

My particular affinity with food: farming in a Community Supported Agriculture

by Tom Troonbeeckx

Tom Troonbeeckx studied at the Higher Institute for Readaptation Sciences Leuven, Belgium from 1996 until 1999. After graduation he started a project to rebuild a sailing ship to reintegrate people after time in jail or psychiatry. In 2001 he traveled for half a year through Eastern Europe on a bicycle. On the way he worked on different farms in Romania, Poland, and Hungary. At his return he followed a practical course in organic farming at Landwijzer, Antwerp. When this was finished it took him a year to get organized and start “Het Open Veld”, the first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in Belgium.

ABSTRACT

In my contribution I attempt to give an idea about Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and the way it functions. I start with a description of the course of my life to sketch the background of the reasons why I established a CSA as a farmer. The general principles of CSA are outlined and made more concrete by discussing the possible varieties of these principles as practiced and by describing the way my CSA works. My interest in CSA is much linked to the way I personally relate to food, something which I try to express as well throughout this article.

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Introduction

In this contribution I will tell something about my relation with food and the way foods are produced. To understand what I'm doing now as a farmer, it is necessary to first explain a little bit about my youth and about the way I rediscovered my affinity with plants, soil and food later in my life. This resulted in the discovery of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).

In the second part I will elaborate on the concept of Community Supported Agriculture and give an overview of some of its possibilities.

After clarifying the large contours of CSA I will focus on our farm and explain how it became configured in this specific way. When observing a farm(land) it is possible to see the personality of the farmer that's running it and the way he connects to soil, plants, animals and society. I can only hope that this article would enable the reader to observe our CSA and get a feeling about me as the farmer.

Presentation

Most of my childhood I spent on a Waldorfschool (Rudolf Steiner) in Leuven, Belgium. Students in this school are encouraged to make a connection between the head, hands and feelings. Although, none of the teachers ever told us this in so many words, they managed somehow to make its importance clear. By doing arts, crafts and theoretical studies we learned to connect those three fields in human beings. After spending 11 years on this school I studied three years to become a social worker, specializing in the reintegration of people through involving them in working processes. Following this, I was rebuilding an old sailing ship during three years, together with people who where trying to re-integrate in society after jail or psychiatry. I loved this job but it didn't satisfy me. Is it good to re-integrate them in a Western-capitalistic society? Who do we have to change: this society or the people who can't connect to it? Is it possible to be socially engaged when paid to do so? How many more people could we reach with the same budget if we chose for a less expensive project? Who am I working for? Myself? The people who have to be re-integrated? The people who where going to sail the ship? The sponsors? These have been the kind of questions was struggling with. I can still be quite radical in these kinds of questions because I really want to go back to basics.

I needed to break free and find my way back to myself and to my goal in life. I took a bicycle and rode through Eastern-Europe. By cycling 10.000 kilometers and meeting hundreds of people I had time enough to think about my questions and goals. My conclusion after six months was the following: One can't do anything better than producing healthy food for the people and the planet. On my journey I saw many people working the land in many different ways. In Belgium one can hardly ever see a farmer with his feet on the soil because there is generally a huge machine in between. All these examples I saw during my trip inspired me. In their whole production process there is a very low input of money and of non renewable energy. The fact that their system is fuelled by 'solar energy' collected through food consumption into their bodies made me realize how important it is to have healthy food. If you look at the word 'healthy' in Dutch (gezond) it is clear that the word sun (zon) is contained in it. This means that food should be outside in the sun. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of healthy food and its influence on the body and mind.

What did this mean to me, my questions and my goal? Is organic agriculture the answer? Is small scale production the answer? Permaculture? Biodynamics? Agroforestry?

I could have driven around the planet still not knowing the answer. Instead, I decided to take action and to put into practice my feelings and my thoughts. Back in Belgium, I followed a course in organic farming because my previous experience in a vegetable garden was very valuable but not enough. My knowledge of farming increased rapidly after two years of theoretical lessons combined with many hours of fieldwork. I worked on different farms, together with different people and including all kinds of crops. The first year I worked on a vegetable farm and an apple and pear orchard. The second year I worked on a mixed farm with animals, such as dairy cows, sheep, pigs, chicken, and vegetables and cereals. I learned a lot and saw how hard people need to work on their farm in order to make a living. At the same time it became clear to me that it would be very difficult to start my own farm, especially not being a farmer's son, as it requires a lot of time, labor and capital. On top of this, there is a big risk in it because one is never sure whether it is going to work. It was all very depressing until I got in contact with the concept of Community Supported Agriculture in Holland. This concept opened my heart and it provided me many possibilities.

