

Farming Sustainably in Northfield:

Community Dynamics and Motivations

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Abstract

What has motivated farmers to grow food locally and sustainably, and what drives consumers to support local food systems? Additionally, what are obstacles that prevent community members from participating in locally grown agriculture? We surveyed local sustainable farmers in the Northfield area and their direct consumers to determine the structure and function of the local farming community. We found that growers as well as consumers cite a feeling of connection and community in regard to their interactions with Northfield's farming culture, and that the town's small size and relative connectedness facilitates this sense of closeness. The way Northfield farmers have created their community has led to an increase in the number of people farming locally, and the sense of collaboration across the value chain of farmers, secondary retailers, and consumers has had a positive impact on the farming culture.

Setting/Community

Farming around Northfield/Groups of Farmers:

The sustainable farming community around Northfield is very close-knit and exemplifies what Brasier et. al. refer to as a "small farm cluster," in which businesses "coordinate some parts of their business activities but are competitive in others, and are geographically near each other" (Brasier et. al., "Small Farm Clusters and Pathways to Rural Community Sustainability"). Due to the expense and relative scarcity of machinery available to small farmers, growers in the area pool their resources to make the most use of what they have. For example, one farmer, the

head of an operation that primarily produces chicken, plows the fields of St. Olaf College's student-run organic farm.

According to one farmer surveyed, Northfield-area growers operate in a very collaborative spirit, sharing techniques, prices, plans, and equipment, encouraging each other "to be the best farmers we can." "We're friends," she said.

Events at the Co-op:

Just Food Co-op, a natural food store in downtown Northfield, serves as a meeting point for growers and consumers of sustainably grown foods. The co-op's local purchases are primarily from farmers who operate farther away from Northfield than the farmers we surveyed, and some of this could have to do with the volume of produce smaller local growers are able to produce.

Every year, Just Food hosts a CSA day, in which CSA farmers advertise their farms to co-op customers and encourage them to purchase a share for the summer. The CSA day was one of the primary ways that we first began to learn about which local farmers might be a good idea to contact.

Farm Bike Tour 2012:

In September of 2012, college students from St. Olaf and Carleton, community partners, and local farmers collaborated to host the first inaugural Farm Bike Tour, in which participants could bike around Northfield and go on tours of local farms. Some farms had activities for children and adults, and farmers were eager to tell the story of how they had begun their operations. The day culminated

in a pay-what-you-can banquet featuring local food cooked and catered by Bon Appétit, the locally minded food service provider that serves both colleges. Donations for the meal benefited a local farmer who had lost a great deal of her plants in the combination of drought and flooding that had ravaged the Midwest during the summer.

This event facilitated much beneficial interaction between producers and consumers; local residents got to meet the farmers from whom they might have purchased previously, and farmers got the opportunity to publicize the typically low-profile work that they do. This was another way that Aly met many farmers with whom we later corresponded for our interviews and research.

Farmers Markets:

Northfield hosts two distinct farmers' markets: the Northfield Farmers' Market and the Riverwalk Market Fair. While the former is strictly an avenue for farmers to sell their produce, the latter is a combination farmers' market and craft fair, attracting a wider array of visitors, some of whom are "just shopping." The Riverwalk Market Fair was established in 2010, while the older Northfield Farmers' Market was established at some time before the Riverwalk fair existed. Both markets offer an opportunity for visitors to interact directly with the farmers who grow their produce; chatting between farmers and purchasers is common and centers around weather (good or bad), what is ripening, and other day-to-day life events.

The farmers' market structure can be a good way for growers to sell directly to consumers and enhance their farm's presence in the area, but farmers can't rely on these markets to provide reliable sales from week to week. Additionally, farmers are left to the whim of purchasers who may overwhelmingly buy a particular fruit or vegetable and pass over other produce, leaving farmers with a glut of one crop and a dearth of another.

Community-Supported Agriculture:

The community-supported agriculture (CSA) model has gained popularity in recent years as the renewed focus on local food has gathered steam. In a CSA system, customers (often called shareholders) pay a fee to a farmer to support the farm's operations. In exchange, the farmer provides shareholders with a regular (often weekly) supply of produce from the farm. The produce may be delivered to the shareholders or picked up at the farm, depending on the stipulations of the CSA membership.

