

Developing A Grain CSA

More and more each day, communities all over the United States are concerned about their food. Where it comes from, how it is grown, and who benefits from its sale. While our Federal Farm Bill primarily subsidizes major agribusiness, whose bottom line is shareholder profit (not to mention executive bonuses and vacation homes) we should be chastising law makers and representatives to change this paradigm. But the most powerful and practical thing to do right now is to build a better system. This is exactly what the CSA is all about.

We have seen vegetable CSAs blossom from their start in the mid 1980's to well over a thousand nationally, and recently there is a sudden expansion in their scope. Meat CSAs, winter root vegetable CSAs, and grain CSAs are the new frontiers. Producing our own staples such as wheat, corn, rice, and beans is proving to be very exciting and economically viable. The community shares the risk with the farmer, and also shares the benefits of connection to the land, community, and farmers.

When we first proposed the grain CSA idea to our bakery customers (we own and operate Wheatberry Bakery and Cafe in Amherst MA) last summer after reeling from skyrocketing wheat and other food prices, the response was clear. Our community wants more influence on and connection to the food they eat. By our first annual shareholder's meeting six months later, we had filled our member goal of 50 shares (with \$15,000 in the bank) and our waiting list was beginning to grow. We partnered with White Oak Farm in Belchertown, MA and began pre-production meetings. We decided to plant 13 acres total and hope to fill as many as 100 shares this coming season, if our production permits. Each shareholder gets a mix of grains averaging 150lbs total with about 12 different crops (we are planting about an acre of each of wheat, oats, barley, rye, spelt, corn[popping and dent], dried beans [1 acre each of five heirloom varieties] flax, and sunflowers). For more details on the share please visit www.localgrain.org.



What are the catches? The biggest challenge we face is not operating costs or consumer interest but handling and processing. We've almost eliminated storage by distributing shares all at once at harvest time, but we still need to harvest, clean, sort, and bag. We have enough operating budget that we can invest in some of processing equipment (a fanning mill, a gravity table, and a de-huller). The grains are distributed whole so they keep for the whole year and shareholders can either get their own home mill for \$50-200 or come to us to have their grains milled at the bakery. There are many ways to set things up, and our program is by no means the only way to go about it. Different mixes of crops are desirable to different groups and we've made a point to find out what our shareholders want. At this point wheat, rice and beans seem to be high on peoples list but they also are excited about the variety and more unusual possibilities such as teff, millet, and quinoa. We are especilly excited by the natural companionship of grains and beans, both on the plate, and for the fertility and health of the soil.

Our project partner The New England Small Farm Institute was also awarded an MAIC grant to develop processing infrastructure for grain production here in the Valley. This kind of agricultural re-localization is no longer a fringe idea but is on the minds of communities and governments alike. If you would like more information visit our website for basics or contact me directly for more detailed information and assistance.