

## **Joining the Food Revolution in Grinnell**

### **By Jonathan Andelson**

“Let’s make Iowa the food capital of Iowa.”  
-Neil Hamilton

“People did it before,” Karie said in a tone somewhere between hope and desperation. “Couldn’t we do it again?” Several of us were sitting around a table one day five years ago on the campus of Grinnell College in Iowa discussing the possibility of a community supported agriculture (CSA) initiative in the town of Grinnell. Karie, though, was already possessed by a larger vision of local food self-sufficiency. What piqued her was the estimate we had heard that ninety percent or more of the food eaten by Iowans was produced elsewhere. “It really is crazy,” Ann agreed, “when so much of the best farmland in the country is right here.”

Like people in most places around the world, Iowans once produced most of their own food. The first European American settlers, like the native peoples who were in the area before them, raised or hunted nearly all of their own food. Although the coming of the railroad in the 1860s greatly increased opportunities for exchange with distant markets, and sugar, coffee, and tea began coming in quite early, still, a quick look at the annual state agricultural censuses reveals that Iowa historically produced a wide variety of food crops on a commercial scale. Wheat, rye, barley, potatoes, apples, cherries, plums, grapes, strawberries, pears, peaches, raspberries, tomatoes, sweet corn, popcorn, melons, sorghum, and sweet potatoes were all grown for market on Iowa farms in the twentieth century, most of them within the last fifty years. Likewise, cattle, hogs, chickens, ducks, sheep, and goats have all been raised commercially, as well as bees for

their honey. Traditionally, produce from farmyard and back yard gardens contributed significantly to the diet of most families, not only during the growing season but, due to home canning and other forms of food preservation, throughout the year.

Iowa's food system has changed significantly in the last fifty years. Today, over 97 percent of the state's cropland is used to produce field corn, soybeans, and alfalfa, virtually none of it for human consumption. Cattle, hogs, and chickens are still raised on a large scale, but the organization of production, particularly of hogs and chickens, is much different than it was. Whereas in 1954 four out of five Iowa farms produced hogs and chickens for market, today, although the number of each produced in the state has held steady or even increased, only one farm in ten produces hogs, and one in fifty raises chickens. This level of specialization obviously necessitates bringing other foods into the state from elsewhere. Another important change is the increase in the amount of highly processed and packaged food and fast food that Iowans eat, most of which originates from out of state as well.

I doubt, though, that any of us sitting around the table that day had quite conceptualized the whole picture. As Vince, whose family was among the first CSA members, said at some point, "I just want to eat good, healthy food raised by people I know." We all felt that way, but it was Karie who had drawn us together. She had recently graduated from the college, had learned about CSAs through attending field days sponsored by Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), and had received a post-graduate grant from the college's Office of Social Commitment to stay in town to work on the CSA idea. In an effort to identify potential producers and "eaters" for the CSA she made phone calls, knocked on doors, visited other CSAs in our region, and met with some key

people in the community. A local organic soybean farmer who was in the midst of developing a value-added tofu production plant steered her to Ann, who raised vegetables organically near Malcom, a few miles away. “I was always interested in alternative farming practices,” she later recalled. “We grew up without chemicals, and my parents were good at telling us how the food was raised, where it came from.” Ann became the first farmer to volunteer to be a producer for our CSA.

A series of organizational meetings at the public library followed. These were attended by a handful of people that Karie began to refer to as Core Potential Eaters, as well as by some additional producers: Rebecca, who raised vegetables near Deep River, fifteen miles southeast of Grinnell, and brothers Dennis and Doug, who farmed near Lynnville, fifteen miles south. The geographical dispersion of the producers was valuable insurance for the CSA against local crop loss due to pests, hail, flooding, or other natural disasters. Later we learned that having multiple producers also increased the variety of produce members received, since each producer enjoyed growing a slightly different array of vegetables. Barney, a local livestock producer who had already been direct marketing his meat for several years, also came to the meetings, and a couple of people talked about offering eggs. Ann and Karie even proposed a name for the about-to-become association; it had come to them on a drive through the countryside, where they had seen one of our native prairie plants, erect and tall like a beacon along the roadside: Compass Plant CSA.

