



Thought
FOR
Food

Interest in community-supported agriculture and sustainable farming is growing in Barrington

BY MARY KLEST



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN MCCONNELL

A direct, farm-to-consumer movement offers people a closer link to the food chain.

Community-supported agriculture and sustainable farming provide good-for-you, locally grown food while preserving the land and a way of life for nearby farm families.

MAGINE FRESH, HEALTHY TAKE-OUT FOOD that stimulates your senses, tickling your nose with its fresh aroma and filling your mouth with flavor almost forgotten. It is the sun, soil, rain, and a farmer's strong back that produces the sweetest fruit, the healthiest plants, and the tenderest meats. Our food chain is not broken; it's winding its way back to the family farm, where food harvested in the morning can be served that evening. Community-supported agriculture, farmers markets, and businesses that support sustainable farms are some ways to reconnect with your food roots. There are several sustainable farms surrounding the Barrington area that are ready to deliver on the promise of healthier, more earth-friendly food choices.

In Margaret Myren's yellow and blue kitchen on Liberty Street in Barrington, a plainly marked jar of S&D honey sits on the table while she talks about the difference between food co-ops and community-supported agriculture. Co-ops, she explains, increase consumer buying power by purchasing in bulk. For instance, she can order a case of organic cereal from a central warehouse with her buying group. Community-supported agriculture, however, is a mutually beneficial partnership between those who consume and those who produce locally grown (mostly organic) food. Members sign up to receive a share of the season's harvest. The members' financial support helps pay for seeds, equipment, labor, and other operating expenses at the farm. The farm then provides its members with a supply of fresh produce during the growing season.

The community-supported agriculture movement (sometimes referred to as "CSA") in the United States has grown from 50 such partnerships in 1990 to over 1,000 currently. The agricultural model began 30 years ago in Japan, when a group of women became concerned about where their food was coming from and a decrease in their farming population. The women established a direct growing and purchasing relationship between their group and local farms. Called *teikei* in Japanese, it translates to "putting the farmers' face on food."

Margaret didn't always appreciate farmers' work. She began examining what went into her body when she became pregnant. "I met the right person at the right time," she says of a friend who mentored her on making healthy food choices. She had never cooked a whole chicken, relying instead on chicken parts already cut up and sealed in plastic. Now she describes herself as "an unconventional grocery shopper" as she hands three pounds of recently slaughtered, grass-fed beef to a neighbor. A wife and mother of four, she doesn't want her kids to think that carrots are created in factories or that meat comes from a fast-food drive-through.

Local farms, local produce

Margaret's house serves as a host site for Sandhill Organics, a CSA owned by Peg and Matt Sheaffer of Grayslake. They farm 42 acres of leased land at Grayslake's Prairie Crossing, a planned conservation community that includes an organic farm, a charter school, a barn, and a stable. A conservation easement on the land protects it from development. Members of the CSA enjoy their portion of the farm's harvest after it is picked, weighed, and divided up proportionately. Sandhill supplies fresh, organically grown produce to 275 families weekly through CSA memberships. They employ six to eight people. Included in the basket of goods is a



Margaret Myren savors the roots of community-supported agriculture while visiting the community garden plots at Beese Park in Barrington.

newsletter on what's happening at the farm, a gesture that creates a dialogue between farmers and consumers.

In the United States, it is estimated that a typical ingredient in a modern meal travels 1,500 miles or more from farm to plate. Locally grown food is fresh, tastes great, and retains its vitamins and nutrients. "Our produce doesn't have to be grown for shipability. We select varieties that taste the best, not ones that will travel best," says Peg.

As the parents of three young children, the Sheaffers defy farmer demographics. Current census data show the average age of an Illinois farmer at 59.5. This young family combines meaningful work with family life and the life of their community. "Even if you don't buy produce from us, we add value to the community by being good stewards of the land, preventing soil erosion, educating kids, and using water resources wisely," says Peg.

She appreciates the CSA model. "With a membership market for our produce, we can invest our time in doing the best job we can as growers rather than spending it looking for buyers." Sandhill Organics extends its product line by forming a cooperative network with other farmers, such as apple growers in Michigan.

The best way to know where food comes from is to ask the farmer who produced it.