CSAs are popular among small farmers who sell locally because they provide a reliable source of income to farmers, who can count on receiving payment for their produce throughout the growing and harvest season. Since shareholders pay a flat fee for membership, farmers can choose what to include in each batch of produce. In this way, they can offer customers whatever produce has been abundant as of late and avoid building up a surplus of any one crop or product that shoppers at a farmers' market may pass over. Another benefit of the CSA system is the potential for shareholders to interact with the farmers who produce their food. According to

anthropologist Brandi Janssen, “the CSA model shortens the commodity chain, effectively putting consumers and producers in direct contact with each other” (Janssen 5).

However, the CSA model is not an automatic curative for the separation of consumers and producers; it makes it more possible for interactions to occur, but does not guarantee it. A successful CSA is rooted in a broader community framework than just the one between eaters and growers (Janssen 4). “Wider civic involvement in CSA promotion and education” is necessary to support a healthy CSA system (Janssen 15). In addition, farmers need to be well prepared to operate a CSA farm; in a population of sustainable farmers in New Mexico surveyed by sociologist Lois Stanford, inexperience with the operation of community-supported food ventures is common (“The Role of Ideology in New Mexico’s CSA Organizations: Conflicting Visions Between Growers and Members”). This phenomenon may have to do with the relative trendiness of the CSA format among “foodies” and “locavores” and the abundant demand for local food.

Supporting the operations of the CSA, according to a group of Iowa farmers Janssen surveyed, is mostly dependent upon labor and infrastructure; both of which are costly to small farmers. It is difficult to survive on a farming income alone, and many farmers who attempt to make farming a significant portion of their livelihood rely on hiring outside help in the form of farmhands and other laborers to assist them with their work.

Methodology

We began by researching local farmers within a 15-mile radius of Northfield, MN. There are a number of websites that list these farmers, complete with email and phone contact information. Once a list of about 14 farmers was generated, emails were sent out to these contacts with information about the study that we were conducting. Several interviews were conducted based off of this first method of communication. For those who did not answer, two subsequent emails were also sent out and a call was made to the number listed.

Once we made contact with a farmer interviewee, we asked for an interview that would last between 40 and 60 minutes. Preceding the interview, they were asked to complete a written survey, which asked basic questions about their relationship to farming, and the details about the particular farm (such as the produce, the methods they distribute their produce, their practices, etc). After completing the survey, an interview was conducted that included 12 base questions and follow-ups according to the flow of conversation.

We quickly realized that the time of the year we were conducting interviews (late March through April) was an extremely busy time of year for farmers, as many of the individuals we contacted were not comfortable meeting with us as they were too busy. Thus we had to find a way to shape our proposal and questions in a new way--incorporating the perspective of the consumer. We broke down interviewees into categories; farmers, retailers, CSA-owners, and food-service managers. The farmer category was kept the same. The retailer's category included contacting all the Northfield retail markets that sold produce. The CSA-owners were found by simple outreach to the St. Olaf and Northfield communities. The last category, food-

service managers, included the people from the food-service company in Northfield that provides food for both St. Olaf and Carleton. We devised new questionnaires to suit the different perspectives that CSA members and other direct consumers had on the Northfield local farming community.

This increased look at the consumer-farmer interactions guided our research to a more holistic understanding of the community, such that our findings are more validated and include a broader look at different perspectives. The biggest constraint in conducting the latter half of our research was the time constraint. We had only 2 weeks to make contacts and conduct interviews, on top of trying to follow through and hunt down the original invited participants. In total, we made contact with ~25 individuals. Splitting those stories up into three groups: farmers, CSA participants, and food-service managers, we were able to synthesize their responses and draw conclusions.

Literature Review

Industrial clusters are groups of competing businesses located in a small geographic area. Instead of functioning solely as competitors, however, they cooperate to develop the industry as a whole. Small farmers are a prime example of an industrial cluster that work together to make changes in both the economic/political system and the local consumer culture. There are a number of benefits of associating oneself in a cluster situation, for example, they have an accumulated critical mass that can both collaborate on larger projects and also bend

consumer habits. They also have the ability to respond to large-scale fluctuations in consumer habit and market conditions.