It should be clear that I was looking for a project that was both ecologically, socially and economically sound and that I could not be happy with only a half solution. Key concepts to my dream are: sustainability, 'small is beautiful' and the reduction of my ecological footprint. How could CSA help me to fulfill this dream?

Community Supported Agriculture

As CSA is not a well known concept in Europe, I will explain it in what follows. It was 'invented' in Japan and came first to Germany and later to the USA where it is now the quickest growing sector in agriculture comprising a few thousand examples. It started as a solution for a food crisis during which a woman asked a farmer whether they could join their powers to make sure they would have good food for their families. She would bring together a group of women that would engage themselves to buy their foods from that farmer and to help him cultivating the desired vegetables. The farmer could then have more income security and make a proper living. Hence, CSA is a system where the farmer and the 'consumers' both participate in running the farm. They make an agreement about how the farm will be managed and how responsibilities will be shared. On another level, these agreements entail relations of responsibility towards each other. In addition to that, participants become fellow travellers on the road towards a more sustainable world and be(come) the changes aspired for.

For me it is also very important to realize that through CSA we can adapt economy to nature instead of trying to adapt nature to economy. We don't have to grow cubic pumpkins or pick tomatoes still green. We can 'afford' to be good for our soil, grow 'uneconomic' varieties and select on taste instead of transport ability.

On a more practical level three mayor conditions need to be fulfilled:

First off all, the risk is shared between the farmer and the members. In case there is a low harvest, everyone is affected by it and not only the farmer.

Secondly, the price should be discussed with 'everyone' so they know how much they are paying and wherefore.

Thirdly there should be an open bookkeeping so the consumers (often called members) know what the farmer is doing with their money, which is good for the sustainability of the project. For instance, members could find out that a farmer is paying himself a very low wage. In this case there is a possibility that he might look for an easier and better paid job and quit the project prematurely. With an open bookkeeping, such potential problems can be signaled in time. All these kind of issues are discussed and agreed upon between the farmer and the members. It is good to write these things down into a kind of contract.

In practice, all CSA farms differ in size, production methods, agreements, and ways to get the food to the consumers.

A few examples will make this clear. The price can be higher or lower on one farm than on another one. It can be paid in money or also partly in labor. For example, we could agree on decreasing the price if the members help one day a month. We can also implement a variable price within the group of members. Let's say the average price has to be 160 euros per person per year for the whole group. The members can choose to pay between 120 and 200 euro, to ensure everybody's engagement, but the average of the group as a whole has to reach 160 euros per person.

There are not only big differences in price systems. The way vegetables are distributed to the members can be organized in various ways. Generally, the vegetables are brought in boxes to the members. The farmer drives these to certain point where people can come and collect them every week. I also know places where the farmer puts the harvest at a spot on the farm where people can take their share. All information is then indicated on a blackboard so members know what they can take.

Another important difference is related to production. What is produced and in which way. Are fruits included? Is it organic or

biodynamic? Do they get a share whole year round? ... It is clear that there are endless possibilities.

Now I will explain more about the way we do it at 'Het Open Veld' (The Open Field), the first CSA in Belgium.

Our Farm

'Het Open Veld' is situated close to a monastery, one and half kilometer outside of Leuven. This is a small city with 90.000 inhabitants and a big university.

The farm exists out of three fields. The first and smallest one (15 ares) is situated next to one of the four big lakes of the monastery. It has a beautiful view and lies next to a walking path. The second field is a cherry orchard (1Ha) comprising 22 different varieties and is 200 meters away from the first field. Next to the cherry orchard is the third field (80 ares) with most part of the vegetables. During the summer of 2008 we will add a fourth field next to the third one. In total we will work on 2.3 Ha of which 1 Ha will be used to produce cherries.

The cherries are most often sold directly on the markets in and around Leuven and are not really part of the CSA. I, as the farmer, keep the full risk and responsibility for the orchard. The vegetables, by contrast, are harvested by the 90 members for their own use. Most of these people live close to the farm and come by foot or bicycle. They are allowed to harvest what they need for fresh consumption. We have different communication systems to make sure that people find what they need and how to harvest at the right time. The most important way is through email. They receive a monthly newsletter, and sometimes messages in between, to give them all the information they need. The second system exists of red and green flags on the field telling them what they are already allowed to harvest and what should be eaten fast. The third one is a blackboard on the field with more information. Keeping all this systems up to date is quite a big job but not half as much as harvesting myself. These communication systems are agreed upon at the start of the year.