Off-season markets

During the “off-market” season, farmer and entrepreneur Greg Rosenquist drops off orders in Margaret’s driveway (a central location) for his regular customers. His cows, pigs, and chickens are raised at the Staff of Life Bakery and Farm in Dwight, Illinois, which he and his wife, Ginger, call home along with their seven young children. In addition to filling these orders, Greg brings his naturally raised beef, pork, chicken, and eggs to sell at the Barrington Farmers Market and pops fresh kettle corn on the spot.

His farm is economically self-sufficient. He doesn’t rely on memberships for support. His 28 acres of land are divided into pastures for livestock, rows for crops, an apiary for honeybees, and a small orchard and vineyard. He rents another 24 acres. Diversity is a key strategy: The family farm produces bakery goods that are certified by the health department for sale off the farm. A feed mill allows him to grind his own organic feed and sell any excess. These quality and cost controls buffer the farm from a food business increasingly affected by world economics.

Greg’s livestock is slaughtered at an FDA-approved site and packaged there. Yet he delivers the food himself. “When I sell my product, I like to look the buyer in the eye. If all farmers could see their customers’ faces, it would change farming. If what I sell is not fresh and tasty, I’m in trouble.” It’s his personal commitment that guides his decisions as a farmer.

Human health and animal welfare are important to Greg. His farm animals graze on pasture or other feed he grows in the summer, and mostly hay in the winter. The animals live in accordance with their natural behaviors. “When my animals are happy, I am happy,” he says.

This way of farming has practical applications. Well-cared-for animals have high levels of glycogen in their tissues and a lower fat content. Glycogen is the sugar in muscles that give animals the energy to move. It makes their meat tender, more flavorful, and less likely to carry bacteria.

At his Staff of Life Farm, Greg spreads manure to fertilize the soil. He moves his chickens every day, giving them fresh green plants to eat and keeping them clean. Crops are rotated to bolster soil integrity and maintain concentrations of vitamins and minerals. The leaf hoppers, Japanese beetles, and aphids are not annihilated with pesticides but recognized as part of a complex ecosystem. And here’s a novel concept: Farmer Greg doesn’t have an irrigation system. He relies on rain. If there is a drought, he steps up the bakery and feed supply business. “If one thing falters, there’s always something else to rely on,” he says.

Those who are committed to farm-fresh food, like Margaret Myren, appreciate farming practices like these. “I hold Greg’s farming and husbandry techniques in the highest regard,” she says.

A farm is not a cocoon

High global energy prices are adding to the cost of hauling, transporting, processing, and packaging food. The cost of grain is skyrocketing. Still, farmers maintain autonomy when it comes to pricing. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) statistics show that in the 1970s farmers received about one-third of retail food expenditures. That amount has dropped to about 22



Judy Bruce (left) and Margaret Myren co-chair the Barrington Farmers Market.

percent today. By selling directly to consumers, farmers can get the fairest return on their products.

“Prices are all over the board,” says Peg from Sandhill Organics, referring to the cost of grocery-store produce relative to farm-fresh. “Some are comparable, such as milk; others are cheaper, such as chard. I saw a bunch of chard for \$4 at the grocery store, and I was selling ours fresh for \$2.75.” She said the cost to customers for CSA-grown food is on par with that charged for organic food at grocery stores. She suggests stocking up and buying in bulk to make it more economical. “If you buy a flat of blueberries, you can put them in quart-size freezer bags and freeze them. You will have organic, locally grown blueberries year round to make smoothies or pies.”

You may find yourself asking, Why buy a can of tomato sauce when I can simply buy some tomatoes, basil, and garlic, and make it myself?

“Once you’ve tasted the difference, you won’t balk at the price,” says Judy Bruce, who co-chairs the Barrington Farmers Market along with Margaret Myren. Margaret’s enthusiasm is driven by respect for sustainable farmers and the land they protect. For Judy, the focus is on community. “Anything that brings us together as a community is a benefit to us. It’s a total pleasure for me to volunteer at the Farmers Market. I get upset if it’s going to rain.”

It is here that you will see the farmer’s face. The Farmers Market on Park Avenue at Cook Street began in 2000 through the Barrington Village Association (BVA), a homeowners’ not-for-profit group comprising residents living within the four quadrants of the downtown village area. Judy describes the market as “a touch, taste, and smell type of place.” Simply stroll past fruit purveyor Wayne Miller’s booth, and he’ll proudly invite you to sample one of the fruits he grew at his Michigan orchard.