Working in close proximity with other farmers allows the dissemination and spread of techniques and ideologies that encompass the philosophical and motivational aspects of farming. For example, many farmers gather on a regular basis to discuss sustainable and healthy farming practices. These connections allow for group collaboration and growth in shared values, impacting the community as a whole and building trust between individual farmers.

For cluster growth and improvement, it is necessary for there to be “relationships across the value chain” (Small Farm Clusters and Pathways to Rural Community Sustainability, 21). This means that farmers need to engage in personal relationships with both the consumers *and* suppliers that they rely on. This allows for the recognition of the limitations and opportunities that exist in each individual farm, working together to build community. This can organically lead to group empowerment and the ability for each individual to find a larger community in which they find others that share their values, experiences, and interests. (Small Farm Clusters and Pathways to Rural Community Sustainability).

Thomas Marcias warns against the exclusionary aspect of this community, however. In recognizing the monetary prerequisite for joining a local farming community (for example with the high cost of CSAs or regular produce as compared to large supermarkets), Marcias draws attention to the class disparity that can easily occur. This economic barrier for entry can prove divisive in creating a cohesive local community, excluding those who could benefit from locally grown food and support

systems. Countering this with programs that directly target these communities, such as farm workdays and stable donations to local food shelves, helps foster a community support system that leads to a greater integration of local farming practices with the larger community.

Marcias also recognizes the potential for expanding the current local-food movement outside of this small group of educated, financially stable, white people. By using farming communities as implements for social change, that is, tackling local economic inequalities, farms, farmers, and their produce, can act as a method to redistribute goods and create systems for the alleviation of poverty. This also allows local goods to stay local, thereby reducing carbon emissions and creating an environmental ethic that emphasizes sustainability and responsibility. This non-exclusive approach to farming can act as a method to create positive social and environmental impacts and lessen local inequality (Working Towards a Just, Equitable, and Local Food System: The Social Impact of Community-Based Agriculture).

Findings & Analysis

Necessary Conditions for a Healthy Local Food System

A local farming community like Northfield's, in order to thrive, needs the support of engaged community members who are interacting with each other face-to-face.

While many newer farms in Northfield have websites and electronic contact information, we learned about most of the farms we ended up investigating by word-of-mouth. In addition, personal connections (knowing a relative, friend, or

former classmate who farms; participating in a friend's CSA) are essential in developing a robust and healthy local farm cluster.

Additionally, a community of local farmers needs many opportunities for the farmers themselves to communicate and spend time with each other. Through sharing equipment and tips, getting together to discuss common issues, and having low-key social events, farmers can find common ground and better get to know other faces in the agricultural community.

In a municipality with considerable economic disparity, it can be difficult for a diverse selection of the population to become involved in the local food system. As we have suggested in the literature review above, creating incentives and means for lower-income community members to access local and organic produce is beneficial for achieving food security, preventing the worst effects of economic disparity, and expressing a commitment to social justice. Without the engagement of a wide variety of community members, local food systems are not truly representative of the people.

Farmers

Case Study #1: Dayna Burtness, Laughing Loon Farm

When asked what had motivated her to become a farmer, Dayna Burtness, owner of Laughing Loon Farm, said that the word “motivated” doesn’t accurately represent her calling to the agricultural vocation. It was, instead, a “pull” that drew her into farming. As a St. Olaf student, she recalls learning about a host of agriculture-related ecological problems in her first-year environmental studies classes. Following her

initial coursework, she interned on a farm after her first year of college. She described the pulls that made farming an appealing lifestyle for her: the work suits her personality and values, is devoid of “bullshit,” and *seems* simple, but is highly complex below the surface. She calls herself a natural businessperson, and the entrepreneurial side of farming held great appeal. It’s something she claims she “can’t *not* do.”

Childhood experiences drove Dayna toward a farming life, but not in the way most might expect. Growing up, she didn’t have a family garden, nor was physical labor required of her, and at college, she relished the opportunity to do the heavy manual work that is de rigueur for farmers. Her friends who had grown up on farms were mystified by her love of what they saw as very mundane work. Although Dayna’s upbringing wasn’t characterized by farming experience, her ancestors had worked the land, and her father had grown up on his parents’ farm in southeastern Minnesota. His stories were far from rosy, and he emphasized the loneliness he felt living the farming life as a child. Dayna brought up the curiosity of how farms are marketed to children, and how the myth of “how farms used to be,” with diversified plant and animal life living and growing under Ma and Pa’s caring eye, is reiterated in the toys, storybooks, and clothing made for young children in America.

