A photograph of a woman, Carol Whitson, crouching next to a black and white cow named Panda Bear. The cow is wearing a yellow tag with the number 129 in its ear and a rope halter. They are in a grassy field with a wooden fence and trees in the background.

Carol Whitson with Panda Bear, a star performer at the Educational Farm in Bedford. (See sidebar pg. 42)



FRESH FOOD —REAL FOLKS

You can just tell. The tomato skin is vibrant red, the corn husk isn't dry, the cucumbers aren't shiny — the vegetables were locally grown. They may not be perfect — a little spot here and there — but they taste a lot better and are healthier for you — and for your community. *By Meg Hirshberg*

Fever pick up a supermarket tomato and think about the couple thousand miles it's traveled from the farm to your palm, about how it was grown and who harvested it, about the fact that it was likely picked green and goaded into ripening by ethylene gas? Probably not, and you're not alone. Most people don't think very much about where their food comes from. Many of us grow up believing that food just magically emerges from somewhere in the back of the supermarket. We are out of touch with the farmers and the land on which we depend.

This fall is the 20th anniversary of a quietly growing movement to reconnect consumers with the source of their food. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms are community-based associations of growers and consumers. The consumers provide upfront financial support for the growers, by buying "shares" of the farm each season, and in exchange the farmer provides the CSA subscribers with abundant, fresh, (usually) organic produce and other products throughout the growing season. CSAs are a network of mutual support between farmers and consumers.

The CSA movement is growing like a weed. In 1990 there were about 60 CSAs in the country; now there are at least 1,500 nationwide. CSAs also are sprouting up all over Europe and Japan. A Web site, www.localharvest.org, lists more than 20 CSA farms in New Hampshire alone, ranging in size from a couple dozen members to several hundred.

Farming for a CSA is a labor of love — most growers net very little profit by the end of the season. And many fail, usually due to inexperience, or loss of the farmland. Many CSA growers must rent their farmland, often near urban areas, where high land



Anthony Graham is the manager of the Temple-Wilton CSA. The farm is sustained by members, about 100 strong, that pay upfront to share the season's bounty. Using organic methods of fertilization, Graham believes, produces vegetables that are born of "life" and are full of life-sustaining nutrients. Raw milk and yogurt also are available to members, along with organic breads from Orchard Hill Breadworks in Alstead. There is currently a waiting list to join.

values mutate tractors into bulldozers, and beets into square feet, as fertile soil yields a crop of wood, metal, concrete and glass. Land security is a huge issue for CSAs, and the long-term successful operations have all found ways to secure their land.

One of the very first U.S. CSAs took root in 1986 in Wilton, N.H. The Temple-Wilton Community Farm still thrives today, with two full-time farmers and about 100 families (comprising about 350 people), and 85 families on the waiting list. At a meeting last spring of farm subscribers, farmer Anthony Graham asked the 40-or-so members in attendance to explain why they had joined the CSA.

A Nashua man is "trying to get away from technological food." A young mother wants her daughter eating organic food and drinking organic milk. (Her daughter Sophie, age 9, loves the farm, too: "I like feeding the cows hay.") According to a member from Peterborough, "You are what you eat ... since joining the farm my life and health have improved dramatically." Others are comforted by the fact that the farmland is respected and cared for, and not poisoned by pesticides. Some subscribers are serious cooks seeking the best and freshest produce. One woman, moved by the quality and care that goes into the farm products, said that "when I eat food from this farm, I'm reminded to call on the best in myself."

Though member motives do vary, one universal experience is the sense of a reconnection to the land. CSA membership is a wholly different experience than the flat monetary exchange in a supermarket or even at a farmstand. CSA subscribers ride the ups and downs of the season, of crop success or failure, of deluge and drought, with the farmer. They are stakeholders in the grower's success; as one

farmer put it, "People come to feel that it's their farm." Many farmers put out newsletters or e-mails to keep members apprised of what is happening in the field; many members enjoy lending a hand on the farm with weeding or harvesting. Often members find unusual vegetables in their weekly basket, like collards, garlic tops or bok choy; growers frequently supply printed recipes to help the perplexed customer enjoy these exotic offerings.

Typically, customers pay a certain amount for a single share (good for one or two people) and more for a family share (good for about four people). Sometimes they can pay extra for fresh bread, flowers, honey, berries, eggs and naturally raised meats. In New Hampshire, most farms operate for between 18–20 weeks, from the beginning of June through October. Most farmers prefer subscribers to pay for the season upfront, but some will accept monthly payments. A typical family share runs around \$500 or \$600 for about 20 weeks, or about \$30 per week. The farmers prepare a weekly box of vegetables for each subscriber, which is then available for pickup.

CSA subscribers enjoy not only the abundant healthful produce, and the connection to those who grow it, but also the knowledge that they are helping to preserve open space by keeping local farms in business. They are supporting a cleaner environment by purchasing from farmers who (usually) use organic practices, which better protect the environment. They are also supporting the local economy by keeping their food dollar in the state — like many states, more than 95 percent of New Hampshire's food is imported.

Vicki Smith, New Hampshire's certification coordinator for the state's organic program, is enthusiastic about CSAs for these and other reasons, as well: "CSAs give a sense of what community is. It's neighbors helping each other."

The ultimate expression of this sense of community surrounding CSAs can be found in the philosophy of the Wilton-Temple Community Farm. This year-round CSA offers eggs, meat, milk, >



Organic breads from the Alstead's Orchard Hill Breadworks are available to the Temple-Wilton CSA members, too.