Everything seemed to be coming together to make our CSA a reality, except that at the end of our final planning meeting no one had stepped forward to coordinate the whole business. “Can we make this happen?” The long silence that greeted Karie’s

question seemed like a death sentence, until Brenda said, “OK, it looks like we need some help,” and stepped forward to meet the need. Brenda, who with her husband and children had moved to Grinnell only recently onto a farm that had been in her husband’s family for a hundred years, became our executive captain, and the details were achieved.

That first year the Compass Plant CSA had three producers and twenty families. Each of the families purchased a share for \$200 (or half a share for \$100), and every Tuesday came to the pickup site at the activity center of a local church to receive a virtual cornucopia of fresh produce, everything from the familiar sweet corn and tomatoes to what-do-I-do-with-it turnips and kohlrabi. If it had been possible to assemble the season’s share on a single table, what a sensory extravaganza it would make: deep purple eggplants, aromatic basil, tongue-tingling peppers, green and yellow and lavender pod beans, zucchinis as long as your forearm, carrots as sweet as sugar, and -- ahhh -- garlic. The bounty was staggering, and many times my own family could not finish a week’s share before the next one arrived. We ended the year with a potluck dinner for the producers and shareholders, impatient for the arrival of spring and the first salad greens.

Compass Plant CSA has gotten a little larger every year. We’ve been fortunate to have a series of energetic and capable student interns funded by the college’s Center for Prairie Studies working with us every summer: Jess and Brian the first summer, then Lauren, Erika, and Katharine. As I write, four years into our venture, thirty-five families are enjoying the end of this season’s harvest. We have lost a few eaters to moves or family changes but gained more. The members are clear about the reasons that draw them to local food. “It’s just good, delicious stuff,” Jackie said, going to what for many

eaters is the heart of the matter. But there are other incentives. “I enjoy being in tune with the seasons, not simply eating what’s in the grocery store,” Lorna said. “We look forward to what each season brings. We also like eating food that’s grown responsibly with a minimum of chemicals. And I like knowing where my food is coming from.” For Jon and Jeannie, one of the appealing things about the CSA is the element of surprise. “We love the surprise of not knowing in advance what we’re going to cook for Tuesday’s dinner. We enjoy the challenge of figuring out a plan for using all the produce during the week.” For some, social considerations are part of the appeal. “I enjoy going to the weekly pickup, interacting with like-minded people, knowing they’re going home and eating good food,” one member said. Jon agreed: “there’s a social element to the whole thing -- connecting with neighbors we don’t see regularly otherwise, and also with the countryside.”

Connecting with the countryside was not part of the initial arrangement of Compass Plant, but in the second year something that Ann describes today as “a big thing for the CSA” made it possible: Brenda and Lisle offered their “century farm” as the weekly pickup site. Although the church’s activity center that we had used the first year certainly was adequate, the short drive to their farm at the edge of town provides an ambiance that in obvious ways complements what the CSA is all about: a weathered old barn, a few cattle contentedly munching hay in the barnyard, gabbling chickens in front of the henhouse, an herb garden, and assorted barnyard cats. It is a place to linger, to allow children a few minutes of exploration, to glimpse a once common but increasingly rare surrounding. Even the low-ceilinged room where the produce is laid out, with its rough walls through whose cracks bits of sunlight sparkle of an afternoon, feels right.

Everyone enjoys the location, and so now a lovingly hand-painted sign for the CSA stands permanently by the driveway.

Just as you cannot have a CSA without eaters, so are the producers essential. Their reasons for being involved complement the eaters' reasons. Dennis's general goal as a farmer is "to grow food the best way possible." For him this means using organic practices, even though he and Doug have not undertaken the burdensome paperwork to be certified organic according to government standards. By way of explanation he says, "I once got drift from a neighboring farm, and you can lose your certification from that. People who get our food can ask about our methods, and they can visit our farm to see how we do everything. If they do, they'll see some weeds because we don't use chemicals." Doug and Dennis have two and a half acres in vegetable production, and during the peak of the summer Dennis says he puts in around 55 hours on the farm. They both also have full-time day jobs. "The garden is a kind of a stress relief for me," Dennis says, "at least when the weather is nice," which of course is not always the case. A couple of years ago, their garden got hammered by hail, and they lost a considerable amount of produce, which meant that the Compass Plant eaters did as well. Such is the shared-risk nature of a CSA. This is one reason Dennis likes producing for Compass Plant.