Charged with the desire to begin farming after her internship experience, Dayna founded STOGROW, short for St. Olaf Garden Research and Organic Works, in 2005. She operated the farm from its inception until after her final semester at St. Olaf in 2007. Following her graduation, she worked in agricultural activism organizations, but soon learned that her interests lay more in the business sector

than in non-profits. In 2012, she established Laughing Loon Farm, located just outside of Northfield, MN. The farm sells produce locally to Bon Appétit cafes at St. Olaf and Carleton Colleges, and a diverse array of restaurants in the Twin Cities area also purchase from the farm.

Dayna explained that since she recently began farming in Northfield, she's still getting into what she described as a strong community of sustainable and organic farmers in the area. Making connections outside of farming has been something else she has sought to do as she immerses herself more in Northfield life; she considers it important to invest in this place long-term. Since her husband lives in Minneapolis, she says it has been slightly complicated to base her operations here.

Farmers in Northfield interact frequently, and this fact was evident the morning of our interview--several other farmers, among them Becca Carlson, owner of SEEDS Farm, had joined her for breakfast just before our arrival.

When asked what words she would use to describe her farm, Dayna mentioned that she had just been talking with other farmers about that topic at breakfast. Putting it bluntly, she said, "We're not 'sustainable.' No farm is." While her farm operates using organic practices, without artificial agrochemicals, Laughing Loon is not certified organic, a common theme among small-scale farms who sell directly to their consumers. A certification becomes less necessary when purchasers know the farmers, can see the farm, and can be certain that the produce they are buying is grown organically. Dayna described her farm as a "small-scale, diversified" farm that grows lots of vegetables. She settled on the term "integrative," describing it in terms of her farming mentality and the pattern with which Laughing Loon

establishes its sales relationships. She seeks to go beyond her own operation and use her knowledge and experience to grow new farmers, especially among students who, like her, are eager to get their hands dirty and break new ground for a more restorative food system.

Does Dayna see Northfield area local farmers as collaborators, or competitors? “Definitely collaborators,” she asserted. She hopes that one day they can consider each other competitors in the sense that they provide competitive encouragement to be “the best farmers we can.” Currently, Northfield farmers share prices, growing tips, plans, mistakes, and equipment--“we’re friends,” she said simply. Further, she highlights the community that local farmers have built as “why I want to be here.”

The frequency with which Dayna interacts with the greater Northfield community is variable. She spends winters in Minneapolis, but says that she’d like that to change. During the growing season, her focus is primarily on the farm and all the constant upkeep it needs, and her main interactions are with the people she sells produce to and students she takes under her wing. She says that the Northfield residents she has encountered seem supportive of her and what she does, especially college students. Since she doesn’t operate a CSA, Dayna doesn’t have the immediate contact with local purchasers that some other farmers have, and with the exception of the Bon Appétit cafes at St. Olaf and Carleton, she doesn’t sell as locally as other small organic farmers, working instead with cafes in the Twin Cities.

When asked if she feels like her farm is part of a broader movement of organic and sustainable farming, Dayna said she “kind of” does. While her work does

make her feel like part of a movement, she claimed that the intensely local focus of her work makes it difficult to zoom out and keep track of the larger sustainable agriculture movement that is operating throughout the country. Her immediate financial concerns make it more important for her to focus on the minutiae of her own farm for now, but she finds her own ways to broaden the scope of her operations, including her program of training student interns who aspire to be farmers. Her personal goals include having a successful business and a balanced life. While she admits that “no one’s going to get rich farming,” she believes “we shouldn’t be living on food stamps,” and that she hopes to live in a “comfortable” manner.

Case Study #2: Becca Carlson, SEEDS Farm

If Becca Carlson had been told in college that she would be a farmer after graduation, she said she would have been extremely “disappointed.” A St. Olaf ’11 graduate, Becca graduated with a double major in Biology and Environmental Studies with a concentration in Asian Studies. After graduating, Becca took a year to travel to countries in South America, Europe, and Asia to learn how farms operated. Realizing that she was philosophically drawn to the idea and ethic of farming, Becca realized her passion by beginning a farming operation when returning to Minnesota.

