands of these emerging specialty markets. The farm currently has 15 acres under intensive cultivation with some of the land double or even triple cropped over the course of an extended season from April to December -- not bad for our abbreviated Zone 5 growing season.

Driving this demand is a heightened consumer consciousness of the benefits of localism itself. Midst the standardized plenty on supermarket shelves with year round tomatoes, globally grown grapes and winter strawberries all shipped in from thousands of miles away is the growing idea of eating fresh foods in season for health, flavor and nutrition. Top chefs are hallmarking this concept and are leading the way in demonstrating the cuisine potential of unusual and underused seasonal food varieties.

Along with an increasing desire to support local farms for direct market fresh food production, consumers are also beginning to see the positive aspects of the local multiplier effect whereby their home spent dollars stay home to circulate and benefit the local economy. In many areas local farms are finally becoming valued for their preservation of open space, conservation of natural resources and promotion of biodiversity and there is a concerted public desire to preserve, support and protect them including the transference of development rights and reduced

taxes.

Such localism may also be a direct result of increasing anxieties concerning the trends of industrialization, commodification and globalization of our food supply. As an alternative, the face to face transactions between farmers and consumers at Farmers Markets, for example, can forge highly satisfying direct and personal connections to one's food supply that is fun and socially rewarding -- and is quite apart from the mundane supermarket experience.

Community Supported Agriculture or CSA take this connection several steps further. Shareholders become members of the farm and share in its production -- and are also offered a wide range of choices for further hands-on involvement if they so desire. For instance, CSA farms may offer regular tours, farm events and seasonal celebrations which directly involve members and their kids in various aspects of farm life. Some CSAs offer Working Memberships where sharers can join in on farm tasks and participate along with other members in harvests and food distribution in return for reduced membership rates. The heightened social context and community of the organization is analogous to a food co-op, with opportunities for group decision making, including what crops to grow each season and helping to determine annual budgets.

To look a little more deeply into the consumer perspective of why they joined a CSA a 1995 study of shareholders, ("The Quest for Purity, Stewardship of the Land, and Nostalgia for Socialability: Resocializing Commodities through Community Supported Agriculture" by Cynthia Abbott Cone, Hamline University and Ann Kakaliouras, U. of North Carolina ranked their order of their interest in belonging to a CSA:

1. Source of organic produce
2. Source of fresh produce
3. Concern for a healthy environment
4. Support local food sources
5. Support the small farmer
6. Knowing where and how their food is grown
7. Desire to eat vegetables in season
8. Desire to reduce packaging
9. Health reasons
10. To participate in community
11. An opportunity to be connected to a piece of land
12. Price

13. Unusual varieties of food
14. A place to bring children
15. An opportunity to attend festivals and events
16. An opportunity to be around farm animals

Curiously, price as a major consideration is way down the list even though CSA members are asked to pay a lump sum, up front, before the beginning of the season to enable the farmer to cover seed purchases and other seasonal start-up costs. An economic study from the University of Massachusetts indicates, however, that compared to organic supermarket pricing, shareholders are receiving close-to-wholesale prices for their weekly supply of produce and are getting a good deal in return for their up front support.

What is most radical of all in this arrangement is that Sharers also explicitly agree to share in the vicissitudes of the growing season alongside the farmer. That protracted drought affecting the sweet corn production is also their drought, reflected in a diminished weekly share perhaps. An early killing frost puts an end to their tomatoes and eggplant. However, that cool snap in early June may bring on an extended season of super lush crops of snow peas and sugar snaps, much to everyone's delight. CSA growers usually grow a large variety of successive crops on the theory that no matter what the seasonal weather and conditions -- it's always a good year for some crops even if others might suffer.

It's also important to note that "Source of organic produce" is at the top of the preference list. While more and more urban areas are boasting organic food outlets and some conventional supermarket chains now feature sections carrying certified organic produce and products, dependable mainstream sources of top-quality organic foods are still lacking, particularly in more rural areas. The small scale local organic farm therefore becomes a primary link for consumers looking to buy certified produce and specialty foods and the consumer-direct, fresh-picked quality is highly competitive with the global distribution system.

Organic agriculture's solid ascendancy in the marketplace over the past decade is also closely linked to an overall increase in personal health consciousness and concern for the environment. Organic farming has become the practical alternative for those consumers who want to have choices in the marketplace for the food they eat and feed their children -- and how that food is grown and produced in the environment. As it is now, the only recourse for consumers concerned about genetically modified organisms in foods, for example, is to purchase certified organic products which explicitly forbid them. Otherwise the public is confronted with a wide range of genetically engineered foods, from chocolate to spaghetti, that are not labeled as such in the conventional marketplace. The certified organic label becomes the only available guarantee. At root, the public is voicing a strong demand for real choice in the marketplace, even if they only seek to actually exercise that choice on a limited basis.

This concern for health and the environment and honest labeling, I believe, is responsible for the tremendous public outpouring of support for a bona fide Organic Program last year. The record 280,000 comments, overwhelmingly critical of USDA's proposal, are concerned about much more than the "Big Three" issues of allowing genetically modified organisms, sludge and irradiation of foods to suddenly qualify as certifiable organic practices. The proposed Rule failed to grasp the underlying organic paradigm which does not merely substitute organic inputs for

synthetic ones but encompasses holistic, ecological practices that work together in concert with the forces of nature.

One phenomenon particular to organic farms was noted at a recent regional Farmer/Scientist Conference held at Yale University in December. As organic farms mature and are able to balance their soils and develop the whole farm habitat the need for pest controls diminishes considerably as populations of beneficial insects and disease-suppressing soil organisms become established within the farm's ecosystem. On my own farm, for instance, a system of "strip-insectary intercropping" has established permanent habitat for beneficials right in the fields among the crops, resulting in my not having to use any pest controls at all for the past four years.

Conclusion:

The huge piles of grain left stockpiled with nowhere to go this past Fall when the Asian markets collapsed bears testimony to the inherent problems of the global marketplace for farmers. The industrialization of agriculture has led to an overproduction of commodities whose purported efficacy is vastly diminished when the regular environmental and health "side-effects" are factored in. Starvation in the World is taking place among Plenty -- and is more a function of economic and political conditions rather than not having enough food to go around, although feeding the World is always a primary justification for developing further injurious industrialized practices.

USDA has recently underscored the importance of this country's small farms to today's agriculture. The need for support of direct marketing initiatives to help these small farms cannot be overstated. At the same time, organic research and extension has received very short shrift indeed. The 1997 study by the Organic Farming Research Foundation, "Searching for the 'O' Word" concluded that less than 1/10th of 1% of USDA supported research projects both numerically and fiscally have specifically addressed organic needs or practices. Here at the door of the Millennium it is high time to rectify these omissions.

Thank you.

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