Reaping rewards

Judy Bruce measures the success of the market by the number of people who attend and whether the vendors want to return the next year. Visitors to the market have increased during the four years she's been involved with it. Many of the vendors fill out their applications early for the following year. "We're foodies here. Barrington residents appreciate good food. So the vendors want to come back."

Farmer Greg from Dwight says that Barrington is a very good market: "The customers are fun. I enjoy talking with them." Illinois farmers markets on average yield \$7,100 per vendor. But, says Judy, "They do it for the love of it and the personal pride they take in producing a quality product."

As a child, Greg dreamed of being a pioneer but later realized there was no frontier left. What survives of that dream is his farm. It is there where he finds his faith in God, a tremendous environment for his kids, and a life with no time clock. "It's whenever, wherever, and however. We don't quit at 5 p.m."

When you buy meat and vegetables from a sustainable farmer, you're supporting biodiversity and protecting valuable breeds of animals and plants from extinction. Almost 96 percent of the commercial vegetable varieties available in 1903 are now extinct. Sustainable farmers raise only as many animals as the land can hold. They preserve valuable traits within breeds so

that they can endure harsh conditions and survive outbreaks of disease.

No shortcuts

Paying a premium for quality is nothing new to those who drive a Lexus or Mercedes automobile, carry a Coach handbag, or step out in Italian leather shoes. The same is happening with the food we eat. High-end restaurants and luxury resorts are serving locally grown food prepared by some of the best chefs in the country.

In Barrington, Le Pomme de Pin, a gourmet market and catering business owned and operated by chef Erin Bailey, pays tribute to the humble roots of naturally grown food. Located on Applebee Street across from Jewel, the market delights discerning palates with soups, salads, sandwiches, and dinners-to-go – all made with natural ingredients.

Chef Erin has a list of sustainable farms in Illinois and Wisconsin that she buys from. Holding to the traditions established in classical French technique, she says, "I use only the best ingredients in their natural state."

Her work stands as the crown jewel of the farmers' toil. She learned the art of food preparation at the esteemed Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris.

"There are no shortcuts. Taste and presentation matter to me," she says. A stressed-out architecture student while in college, she took a break and

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Erin Bailey's Barrington-based gourmet market and catering business, Le Pomme de Pin, pays tribute to the humble roots of naturally grown food.

A CHANGING PRAIRIE

In her book, *They Built Better Than They Knew*, Barrington historian Barbara Benson traces the origins and eventual disappearance of farms in the area. Yankee pioneers began tilling the prairies in the mid-1840s. German, English, and Irish immigrants followed, cultivating small farms. In the late 19th century farming changed from sowing grain to milking cows and churning cheese and butter. "Gentlemen farmers," prominent Chicago families who had made their fortunes during the railroad expansion and the Industrial Revolution, moved to the area and built large estates on these dairy farms, which they continued to manage and run. Dairy products were sent to Chicago by train. Full bottles of milk were sent in the morning and came back empty that evening.

By 1907 the original pioneers were still farming, mostly on tracts of less than 200 acres at a cost of \$1.25 per acre. The second- and third-generation residents started moving off the land after educational opportunities brought them career choices. The first high school class was graduated from the Barrington Public School system in 1904.

A 1937 *Chicago Tribune* article cited by the author describes how city dwellers from Chicago had bought 111 acres in the area in the previous four years. Fowler McCormick (a grandson of Cyrus, the inventor of the reaper) purchased 440 acres along Penny Road. Costs had increased from between \$125 to \$300 per acre. The trend continued. Old farmhouses were renovated to satisfy "agricultural-minded urbanites."

In the 1950s many of the estate properties were broken up. The Northwest Tollway and O'Hare International Airport increased expansion to the area. By 1957 large tracts of land were rezoned and incorporated into municipalities. The soil originally broken by oxen and plow is now mostly covered by housing and commercial development. The land has now become fodder for development, though the Barrington area, alone among its neighbors, has made many successful attempts to preserve large tracts of its open space.

headed for Paris, where she found her calling. She started cooking in California, then Atlanta, before landing in Barrington where her sister lives.

Europeans practice what she calls "closed-circuit farming," where everything they need is grown in close proximity. Erin's Barrington shop resides in an old farmhouse, warmly furnished with a large pine table that displays the day's food choices. French doors separate her cooking area from the store. She and her husband, Matt, live upstairs. Outside, pine trees shade the bistro tables that welcome customers to sit for awhile.