When asked if the larger governmental structure is harmful or helpful to her small-scale operation, Becca replied that it’s hard to provide jobs when she doesn’t make enough money to support minimum wage or pay benefits. She says that the financial support that larger farms receive is much more substantial than what she

receives. She says it's hard when she is "doing the right things [for the land]" by utilizing sustainable practices whereas some farms who do not uphold the same level of stewardship are more supported by the government.

The farmers operating in the Northfield area were very accepting and willing to give advice, Becca said. "This is a unique situation," she added, "we all want each other to succeed." This collaborative atmosphere allows interactions between farmers to be constructive rather than competitive, an aspect that allows for new additions to the community and a sense of cohesiveness.

Case Study #3: Kate Seybold, STOGROW

STOGROW, or St. Olaf Garden Research and Organic Works, was founded in 2007 by Dayna Burtness. Since its inception, the student-run organic farm has provided St. Olaf students an opportunity to try farming for themselves while providing fresh produce for the school. Bon Appétit, the college's food service provider, buys everything the farm yields each growing season, serving the produce to students in Stav Hall, the cafeteria. Each summer, STOGROW hires student farmers whose work consists of planning the crops, planting seedlings, tending the farm, and harvesting at the end of the season.

When asked how long she had been involved with STOGROW, Kate Seybold, a St. Olaf student, said she had been employed on the farm since the spring of 2012, but she had known about the farm for a while before applying to work on it.

According to Kate, working at STOGROW has helped her interact with local farmers in a variety of ways. Since they don't till their own fields, she said, local farmers who already have tilling equipment come prepare the fields for the summer. Carleton College, which also has a student-run farm, is in close contact with STOGROW farmers to share plans and farming methods; local farmers outside of the two colleges have also shared their time and talents with the student farmers. Kate cited the Farm Bike Tour of 2012 as an event that helped her see just how many local farmers there were in the area, and finally, she said that Dayna Burtness' "generous" mentoring efforts with STOGROW this year were evidence that she "wants us to have an opportunity to learn" about farming. Kate marveled at Dayna's dedication to the farmers and the work that they do. "They're hours she doesn't have, even," she said; indeed, with the amount of work facing any local farmer, it is a large sacrifice to set aside time that could be spent attending to one's own land and use that time to mentor budding farmers.

Since Bon Appétit is the sole purchaser of STOGROW produce, the farm has a unique relationship with the food service provider, and I asked Kate what her relationship has been with the company. She explained that in the summer, the farmers are all hired as Bon Appétit workers paid by the hour, and are in turn covered by their worker insurance; St. Olaf later reimburses Bon Appétit for the hours the farmers work. The company pays STOGROW the same produce prices they pay for food from Open Hands CSA, a local sustainable farm, and Kate said the farmers greatly appreciate being paid a fair market price for the fruit of their labor. She went on to mention the abundant evidence for Bon Appétit's commitment to

sustainable agriculture; at a national agricultural conference in Willamette, Oregon, the company's representatives explained how important it was to them to be teaching students how to farm locally in an ecologically sound manner. Despite their strong ties to the farmers from whom they purchase, Kate said that it is sometimes "tricky" for the company to navigate that relationship, since, after all, they are "a business, not farmers." On the whole, Kate described Bon Appétit as "supportive" of and "loyal" to the farmers with whom they have relationships. By focusing so heavily on purchasing locally, they are doing "what other companies haven't figured out yet."

I asked Kate if she could see farming as something she continues throughout her life. She answered with an emphatic "yes," adding that her coursework centers around agricultural ecology and farm sustainability. This summer, she will be performing local watershed research and determining how larger farms can decrease the runoff from their fields that enters rivers and lakes. She described this research as a way to improve larger monoculture farms in the area, "not [to] put corn farmers out of business" but to help them implement better and more sustainable farming practices. She isn't sure she'll have a farm immediately, but she hopes to volunteer on one in the future, or to perhaps start farming later in life. "It's a hard way to make a living," she said, and she hopes that she could still farm after having worked in a career that ensures she can live comfortably. She mentioned that farmers experience a great deal of vulnerability to fickle conditions, particularly weather, and that such vulnerability might make life difficult.

