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## **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 nine 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 of the food eaten by Iowans was produced elsewhere. Ann agreed: “it really is crazy considering how much great farmland we have.” What had happened?

Like people in most places around the world, Iowans once produced most of what they ate. The first European American settlers, like the native peoples who were in the area before them, raised, gathered, and 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 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 thanks to home canning and other forms of food preservation throughout the year.

In the last fifty years, though, Iowa’s food system has changed dramatically. Today, over 97 percent of the state’s cropland is used to produce field corn, soybeans, and alfalfa, virtually none of it directly 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 food 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,” Ann 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.

There followed a series of organizational meetings at the public library. 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 interested in direct marketing his meat, 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 came to them on a drive through the countryside where they had seen one of our native prairie plants, erect and tall along the roadside like a beacon: compass plant.

Everything seemed to be coming together to make Compass Plant CSA a reality except that at the end of our final planning meeting no one had stepped forward to coordinate the whole business. “Well, can we make this happen?” The long silence that greeted Karie’s question seemed like a death knell. Then 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 nearly a hundred and fifty years, became our executive, 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 have made: deep purple eggplants, aromatic basil, tongue-tingling peppers, green, 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 family of five could not finish a week's share before the next one arrived. We ended the season with a potluck dinner for the producers and shareholders and promises to start up again in the spring.

For the next several years the number of members increased a little each year, then leveled off. As I write, eight years into our venture, thirty-five family or individual shareholders are enjoying the end of this season's harvest. Over the years we have lost some members to moves, family changes, or the decision that another source of local food was better suited to their needs, but every year we gain others. We have also been fortunate to have had 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, Katharine, Allison, Lizzie, and Erin.

The members of Compass Plant 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 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 today Ann describes as "a big thing for the CSA" made it possible: Brenda and Lisle offered their 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

The producers' reasons for being involved in the CSA complement those of the eaters. 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 another reason Dennis likes producing for Compass Plant.

Similar goals motivate 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 children. Like a growing number of Americans, she is mindful of the negative health consequences of a diet of mostly packaged and processed foods.

Over the years, the organization of Compass Plant's producers has changed. Rebecca left following the first season. Brenda, after providing the eggs to the CSA for several years and then losing all of her chickens to predators, decided to outsource the eggs to a farmer in the neighborhood. Brenda and Ann also decided to contract with another local farmer, someone who specializes in sweet corn with a legendary reputation for flavor, to supply all the CSA's corn. At the end of the 2006 season, Dennis and Doug withdrew from the CSA because of other demands on their time, but their place was taken by Lisle's garden-wise nephew, Andy, who moved to the farm from northeast Iowa, put up a greenhouse, installed a walk-in cooler, and put three acres into vegetable production. He has also been marketing his considerable quantity of produce at several farmers markets in the area.

For twenty-five years, a revolution has been simmering in the American food system as the drawbacks of our industrial approach to food production have become increasingly apparent. The high fat, high salt, high sugar, highly processed, long-distance, fast food diet is taking its toll on our health, our land, our farmers, and our communities. Grinnell is only one small Iowa town, and so far only a handful of people here have joined the CSA, but heading into its ninth year Compass Plant seems here to stay, and it has stimulated other local efforts involving local food. The Grinnell farmers market expanded from one day a week to two. Students at the college started a community garden. Social justice activists developed a local chapter of the Plant-a-Row for the Hungry program. Several community institutions, including the dining services at Grinnell College, are committed to purchasing more locally sourced food. The local

newspaper and the college magazine publish stories about local foods. A handful of non-profit and governmental organizations joined together to GALFA, the Grinnell Area Local Foods Alliance, to coordinate all of these efforts.

In Grinnell, the local foods movement has reached a tipping point. The public must now decide what kind of food – and what kind of food system -- it wants. Although Karie the catalyst has moved on and earned a degree 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 and inspiring how many good things come from the simple act of eating food produced close to home.