

Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com

Wow! 20 Years of CSA – So Far

By Hana Newcomb

Way back at the turn of the century, we decided to try this emerging idea of community supported agriculture. The CSA concept had been in this country for almost two decades already, coming from Europe of course, and there were some intriguing elements. By the time we got going with our program, the idea had evolved on many farms from its original form (a farm completely supported by its community, having its entire budget provided by the people who received the food) to a hybrid version – more of a subscription service and less of a completely symbiotic system. We don't depend completely on you and you don't expect to eat everything that we produce. And while you will feel the effects of challenging weather and major pest invasions, we try to soften the impact of drought and floods by teaming up with other farms to keep the vegetable flow steady.

The original CSA farm, Indian Line Farm, up in western Massachusetts is still going strong with its mission and so are we. This idea has turned out to be a game changer for us. Before we started the CSA, we went to farmers markets and sold at our roadside stand and also sold wholesale to restaurants and other retailers. But we had to borrow



money every winter to get the next season going. And it took us until early September to pay off that debt each time. Now our CSA customers buy a share, loaning us the money, essentially, in late winter and we pay it off in vegetables for a whole season. We no longer go to the bank to ask for a loan. You are our investors.

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What was the road that brought you to Potomac Vegetable Farms? What were the signs along the way?

Hiu Newcomb and Michael Lipsky:

Hiu Newcomb co-founded PVF in the early 1960s when she and her husband, Tony, began to grow corn on rented land in Fairfax County, near where Tony's parents lived. Michael Lipsky first visited the farm in 1994, shortly after he met Hiu (and 10 years after Tony had died). They married in 2002; he moved to the farm the next year when his job in New York City ended.

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Sam Sedon:

My latest adventure getting to PVF involved every form of transportation besides a boat. I took a plane from Moab to Denver, then the metro from the airport to the bus station, where I walked several blocks from the bus station to meet up with someone from craigslist to buy a car. I picked up my brother in Salt Lake City and we spent almost 2 weeks exploring on our way to Virginia.



Susi Lu:

Sustainability-focused fashion grad turned graphic designer. Left a dead-end job in Brooklyn last December for a couple months on the literal road, traveling down the east and west coasts. Hesitant to return to my regular grind, I looked for a farm job,

hoping to apply the experience to my design work. So far, I've been at PVF for just over a month and have loved every minute of it.



Ben Grausz:

I'm currently taking a semester off of school, and I needed to get a job this spring to make some extra money for when I go back. I hadn't really ever considered working on a farm before, however, I took the job the moment I was offered it. It sounded infinitely more interesting and enjoyable than a job in retail, and so far, it has been even more than I thought it would be.



Foster Gettys:

Foster's journey to PVF started off at UMD, as an undergrad with an Environmental Science Degree with concentration in Agriculture and the Environment. After graduating in

2012, Foster gardened at urban gardens/ farms in D.C. and then took a very scenic four-year detour growing native plants at nursery in Alexandria, VA before jumping back towards the goal of growing vegetables on a larger scale. Foster spent two years farming at a 4-acre farm in Upper Marlboro, MD before arriving this spring at PVF in Purcellville. Foster's obsession with plants, community, and connection through food were signs along the road the whole way.



Katy Craley:

This is my 6th year working on farms and my second since returning to my home state of VA. There were many signs, many path-crossings, a little bit of resistance, and finally a grateful "yes" to a job offer. Tomatoes are my favorite farm friends although tiny baby parsnips are now a close second. Glad to be here.



Megan Seldon:

I moved to DC hoping to find a farm job nearby and got lucky that PVF ended up being my destination.



Jess Rice:

Dionysus (my dog) and I have come to PVF in a very round about journey, a journey that took us from one side of the country to the other and back again. For me it started my last year in law school studying criminal justice and working for the public defender's office. I wasn't happy and didn't feel like I could do much good, despite wanting to help people who were suffering at the hands of a broken system. I was having an existential crisis more often than not and couldn't find a point in continuing down the path I was on, I needed to do something radically different and decided to go back to my roots and what made me truly happy, being outside in the dirt and working with food. I moved to California to study farming and business management, with the goal of building a nonprofit, while there I learned an incredible amount and started listening to the farmer to farmer podcast, where I learned of PVF. The farm sounded too good to be true. Upon further research it really was everything I had been searching for, an amazing ethic, strong morals, and a great sense of

community and environment, as well as a whole lot of know how. I took a leap of faith and emailed Hana, giving her some background on myself and my goals and asked for a job for the upcoming season. To my surprise she responded positively and I found myself assured that this was the place for us, now two months in, I am 1000% sure that I couldn't have wound up anywhere better to both live, work, learn, and grow.