Consumers

We surveyed written responses from St. Olaf and Northfield community members who participate as shareholders in CSA (community supported agriculture) farms, and we received 12 responses. We observed trends in the following categories among the respondents:

Respondents explained that they wanted to “support local business” and “be more connected with where [our] food comes from.” Another respondent tied social and environmental motivations together, explaining that their CSA “was a community-building endeavor, with social events held out at the farm, seven miles south of Northfield. The CSA got away from obnoxious packaging, as well as from the preposterous expense and logistics of transporting food that was raised 1,800 miles away.” Further, some respondents cited the freshness and quality of the produce they received, explaining that it was important to get “excellent quality vegetables that we could trust.”

All respondents surveyed answered “Yes” to the question “Do you see your participation in the CSA program as benefiting a larger social/community movement?” Participants elaborated in a variety of ways. One explained that membership in their CSA “fostered social connections and social capital,” and others found it important to support local business, “eat locally and seasonally to reduce our carbon footprint,” and diversify the produce grown locally because “we need local farmers of more than corn and soybeans.” One respondent was somewhat skeptical of their contributions to an overarching movement, explaining, “I would say my participation did benefit the Northfield community to some extent; however,

in terms of benefiting a larger social 'movement,' my actions didn't make a difference. CSA memberships certainly aren't the solution to dismantling capitalist patriarchy." This more cynical response was atypical amongst our surveyed participants, which likely has to do with our sampling bias toward people who participate in CSAs and thus likely have a considerable amount of faith in their ability to affect change in the way agriculture is practiced.

About half of the respondents answered "Yes" to the question "Do you see yourself continuing with the CSA program in the future? Why/why not?" People who answered "Yes" explained themselves thusly: that their membership has been "meaningful and fun," that "eating with the seasons is a great way of being in touch with one's human nature," that they enjoyed bringing their children out to the farm, and that the whole experience has been "easy, delicious and cost-effective." People who had chosen not to continue membership cited cost as an obstacle, as well as the difficulty of improvising cooking to suit the sometimes-unpredictable variety and massive quantity of vegetables that came in each basket. Another participant turned to another source of food when the CSA they subscribed to was discontinued; they continued, "When our CSA folded in 2009, we started a garden in our own yard. Plus we live 200 yards from Just Food Co-op. So we probably would not join another CSA unless our situation changes."

Cost, certainly, is an obstacle for some when it comes down to the choice to participate in a CSA. As one CSA shareholder we interviewed said, membership isn't cheap, so this creates a barrier to starting and maintaining participation in the program. For example, when asked if they would continue with CSA membership in

the future, one participant said, “No. I'm not sure when I'll be able to afford another membership.” This economic barrier restricts those who do not have the disposable income to purchase a share.

Whether it was through social events hosted on the farm, chatting while picking up the week's share, or reading a newsletter circulated by the farmers, respondents generally had some sort of interaction with the people growing their food. “We exchange conversation about the farm and the weather every week during pickup,” one respondent said. Another didn't have much contact with their farmer “other than the weekly emails about produce,” but such interaction is still greater than the average grocery store shopper would have with the source of their food. This interaction would allow for connections to be made across the value-spectrum, thereby connecting consumers and producers in such a way that creates friendships and social capital. These relationships can come in handy when farmers need support, either financially or socially.

Case Study #4: Mary Cisar, Open Hands CSA shareholder

When I asked her how long she had been a member of the Open Hands CSA, Mary Cisar, the St. Olaf College registrar, said she and her family had been shareholders for at least four years--possibly even dating to the farm's beginning. The CSA runs from June to September, with an optional fall share that members can purchase to receive carrots, squash, beets, and other late-season produce.

Interactions with the Open Hands farmers, Mary continued, occur when her family picks up the weekly share, which typically happens on Monday or Friday. Outside of this meeting time, she doesn't encounter the farmers, except through a regularly published newsletter sent to all shareholders. The newsletter includes detailed and specific information about what's happening on the farm, what's growing, and how the weather has been, complete with pictures and recipes; it provides members a more intimate connection with their farm and farmers, whom they might not often get an opportunity to see.