TO FIND A CSA NEAR YOU

Visit www.localharvest.org to find CSAs listed by state. They include more than 20 CSAs all over New Hampshire. They also list farmers markets and other places to find local and organic products. However, their lists are not complete and in some cases out-of-date.

For a list of CSAs, farmers markets and sources of local and organic food, you also can call the NH Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA NH) office in Concord at (603) 224-5022.

Some of the larger CSAs in N.H. are certified organic; some are organic but not certified. Some offer higher share prices to include bread, honey, maple syrup, berries, flowers, milk and meat. Seasons are usually 18–20 weeks. Shares can be single shares, for one or two people, or family shares, for four people. Shares are available for pickup one or two days a week.

Local Harvest CSA in Concord — (603) 731-5955 or localharvestcsa@mail.com. Single share \$445; family share \$665. They are expanding to around 275 shares. Weekly baskets include produce and other products from nine different local growers.

Cold Pond Community Farm in Acworth — (603) 835-2403. A family share is \$575; there are approximately 40 shares. They are in their eighth year.

Stonewall Farm in Keene — (603) 357-2777, Ext. 111. There are approximately 90 shares. Single share \$385; family share \$600.

Tracie's Farm in Sullivan — (603) 847-9066. Tracie delivers to homes. She offers a reduced price for those willing to work on the farm several hours per week. There are approximately 85 shares. Full share price is \$480, and there are also half shares. Tracie offers weekly mixed-flower bouquets for an additional \$80/season.

Long Trail Acres Farm in Antrim — (603) 588-2573. Fifty year-round shares for \$1,500, includes vegetables, eggs and local delivery. Organic meat is available.

Got Milk?

Carol Whitson manages the Joppa Hill Farm, which is leased from the town of Bedford as a land conservation trust.

The fledgling CSA has a token number of beef cattle and cows for milking along with chickens, goats, a donkey, horses and even a barn swallow. For now, the farm gets along by providing educational opportunities for school groups. Whitson teaches the kids where food really comes from and, beyond that, how a biodiverse farm works.

Sustainable agriculture is really a complete circle. The cows, breeds that thrive on grass, eat in the pasture and their manure, "black gold" as Whitson calls it, is used to enrich the soil on which the grass flourishes. Milk is actually a byproduct. The cows are healthy and the milk is good.

Whitson plans to grow the herd of beef cattle and milking cows within the next couple of years. She also plans to be one of the first certified organic raw milk producers in the area.



Panda Bear (pictured on the page 38) is a Normandy-Holstein cross. The hybrid has vigor and, as Whitson explains, "is designed to eat grass and walk around." Really, a "marvelous machine" — when left to do what they do best, she notes. — Susan Laughlin

Longhorn steer J.R. guards his life's work, the manure pile at the Educational Farm.

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➤ yogurt and cheese in addition to produce. The farmers do not set a required subscription fee, but rather take their total budget, and divide it by the number of shares, to arrive at a suggested share price. But that price, says farmer Anthony Graham, "is not the amount of money we're asking for. We're asking, what can you manage, based on your income? We don't set a minimum or a maximum. It all averages out."

During this year's April "pledge meeting," where members state what they'll be paying for the season, several members pledged less than the suggested share price. But many more pledged in excess of the average price. In the end, the budget was met. Pleased and relieved, Graham said: "We're so glad that we can carry the few who can't afford it. We don't want to turn people away because of the cost. I should learn to trust — every year I walk in afraid we won't make the budget, and we almost always do."

In a fearful and suspicious world, that rare seedling of trust can nourish an entire community. As Anthony Graham says, "It's the proof of what we are doing. These meetings show the community supporting each other. You do things for people in one way, it comes back to you in another."

DROP TOMATO SOUP

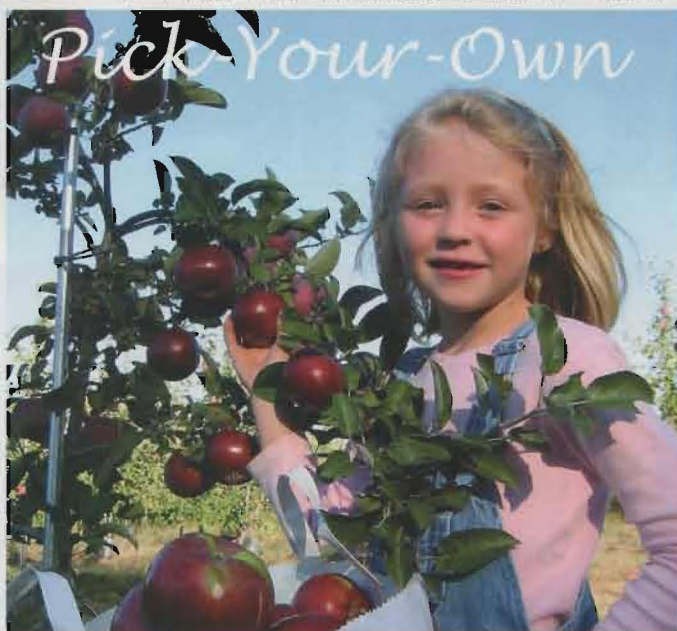
At the end of summer the tomatoes are fat, juicy and sweet. The name for this soup comes from those that are the ripest and bursting with flavor — the "drops."

Serves 6

- 2 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 3 1/2 lbs. very ripe tomatoes, roughly chopped
- 1/2 cup dry red wine, Cabernet or Chianti
- 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves, chiffonade

Sauté onion and garlic in olive oil until soft but with no color. Add remaining ingredients and simmer uncovered for 25–30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Purée in a blender until perfectly smooth. Serve with grilled cheese sandwiches.

From Chef Nathan Baldwin of Baldwin's On Elm in Manchester.



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