Olivia Murphy:

My path toward farming with PVF began with enjoying really good food. Though I grew up all over rural Florida I had no awareness of the industrialized agriculture economy until I moved to Washington, DC for college and got involved in my school's community garden. I was hooked by the amazing weekly potlucks and the joy of a first harvest, and from there I got a taste of farming on both local and international farms, including an educational permaculture farm in Puerto Rico and the Arcadia farm out in Alexandria, VA. These experiences helped me understand the nature of food inequity in DC and the dire need to transform the global food system into

an environmentally sustainable model with racial and labor justice at the core. This will be my first season of larger-scale farm work and I hope to keep eating delicious seasonal veggies and learning all I can!



Maria Gabriela Rangel Semprun:

I have had the opportunity to work in the agricultural area for a long time, but working in a chemical-free farm is possible thanks to PVF's perseverance and responsibility to provide all consumers healthy and fresh products. A great friend Beth Sastre gave good recommendations on PVF, their diversity and respect of gender and inclusion of people.



Dick Clement:

Learning, interesting meaningful work, being part of a team were what I was looking for. A Google search
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Dick Clement, continued from page 3 for local organic farms; Potomac Vegetable Farms website, a farm tour with Hiu Newcomb, Hana taking a chance on some in my age group and here I am in my third season with PVF.

Finding my place on the farm team, connecting farm work with CSA and farm stand customers have hugely enriched my life.



Isabel Hulkower:

I originally came to work for PVF as my first job during the summer in high school. This time I thought I was just coming to work for the last few months of the 2017 season, but of course I immediately fell back in love with the farm and had to stay around. Re-grounding in Northern Virginia through working the land at PVF has been an incredibly sweet and magical experience.

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By the time we started our CSA, we were confident vegetable growers. Not always 100% successful, but we knew we could produce a reliable quantity of high-quality food. So, with the help of a longtime worker named Karin Boyd, we got started. We happened to establish our CSA just as our friends at Newburg Vegetable Farm were closing down their business, so they handed off their list of CSA members. This was a huge help. We inherited some seasoned hosts who let us use their porches, we got some customers who knew what they were doing, and we began to figure it out.

Around 2008, we were the hottest CSA ever, selling out fast on February 1. We let ourselves get a little bit bigger and we stopped selling out so fast. And the world of food has continued to change, with more people enjoying prepared foods and carry-out, and fewer people having the time and ability to spend time with raw vegetables. We still have an excellent number of CSA customers – we have come down from our peak of about 600 to a more manageable 425. In the beginning, we packed and delivered all the shares. There was no on-farm pickup. It seemed unnecessary since we already had a roadside stand with everything available. But over time the offerings in the CSA grew different from what we sold out front – CSA customers were ready for more adventurous, seasonal food. The stand customers were deeply attached to sweet corn, tomatoes, melons and peaches. The CSA began to have an identity of its own, and we made a spot for on-farm pickups. After a while, we figured out how to stop packing the vegetables for the on-farm folks, and we devised a market style arrangement. There was some resistance from the CSA members who were afraid they wouldn't get the best stuff if they didn't arrive at the opening bell, but we devised systems that provided plenty for everyone. Now almost everyone chooses the market style option.

There are some definite advantages to having your bag packed, though. You are forced to be more adventuresome, to try a vegetable you have not desired in the past, and many people have learned to love greens they never knew existed. If you choose your own vegetables, you tend to pick out the same things because it feels more familiar and safe.

We are forever grateful to all of you who help us to start our season off with money in the bank and who then appreciate the garlic scapes and piles of lettuce that inevitably appear in early June. We are glad there are cooks who are looking to expand their horizons. We know how lucky we are to have CSA members who go with us through the seasons, curious and ready for something new. It is a relationship that we appreciate and do our best to honor. Thank you all for eating vegetables, especially the ones from our farm!

