

Fresh business model Consumer-investors reap tasty dividends from farms

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Co-farm manager Nathan Hutt-Tiwald, center, walks down a row of newly planted radicchio during planting at the Green Earth Institute organic farm, in Naperville. The Green Earth Institute is a Community Supported Agriculture farm. With CSAs, customers buy shares of an organic crop in January and February. In return, they receive "dividends" in the form of weekly or biweekly fresh, organic produce dropped at sites in their neighborhoods or picked up at the farm throughout the growing season. (Chicago Tribune photo by Alex Garcia / May 8, 2009)



Organic farmers Matt Sheaffer and Steve Tiwald are busier than three-legged rabbits in a dense carrot patch.

Spring is traditionally busy. But now they have developed increasingly popular hybrids of innovative thinking and old-school food production. Sheaffer, who runs Sandhill Organics in Grayslake, and Tiwald, executive director of Green Earth Institute on the outskirts of Naperville, are Community Supported Agriculture farmers. With CSAs, customers buy shares of an organic crop in January and February. In return, they receive "dividends" in the form of weekly or biweekly fresh, organic produce dropped at sites in their neighborhoods or picked up at the farm throughout the growing season.

Sheaffer started in 2004 with 70 customers. This year, he has more than 300 and can no longer accommodate the frequent phone calls from people wanting to give him money for his product. Tiwald started harvesting in 2003 by supplying about 28 households with produce. This year, he's supplying 500 and cannot get enough water to expand the farm to keep up with demand.

They are part of a small but exploding number of CSAs across the U.S.

"CSAs are a great concept," said Jim Slama, president of Familyfarmed.org, an Oak Park non-profit promoting CSAs and locally grown food. "The farmer gets the money when he needs it. And when the growing season starts ... people get to pick up their box of produce, which was picked the day before. It's super fresh, and the people have a direct connection with the farm. Normally, people don't get to have that intimate experience with their food."

CSAs came to the U.S. in the mid-1980s in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, distilled from similar farming concepts in Switzerland and Germany, according to the USDA and organic associations. Those European approaches may have been inspired by similar efforts in the 1960s and '70s in Chile and Japan.

Tiwald, 59, a former executive in HMO development and management, made his way into organic farming and CSA over time, establishing the Green Earth Institute CSA in 2002. He and six employees are planting produce on about 14 of the 49 tillable acres. The remaining 35 acres is cover crop, such as alfalfa and red clover.

"What was the catalyst for me was my interest in keeping people healthy," Tiwald said. Sheaffer, 34, has a degree in environmental science, started working in organic farming in 1998 and got into CSAs only after overcoming nervousness about taking people's money before he even planted crops. He and wife Peg cultivate about 18 acres of the 40-acre farm operation on the grounds of the Prairie Crossing development.

"I'm really glad I was persuaded," said Sheaffer. "I think it really taps into people's desire to be supportive of something that connects them with the land. And, they enjoy fresh, healthy food."

A growing environmental and health awareness, popularized by works such as Michael Pollan's "In Defense of Food" and "The Omnivore's Dilemma," has aided CSAs, as have outbreaks of salmonella and E. coli.

"'The Omnivore's Dilemma' was a big one for me," said Margaret Myren of Barrington, who has been a client of Sandhill Organics' CSA since the beginning. Her house also serves as a produce pickup spot.

Her interest started when she was pregnant with her first child, now 12 years old, and became increasingly concerned about eating right during pregnancy. She now is the mother of four boys.

"I love doing it out of a sense of good nutrition for my children and preserving the Earth," she said. "You should see how excited they get when the first tomatoes come in."

Under the shade of a maple tree in the back patio of Buzz Cafe in Oak Park, Alix Mikesell and her son, Aaron, 7, of Oak Park arrived one Thursday afternoon to pick up their box of produce, which they split with another family. Her assortment of spinach, mixed lettuce, pea shoots, potatoes and other produce was a surprise. Mikesell and other CSA customers said they like that part of the arrangement, particularly because Sandhill and Green Earth, like other CSA farms, offer tips on how to prepare and store the produce, and recipes in which it can be used.

"I've gotten to try a lot of vegetables I never would have tried," she said. "It's opened my horizons."

Mikesell pays half of the estimated \$800 a year for the full season, she said. Her friend's family pays the other half. Mikesell and other CSA clients said the cost is less than buying produce at conventional grocery stores from May through November.

"There's no downside," she said. "They do a newsletter, and it makes you feel like part of a community."

Kerri Mackowiak, who lives on the Northwest Side of Chicago and works in Lisle, was persuaded by a friend to join the Green Earth Institute CSA in 2007. She and her friend split the three-quarter bushel box of produce every two weeks, and one or the other drives to Green Earth to pick it up.

At times, it's a hassle to drive from work to the outskirts of Naperville, she said. And, at times, she finds a bug or worm in her cardboard box, but "it's worth it."

"I absolutely love that they're fresh," Mackowiak said. "I know that there are no crazy chemicals in there."

David Kaiser of Addison, his parents and three siblings still living at home are members of the Green Earth CSA. It and Sandhill, like most CSA farms, schedule events in which members can visit the farm to work, to partake in a potluck, celebrate tomatoes and, in general, develop a close relationship with the farmers and food.

"It is a connection to the food that is tangible, versus what you buy at the stores," Kaiser said. "Even if it was more expensive than what's in the store, how much is your health worth?"

The exact number of CSAs in the nation remains unclear. CSA organizations place the total at around 2,000. But, the USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture, which surveyed the number of CSAs for the first time, places the number much higher, at 12,549.

Their numbers likely will continue to grow, Slama and others said. His organization listed 12 CSAs two years ago. Now, Familyfarmed.org posts 35 in Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan. Organic advocate Kathleen Merrigan, who recently was named deputy secretary of the USDA, announced this month that the agency is going to spend \$50 million to help enhance organic agriculture. In addition, the Obamas have hired their personal chef, organic foods supporter Sam Kass, as assistant White House chef.

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