Throughout the season they can find more than 50 different vegetables, cherries, herbs and soft fruits. For this they pay me 160 euros per adult at the beginning of the season. Like this we share the risk.

If something goes wrong with the tomatoes they will have to buy them somewhere else. People find this very logical and feel above all really involved. Every last Saturday of the month there is a working day so everyone can give a hand on the farm if he or she wishes. This is not an obligation. Mostly its big fun

and we will try to combine it with thematic moments. For example, I am planning to explain more about the soil, the plants, and the bees. They also share recipes. This will make it more interesting for them to come and will involve them even more in the project, partly because it becomes a social activity.

Last year 2007, was our first year and I saw it as an experimental year. This year 2008, I will work with 140 members and from this moment on, the farm will be financially profitable. At the start of the season, we agree on how the farm will work during a meeting. The price, being set by me, is discussed with the group later. It is very hard for a new group to decide on a price without any background in agriculture. Later on I can only hope that people become more involved. At the end of last season, we had an evaluation in which the members could help me in shaping the farm more in accordance to their wishes. Generally, these meetings we have are about very practical things. Last season, some of the topics included: more tomatoes, less cabbage or the possibility of installing a place to wash the vegetables before taking them home. Some of the things are possible whereas in other cases I have to explain them why it is not good, for instance, for the soil to grow too much of the same crop.

Why did I make the choices I made?

As mentioned earlier, there are many possibilities in starting a CSA farm. Every decision one takes has an influence on the financial, social and ecological impact of the farm.

Financially, I had been looking for a way to start up with a low budget and with a safe income for the long term. The selfharvestingsystem saved me from making many big investments at the start. It reduces my work with about two days a week and I don't have to buy a van or a car to bring away the harvest. Furthermore, I don't need a barn to pack, weigh and wash the vegetables and therefore no expensive packaging materials are required.

The way we share the risk and the fact that people pay me in advance gives me a very sure income when compared to other farmers. Because all the vegetables are going straight to the consumers, I have a very high income per square meter of land. This enables me to earn a living on more or less two hectares which is very small. It reduces my investments too.

Ecologically, I have been looking for real solutions. Not only the production has to be ecological, but also the marketing. For my private life I don't need a car. So, buying a car only for an ecological project would be very contradictory to me. The idea of selfharvesting saved me from having to do this. Although I try not to make compromises when it comes down to ecology, sometimes I don't see any other options on the short term. I bought a tractor

which is an asset in maintaining the field. I use around 150 liters of fuel a year. When buying the tractor I made sure it was a type that can deal with organic fuel too. It makes about 50% of the total amount of fuel that I use. This is okay for me.

There are also many situations where I have to make a decision not knowing what would be the best thing to do. For instance, my neighbor offers me seeds from a variety of beans which according to his experience are very productive in our soils. The law says I can't use them because they are not organic so I have to go and get them kilometers away from my plot of land. What would be most ecological; organic or local seeds? The same question goes for manure. The nearest organic manure that I can find is 25 kilometer from my field whereas the other manure is just next door...

Socially, is a bit harder to manage. It is not about taking decisions and knowing what the results will be. This is more about processes that start and grow out of my influence. There is for instance the relation between me and the members which is very clearly based on trust. With some of them this relation has quickly turned into friendship whereas with others it stays a bit more formal. Between the members there is also some exchange and also here one can see friendships starting. Since we are still in our first year and since it's not our first aim to become a group of friends I'm very happy with this evolution. The CSA builds a group feeling and relations among each other. This avoids misuse.

I'm not sure whether one would define the following as something social but it's definitely important. The members do not only connect to me as a farmer or to each other, but also to nature. Can you be social with nature? I think so. Being regularly in contact with nature and plants, it is possible to see these processes and feel deeply connected. This is different every day again. When connecting only through knowledge it's a fragile connection, whereas through feelings it's much stronger.

Conclusion

As a conclusion I would like to invite everyone who read this article to go into the fields and find a CSA. Maybe it's good to start the search on the World Wide Web (it might save some time) but it would be more inspiring when visiting at least one farm. Only then, in its practice, it is possible to understand CSA and if inspired, it's good to know that starting a CSA as a consumer is possible. Together with a few other people, interested in fresh healthy food, one can start creating a group and look for a farmer. There are many farmers or young people who would like to start but who don't see the possibilities. If they're invited by a group to cooperate with them it could be the trigger they need and in that case there could be a new CSA soon!