Friends of the Cisars also participate in Open Hands, and according to Mary, there is always someone the family knows picking up their share at the same time they are. "It's a social thing," she mused. She knows the farmers from their days working at Just Food Co-op, a natural food grocery store that serves as a hub for sustainably minded Northfield residents. Connections like these can influence whether a consumer may choose to participate in a CSA--one's friends and acquaintances have the power to make specific consumption choices "cool." Further, these friends can sway which CSA a consumer might decide to support, whether it's for the social stimulation of seeing neighbors while picking up shares, or for the variety and quality of the produce, news of which is readily spread by word of mouth.

When I asked Mary what got her into participating in a CSA, she explained that she does it because she values supporting local business, appreciates knowing that her produce is organic, and has a strong gardening ethic. While she still gardens ornamentally at home, she found that food gardening was "a lot to work with" in

light of her demanding work schedule. Still, though, she and her husband both appreciate the format of Open Hands, in which shareholders are presented with an array of produce and can pick it out like they would at a grocery store or farmers' market, touching it and choosing what they want. Such a format has likely garnered appreciation from shareholders due to its emphasis on consumer choice, but also undoubtedly comes with specific concerns for the farmers, who have to ensure that the majority of their produce is sold. Open Hands goes one step farther on occasion, allowing shareholders to pick their own produce at specific times (Mary mentioned picking green beans in July and August). This pick-your-own setup benefits producers and consumers by relieving farmers of some harvesting work and giving shareholders a chance to connect intimately with their food. Mary recalled traveling to Silkey Gardens and Lawrence's, both primarily berry farms in Northfield with a pick-your-own format. "It's fun to go out in the field," she commented, explaining that picking one's own produce at a farm offers some of the benefits of having a garden without all the work.

According to Mary, a large portion of her family's food needs is met by the CSA share, although she couldn't pinpoint a specific percentage. "We eat a lot of vegetables," she said, describing her family's eating patterns as flexible and attuned to whatever is in the weekly produce share (salads were commonly eaten multiple times per day). The Cisar family purchases a half share now, splitting it with their neighbors, because their two daughters have since moved out of the house, and a full share is now more food than the family can manage alone.

Does she feel like part of a larger movement by participating in Open Hands? “Absolutely,” said Mary, claiming that such a feeling is part of why she began a CSA membership. She acknowledged that her family pays more for food per week than they would at a grocery store, but mentioned that for the money they spend, they receive more produce than they would purchase at a store. She also pointed out that her family doesn’t subscribe to a CSA because it’s cheap, but because it’s good food and they believe in what the farmers are doing, including donating produce to the local food shelf, selling at the farmers’ market, and to Just Food Co-op and St. Olaf.

Bon Appétit

Northfield, Minnesota has two small colleges located within its foodshed: St. Olaf College and Carleton College. The same company, Bon Appétit, which prides itself on being a “food service for a sustainable future,” runs the foodservice program at both of these institutions (BON APP WEBSITE). Acting as consumers in both a local and international market, this company makes decisions on what produce they purchase, when they purchase it, and how they purchase it. With a large amount of capital to back them up, these branches have a substantial amount of purchasing power. Local farms and farmers are continuously looking for ways to interact and collaborate with these colleges in order to gain a solid foothold on a large scale. Large companies such as Bon Appétit can provide security, stable financials, and even collaboration to attempt new things.

Case Study #5: Katie McKenna, Bon Appétit at Carleton College

Katie McKenna is the General Manager of the Carleton branch of Bon Appétit. “Bon Appétit attracts a certain type of person,” she begins, referring to the emphasis placed on local and sustainable produce. According to Katie, Carleton sources about 23% of its food year-wide from local farmers. This number fluctuates to reflect growing seasons, sometimes rising to about 30%. While the overall goal is to bring more local food into the system, Katie says that the largest challenge they face is the timing of the growing season. While the College is in session during the fall, winter, and spring months, the growing season is the opposite time of year.

Thus begins the collaboration that sets Bon Appétit apart. Along with proposals from local farmers, Bon Appétit makes a genuine effort to collaborate by financially backing farmers who want to try new things. For example, Carleton’s Bon Appétit has worked with a particular farmer who is trying to grow lettuce using vertical farming. This practice produces more food per acre while also using sustainable and healthy procedures, securing health to the environment. In fact, Carleton’s Bon Appétit commonly has meetings with local farmers in order to secure good relations and build upon opportunities.