Another reason involves his comparison between the CSA and the farmers markets he and Doug sell at, including the one in Grinnell. There they have to pay for a vendor's space, set up tables, man the tables for about three hours while interacting with customers, then pack up the tables and drive home -- a total time investment of over four

hours. The CSA drop-off generally takes him less than an hour. He would like to see Compass Plant double in size, which would allow him and Doug to shift their production away from the farmers markets and toward the CSA. Either way, though, their truck gardening will probably only provide a modest supplement to their income. More than for the money, they farm because of the satisfaction they get producing healthy food from the land.

A similar goal motivates Ann. “My parents raised us with the stewardship thing: what you take from the earth needs to go back somehow. And what you put into the earth shouldn’t hurt it. It was hard for me to reconcile this kind of thinking with what I was taught in ag school at Iowa State in the late 1970s, but I’ve kept that vision.”

Another important consideration behind Ann’s farming choices is wanting to do the right thing for her childrens’ health.

Like Doug and Dennis, Ann does not depend on her CSA income for a living; she also teaches agricultural science at Grinnell High School. Brenda has a part-time job, and her husband Lisle works for an implement company. Of the producers associated with the CSA only Barney, who direct markets beef, lamb, pork, and chickens to local customers, including many Compass Plant members, supports himself from his farm income. This year he’s been getting 10 cents per pound over the local market price for his beef (with a self-imposed ceiling of \$1.00 per pound) because people are willing to pay more for it. He generally receives a premium on his other meat as well. Still, Barney is not exactly prospering; he uses old farm equipment (of his several tractors, the newest was built in the 1960s), barter for many of his needs, engages brilliantly in what the French call *bricolage* – a proficiency at scrounging, saving, and re-using – and lives

simply. He is the first to admit that his “getting by” lifestyle would probably not satisfy most people, even most farmers. But he is happy. He is also doing what he thinks is right. He likes to quote a Gaelic saying he learned from the Iowa farmer-poet Michael Carey: “If you should, you can.” “I feel the local foods movement is something we should do,” he says. “It makes sense environmentally, and it’s socially responsible.”

Everyone associated with Compass Plant CSA agrees, but sometimes we wonder: will it ever be possible for like-minded producers to make a decent living from local food systems? The answer can only be, “it depends on the demand.” The public must choose what kind of food it wants. But perhaps the public can use some help making up its mind. This conviction led several organizations in the Grinnell area to form GALFA, the Grinnell Area Local Foods Alliance. A partnership among Compass Plant CSA, the college’s Center for Prairie Studies, Imagine Grinnell (a non-profit quality of life foundation in the community), the Poweshiek County Extension Service, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Iowa Valley RC&D, Iowa Network of Community Agriculture, Practical Farmers of Iowa, and the Grinnell Farmers Market, GALFA works to promote local foods in a variety of ways. The Center for Prairie Studies created a directory of local food producers who market locally. Two years ago, with critical support in the form of a grant from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, GALFA hired a half-time coordinator to develop an “institutional buying initiative.” Whitney works to bring together local producers and institutions that serve or sell food. Members of the Environmental Action Group on campus began a student garden that provides produce to the Grinnell Community Meals Program and Mid-Iowa Community Action. Most recently, we worked with Ann to

secure a seed grant from the college's Office of Community Enhancement to develop a student garden at the high school that we hope will provide fresh produce for the school cafeteria.

The local foods movement in Grinnell has come a long way in five years. Although Karie the catalyst has moved on to enroll in the Sustainable Agriculture program at Iowa State University, the rest of us remain, working in our various ways to advance the causes of healthy eating, community economic well-being, food security, environmental improvement, and the ties of neighborliness. It is remarkable how many good things come from the simple act of eating food produced close to home.

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