



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

21 June 2007

Welcome to The Alleged Farm virtual CSA 2007 season.

I have been toying with the idea of a virtual CSA for some years now. It seems like an excellent way to help integrate agriculture into the new economy—no easy task given that agriculture has barely made it into the old one yet. Farming is something of a relic of what one might call the preeconomy, that distant past when people merely tended to their basic needs and the idea of swapping a few of ones extra roots and berries for a chunk of mastodon femur with the guy in the cave next door was the height of international trade.

As I understand it, the new economy consists largely of finding ways to get a lot more money for a lot less product. You create synergy and vertical integration. You provide convenience and value. You employ interactive technology. You build the brand. And at the end of the day your customers have a good feeling about something—they are not quite sure what—and you have a pile of cash.

An activity that involves considerable amounts of brute physical effort resulting in the creation of such tangible objects as potatoes is going to have a hard time fitting into this scheme. Sure, the savvy marketer could get Americans fired up about a particular variety of potato or the remarkable health benefits of potatoes or even some sort of potato lifestyle complete with magazine, apparel (russet norkotah is the must have color for this fall), destination resorts and a gala awards show featuring various strongly pro-potato celebrities. But some time around six in the evening people would still begin to feel a need to get their hands on an actual potato (well, in most cases not an actual potato, but at least some sort of potato-based food product). In order for that to happen somebody somewhere has to have grown the potato, which has precious little to do with image, desire or shareholder profits.

The problem, of course, is not integrating the potato itself into the new economy. McDonalds and the Frito-Lay Corporation have offered the world more than adequate evidence that this can be done (just mix with fat, salt and a billion dollars of advertising). It's the sweaty, grease-stained, irritable guys growing those potatoes who have no obvious role in the modern scheme of things. We are a bunch of literalists, clinging to the belief that you should have something to show for a day's work—a plowed field, a new fence line, a cooler full of greens—and happy to let our produce speak for itself. A quick glance will show that we don't care much about appearances and as for creating connections, we might stop for a chat but we choose to spend our lives out in the fields on deafeningly loud tractors.

So what, if anything, do we have to offer other than our produce? Well, there's a brisk trade in rural sentimentality. People are happy to pay for everything from an elegiac memoir about living off the land to a fake weather vane. There seems to be a growing market for the idea of a simple life, of being in harmony with nature, of a deep tie to the land. But you won't find a lot of farmers selling this. It is hard to work up that sort of feeling about the agricultural life when you live it. Being covered with dirt is not the same as being spiritually connected to it.

Perhaps, though, it is precisely this matter-of-factness that is our secret asset. In this age of carefully crafted slogans and ceaseless appeals to fantasy, when reality has become just one more entertainment industry concept, farmers may be some of the last people in America who can honestly talk about things as they simply are. I don't mean by that to claim we have some special access to truth. That's just another fiction of the rural sentimentality racket. Farmers are as misguided as anyone. But when we talk about dirt and rocks and rain and blood we are talking about those actual objects themselves. Metaphor is a lovely thing, but sometimes a rock is just a rock. What matters is not its value as a symbol of permanence or stupidity but the fact that it is in

This week's share: Beets, Bok choy, Garlic scapes, Garlic shoots, Kohlrabi, Lettuce, Mustard greens, Lemon balm

the path of the potato planter and somebody has to go and pick it up and dump it in the hedgerow before the tractor hits it.

I like to think of CSAs as a way of offering this literalness to those of you lucky enough to have found something other than farming to occupy your time. We offer it most obviously in the form of vegetables, such as the ones in your bag this week. But it exists too in the fact that those vegetables come to you from a specific patch of dirt you can visit (see below), grown with the labor of specific people you can meet supported by your membership in our farm. You give us money and we turn it into crops such as beets and lettuce and give it back to you.

At least, we try to turn it into crops. Sometimes cold hard facts intervene, as they did a couple of weeks ago. Literally. That is, we had a hail storm. It could have been worse. It was worse a mile east of us. But a mere minute of wind-driven ice pellets can do a surprising amount of damage, even to something as sturdy as rhubarb. For several days after the hail I feared that we would not have much to hand out and that I would be forced to deliver weeks of empty bags with lists of the vegetables they would have contained had the storm not done them in. In other words a virtual CSA offering you a direct connection not to the vegetables themselves but to the fact of their having been grown (and destroyed) on our farm, thus freeing you to enjoy the fundamental concept of the CSA without the distraction of the actual vegetables. It would have been very new economy.

As you can see, I was a little pessimistic (it is hard to be upbeat as you survey the damage from a hail storm). We do not have as many crops as I had expected. But the bags are not actually empty. Fortunately, the beets, bok choy, mustard, lettuce and kohlrabi were all in greenhouses and thus spared. And the garlic is hardy.

I was going to say tough, but it is actually quite tender if you cook it right. Which in the case of the shoots means braising them in a little liquid, butter, salt and pepper until they go soft, then turning the heat up, adding a splash of vinegar and cooking them until the liquid has boiled off. And in the case of the scapes can mean pureeing them with olive oil, lemon juice and salt to make a sauce (you can use it on fish, boiled vegetables, steak, noodles or some slices of raw kohlrabi) or cutting them into pieces and sautéing them over medium heat until they start to brown and soften. You can eat them on their own or have them with some steamed or stir fried bok choy or mustard greens.

I guess the virtual CSA will have to wait. But you can still enjoy its benefits—the knowledge that your food has a specific origin and comes straight from there to you. You are of course free to keep this knowledge virtual and simply imagine what we and the farm are like. But, being a farmer, I would recommend a more hands on approach. Come to out the farm. Stick your hands in the dirt. Move a rock. Dig up a potato. Find out what we actually do all day. Egg on the crops. To encourage this we have several farm tour days—July 8th and August 11th from 10 to 2—and our open house (and annual pie contest) on September 30th. I hope you will make it to the farm at least one of those days. And you can always drop by during the week and watch us at work.

A brief note about the not even virtual fruit share. I have decided not to do the fruit share this year. I have been unable to find enough reliable, affordable local producers to supply a share of sufficient breadth and value.