Carleton students were instrumental for bringing Bon Appétit to their campus. When bidding different foodservice companies, emphasis was placed on the effort provided by each company in the area of sustainable, local, and interactive farming. Bon Appétit showed a strong dedication and commitment to enhancing relationships with the local foodshed and students’ voices were actualized in the College’s final selection of a company. This commitment to long-term sustainable practices prompts the company to even expand into the academic side of campus.

Katie is currently looking to set up some sort of course that interacts with the food service's values and practices, even if it isn't for official credit.

Peter Abrahamson, the General Manager at St. Olaf's division of Bon Appétit, echoed many of Katie McKenna's practices. While St. Olaf's local food consumption rests at about 20% total over the year, Peter also said, "We are always trying [to] increase our local spend[ing] in all categories." This is clearly a theme in both divisions of the company.

When asked about the interaction between local farmers and the company, Peter explained, "The interactions have always been meaningful and respectful with both sides wanting to do the best for each other." This sense of collaboration is key to the success that both the company and the local farms have when they work together. By collaborating without a sense of competition, it allows for greater gains on both sides of the relationship.

This goes back to the theory proposed by Brasier, Goetz, Smith, Ames, and Green about small industrial clusters. This small community of Northfield-area farmers acts as an industrial cluster and exhibits many of the characteristics that the authors lay out. For example, the relationship between the farmers and the Bon Appétit is a form of relationship that crosses the value chain. In other words, a collaborative relationship is established between the farmers (producers) and Bon Appétit (customer) that in turn benefits both parties.

Summary & Conclusions

There are a number of general conclusions that we came to during the analysis of our research. Simply put, we found that working across the value chain has benefited the Northfield community farmers, the economic barriers are holding back a larger participation in the community, the present consumers interact with farmers on many levels, and the consumer base is interested in a number of ideologies (environmental, local) that promote their interaction with these farmers.

As discussed above, the process of working across the value chain for Northfield-area farmers has had benefits for all those involved. The farmers gain a sense of collaboration among themselves and their community while the consumer (in this case Bon Appétit and CSA participants) receive the amount of produce that they can economically afford. Collaborative, flexible, and interactive relationships help create an environment where innovation is rewarded and competition is not the norm.

With a consumer base that values the practices and location of the farmers, there are a number of ideologies that lie behind these values. As mentioned before, there is a concept of a “movement” that supports local, sustainable agriculture. When consumers list this as a motivation for participation in the local farming community, we are drawn to identify the factors that support this motivation. In this case, the interaction with the farmers informed the consumer, to a certain extent, of the impact that they, as consumers, were having on both the environment and community. It must also be kept in mind, however, that the action of following-through on this ideology supposes an amount of economic and social privilege. The access to the farming community takes social networking and capital while the

actual purchase of produce requires a higher amount of monetary capital than the conventional method.

There are a number of areas in which further research can be done. We did not have the resources available to explore the two large food stores in our area (Cub Foods and EconoFoods) in relation to their choice not to buy local produce. This might be the place where the economic prerequisite comes into play if customers are not able to pay the money necessary to purchase these foods. Or, there might be some larger, structural influence that restricts them from entering the local food economy.

Another area that further research could be done in is the idea of the “movement” consumers described. A further look at what consumers mean by the buzzwords *organic*, *sustainable*, *local*, and *fresh* can give insight to the larger social happening that are at play. Especially comparing those definitions to those supplied officially by the government or academically by scholars can shed light on the difference in culture versus the things enforced by the government.

Additionally, an in-depth look on the differences between the consumer’s idea of the environmental impact, especially around those terms, and the actual impact could be done. This would be informational because it would provide an insight into the environmental movement and would help explain motivations. By comparing the consumer’s ideas to the actual impact, we would be able to investigate the disparity between perception and how that is promoted by their sources of information.

This research is valuable for its insight into the consumer-farmer interactions. By gathering perspectives from along this value-chain, this paper provides insight that potential consumers can read to gain an amount of capital that would allow them to interact in a greater capacity. For those readers who are already established consumers, this report might lead to greater understandings of the impact that they have on the farming community. Realizing their integral place in this thriving community can be beneficial to their comprehension of their social role.

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