

COOPERATION IN QUEBEC

By Daniel Brisebois and Emily Board

When the five of us started our farm in the fall of 2004, we decided Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) would be the core component.

Much of our motivation to farm was to help foster a community that valued agriculture, and to strengthen the links between eaters and producers. In addition, members paying for their share of the harvest before the season met a very real need related to the expenses of setting up a vegetable farm. We knew that finding the members wouldn't be hard because of all the work that Équiterre has been doing in Quebec to promote the CSA concept. We had all worked on CSA farms and this was the type of farming, marketing and crop planning that we knew best.

Tourne-sol CSA

Right from the get-go, we jumped into farming full force. We started with 110 shares in our first year, because all five of us needed to make a living. Our main season CSA has grown to 200 shares in 2008.

During our main season, we use a market-style

CSA rather than pre-packed boxes. At our drop-offs, we set out a basket of each vegetable. We put up a blackboard with the week's share of nine to twelve vegetables. We always have a few choices on the list, such as beets or carrots, broccoli or cabbage, zukes or eggplants. We've received a lot of great feedback from having choices. We also have an exchange box

Daniel Brisebois and Emily Board are two of the farmers who run la ferme coopérative Tourne-Sol in les Cèdres, Quebec (45 minutes west of Montreal). The farm is a workers' cooperative made up of five farmers and one apprentice working twelve acres of land rented from organic grain farmers. In any year, 5.5 acres (2.2 ha) are under a wide range of vegetables, flowers, herbs and seed crops, and three acres (1.2 ha) are in cover crops. www.fermetournesol.qc.ca

where folks can put an item they don't want in exchange for something they would prefer. At the drop-off, most of our vegetables are bunched. Using appropriately-sized containers, members measure the rest of the produce including potatoes, beans, peas, tomatoes in the heavy season, and salad mixes. Measuring by volume allows for a smoother flow of people than having to share two scales amongst many people.

We offer one size of basket but members can choose to pick it up weekly or every two weeks. With the latter, half the members pick up one week and half the next.

Some of the members pick up their shares from the farm on Thursday, and the others pick them up from one of two locations (a church and a health food store) on Tuesday. Our season runs 17 weeks from mid-June to mid-October. For one hundred members who are still gung-ho after that, we offer three late fall baskets picked up every other week in November from the farm. Our CSA shares make up about sixty percent of our farm's income.

The joys of administration

The measure of our CSA success is how many excited CSA members return each year. Returning members are great. They understand seasonal eating; they've already experienced the range of vegetables; and they know what they're getting into. We want to give all CSA members an opportunity to renew but we also want to fill any open spots.

To encourage members to renew, we give them renewal forms during the last few weeks of



Tomato tasting at Tourne-Sol.

our main season CSA. This gives them a chance to put the completed forms right into our hands. To put a little pressure on our members we give them until January 31 to renew and send out a reminder email near the end of January. In February, we start contacting names on our waiting list. We contact only a fraction of the list each week to give lingering CSA members another chance to renew.

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Being comfortable with computers has made the sizeable administration much more manageable. We use Excel spreadsheets and a Filemaker Pro database to keep our records. These programs let us easily find

out information such as what our CSA retention rate has been and who might still owe us money. We can also quickly generate email lists. Email is a blessing compared to having to call all our members.

Balancing CSA and farmers' markets

Most of the other forty percent of our farm income is generated from the two Saturday farmers' markets we attend. These venues complement our CSA by providing a secondary outlet for our vegetables.

Having two marketing outlets lets us limit the size of our CSA. There is a history of sharing risk in CSA, but we like to buffer those risks and ensure we can guarantee that all of our members will receive a solid basket of diversified vegetables. We can offset shortages and surpluses in the field by varying the quantities we bring to market. In a bust year, the market will take the brunt of the hit. In a bumper year, we have an outlet for

During the growing season we give our members a newsletter every 3–4 weeks. In addition to news about the farm, pictures, and upcoming events we include recipes.

We aim for quick, easy and delicious in our recipe choices. We mainly focus on vegetables people are less familiar with.

Renee’s baked eggplant with tomato and basil

- 1 eggplant, cut into rounds (2-cm thick)
- 2 tomatoes, cut into rounds
- 1 garlic clove, pressed or finely chopped
- 6 basil leaves, chopped
- olive oil
- cheese (Feta, Parmesan or goat cheese)

Preheat oven to 375°F

Place eggplant on cookie sheet and sprinkle with salt. Leave for 20–30 minutes or until beads of moisture form on the surface. Sop up the moisture with paper towel.

Drizzle with olive oil and garlic

Sprinkle with chopped basil; add one round of tomato to each eggplant.

Top with cheese and bake in oven for 20 minutes.

the excess. We also plant crops specifically for market. Much of our living wage comes from the market, so we take it seriously; it is more than just an outlet for surplus.

The market/CSA combo also broadens the client base we can accommodate. Some people prefer the market because the weekly pick-up time doesn’t fit well with their schedules. Others appreciate being able to choose what vegetables they want. (On the other hand, some of our CSA members have told us that they love *not* having to choose—it makes their life just a little easier.) And, of course, there is no waiting list to come to the market. We have a base of market customers who are as loyal as our CSA members.

With all this, why should anyone choose the CSA over market? There are several reasons including the ideological motivations of risk sharing and helping farmers with their early season cash flow. CSA members can participate in farm activity days and receive newsletters. Most importantly, there is a guarantee that the CSA members will receive a diverse basket each week. They don’t have to arrive



Dan Brisebois of la ferme coopérative Tourne-Sol.

at the start of the market to compete with the throngs to make sure they get their carrots or sugar snap peas. CSA members can show up in the last ten minutes of the drop-off and still get their share.

Looking forward

So this is where we’re at after three and a half years. With five active minds, our farm keeps evolving as we expand our seed production, experiment with fruit, and toy with the idea of livestock. But all this diversification is possible largely because of the solid foundation our CSA and farmers’ markets provide. As such, we are proud proponents of community supported agriculture and ultimately agriculture-supported communities.

Daniel Brisebois and Emily Board are two of the farmers who run la ferme coopérative Tourne-Sol in les Cèdres, Quebec. Daniel is also a member of COG’s board of directors. For more info: www.fermetournesol.qc.ca

Photos provided by la ferme coopérative Tourne-Sol.



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