In her backyard, Erin grows fresh herbs, heirloom tomatoes, berries, and grapes. She grows a dozen kinds of vegetables at her community garden plot in Beese Park. From her home and business she walks two blocks carrying fresh homemade breads, cookies, and pastries to sell at the Farmers Market. "I wave to people along the way and set up for a fine day at the market," she says. Like Margaret, Peg, and Greg, her footprints are making the world a better place, not draining it. She walks softly, careful not to break the chain we all depend upon.



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LOCAL RESOURCES

Find community-supported agriculture farms: www.localharvest.org

List of direct-sell farmers: www.eatwellguide.org

More information about the Barrington Farmers Market: www.BarringtonFarmersMarket.org

Organic foods service that offers locally raised and worldly food choices serving the North Shore and Barrington area: www.OakvilleOrganics.com. Home delivery is \$6 per week.

Online shopping for all natural specialty meats, including ostrich, bison, elk, and venison: www.blackwing.com

To learn more about garden plots at Beese Park, call the Barrington Park District's superintendent of parks and facilities, Steve Nightingale, at 847-381-0687.



Playing peek-a-boo with rhubarb are (from left) Christopher Myren, Alexander Myren, and Maggie Bruce.

Greener Pastures for Oberweis Dairy

BY MARY KLEST

MOST COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED agriculture farms hope to someday be self-sustaining. The Oberweis family took it a step further by becoming distributors and retailers of a commercially successful line of dairy products. In 1915 Peter J. Oberweis started selling his extra farm milk directly to neighbors. The family-owned business now purchases milk from nearby farms and distributes it throughout the Midwest. Traveling from Hampshire, Illinois, to Janesville, Wisconsin, you're likely to pass some of the 35 to 40 dairy farms selling their milk exclusively to Oberweis Dairy.



Visit an Oberweis retail store and you'll see the signatures of farmers who pledge to meet the standards set by the family. The Oberweis Farmers' Pledge requires them to never use artificial growth hormones, to only provide milk that is free of antibiotics, and to treat the cows humanely. The dairy cows are pasture raised, never confined, and are fed grains free of animal by-products. That means they eat 100 percent vegetarian feed.

Joe Oberweis, the great-grandson of the company's founder, Peter, and the son of politician Jim Oberweis, is the company's current chairman and chief executive officer. He talked to QB about the Oberweis business model and holding true to traditional values.



Joe Oberweis, current CEO of Oberweis and the great-grandson of the company's founder.

QB: Why do you choose to do business only with family-owned dairy farms?

For these hard-working folks, farming is a way of life. They take inordinate pride in ensuring that the milk they produce for Oberweis is the highest quality out there. For example, they have all signed the Oberweis Farmers Pledge.

QB: What is the size of the average farm you do business with?

Fifty to 100 milking head.

QB: By purchasing Oberweis Dairy products, are Barrington residents supporting local agriculture?

They certainly are. All of our milk comes from northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.

QB: While you obviously like the product farmers provide for you, do your dairy farmers like the product you produce?

That's a funny question, and the answer is yes. They are often unable to conveniently purchase our products, so our field manager who visits them takes orders and delivers. I was visiting farms with him one day, and the car was full of our products for the farmers. We heard a rise of excitement from them when we opened our store in McHenry, which is the closest location for many of them.

QB: Do you limit your distribution to the Midwest because shipping farther might compromise product freshness?

Yes, we do, and it's also a cost issue. Besides harming the freshness of the product, if we distributed outside the Midwest from our existing plant, it would be too expensive to bring bottles back to North Aurora to reuse.

QB: Why do you use glass bottles?

To protect the taste by keeping the milk colder. And glass bottles reduce landfill waste by being reused.

QB: What is the biggest challenge you're facing right now?

Coping with very high raw milk prices. They've been at extraordinarily high levels for almost a year.

QB: What do you think is causing the increase in price?

Two things. The biggest is a massive increase in demand from China. With the dollar weakened, they are a significant importer of dairy products. Second, corn is being used to make ethanol, so the cost of feed drives up the price of raw milk.

QB: Do you live on a farm?

(Chuckling). No. We don't own a farm anymore. The last farm in the family was sold decades ago.

QB: What's the best part of your job?

We make ice cream! Going into any store and seeing lots of families with kids smiling. It's great to put a smile on someone's face.