

The **New York** Times

August 8, 2004 Sunday
Late Edition - Final

Food Shoppers? Call Them Shareholders

BYLINE: By RAHELI S. MILLMAN

SECTION: Section 14WC; Column 2; Westchester Weekly Desk; ENVIRONMENT; Pg. 4

LENGTH: 1199 words

HALL GIBSON of Ryder Farm in Brewster had sold his produce at the Green Market in **New York** City nearly every year since the market's inception in 1976.

"It was becoming more difficult every year, and very long hours," said Mr. Gibson, who is certain that at the time he left, in 1997, he was the oldest farmer there. His last day at the Green Market coincided with 76th birthday.

"My neighbors would ask me, 'What are you doing going to the city and selling there instead of selling to us?' So I decided to switch from going to market, to trying to bring the market to me, in a sense. A market had developed around me."

So his neighbors became his customers, and Mr. Gibson became a practitioner of something called Community Supported Agriculture, which seeks a more direct link between the products of farms and the people who consume them.

What this means is that the customer effectively bypasses the grocery store, buying a "share" of the coming year's harvest (or splitting one with a friend, as shares tend to amount to more than a family would normally eat). The shareholder pays several hundred dollars, receiving in exchange 10 to 15 pounds a week of organic vegetables, herbs, and fruit, as each variety reaches its season through spring, summer and fall. One group of devotees, based in Scarsdale, was organized by Delia Marx, whose enthusiasm for the concept led her to seek out Mr. Gibson's farm in the late 1990's. A trip to Ryder Farm on the Putnam County border, however, convinced her that it was too far away to get to once a week.

"He offered to come to Westchester once a week if I could find other families." Eighteen shares were bought, and the distribution center for the Scarsdale membership remains Ms. Marx's porch. Every Tuesday Mr. Gibson arrives with bags of produce. While people pick up their shares, he and Ms. Marx talk politics. She says she enjoys feeling closer to the source of her food. And, enthusing over the many varieties of vegetables that Mr. Gibson has on offer, she added, "It's fun to open this wonderful bag once a week and have a surprise."

Fifty-three shares from Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook are picked up every week from Danielle Levitt's garage in Pleasantville; the atmosphere one recent summer day was chummy as people picked out their carrots and collard greens from crates. Roxbury -- 30 acres set within a 225-acre reserve -- is one of the largest community-supported farms in the country, cultivating 750 shares a year. Ms. Levitt and her husband, Steve, bought a share last year. Nowadays their garage is Roxbury's second distribution point in Westchester.

She says she enjoys watching her two young daughters learn from the weekly ritual. "They can see that it is connected to an actual farm," she said, "and that it doesn't come from a truck or from the supermarket."

Community-supported agriculture is an approach to farming developed in Japan in the 1960's by women seeking foods produced by farmers who they knew who used chemical-free methods that they trusted. The practice was brought to New England in 1984 by Jan Vander Tuin, a Swiss farmer, according to several Web sites maintained by the movement. Its followers remain few in number: a survey conducted in the late 1990's by the University of Wisconsin's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences puts the number of participating American farms at about 1,000. Most of these farms cultivate less than 10 acres of land.

Ryder Farm, which has been operated by the Ryder family since 1795, occupies 129 acres. Mr. Gibson, whose wife's great-grandfather was the farm's patriarch, cultivates only a tiny fraction, leaving much of it wild.

He has no plans to plant more acres, he said, or to advertise for new shareholders. "The objective is not to become bigger, but better," he said. "We are limited by the land." Although he is developing a new method of preparing his crop rows, hoping to make his practice more efficient, he opposes the use of chemical pesticides to increase production.

Tracy Frisch, executive director of the Regional Farm and Food Project, a small-farm advocacy group, says the avenue to success is to create a solid customer base, which frees farmers from the time-consuming process of traveling to markets. It allows them to maintain a crop diversity that would otherwise be impractical. When hopeful small-farmers approach Ms. Frisch for assistance, she said, she often recommends working with Westchester residents. "It's a totally untapped market and there is a lot of interest." She estimates that as many as 20 community-supported farms operate in the Hudson Valley, most offering only on-farm distribution. Some of them provide newsletters, offering recipes and describing the growing conditions. Members are invited to spend time at the farm, either by putting in a day of weeding or celebrating the harvest.

One high-profile proponent of the movement in Westchester is Dan Barber, the chef and creative director of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, the new farm-to-table restaurant on the Rockefeller estate in Pocantico Hills. Mr. Barber says he is trying to educate Westchester residents about the bounty of Hudson Valley by example. Encouraging people to support local farmers, he sees the shareholders as "engaging in an opportunity -- not just a way to enjoy life more and eat better, but to change how the world is used."

"The modern system of food distribution is all based on ignorance," Mr. Barber said. "I think that C.S.A. will expand beyond anyone's expectations in the next decade. There's no turning back once you are educated."

Jackie Kovatch and her sister Robin Spillane, both first-year members, say they divide their share between their families. They agree that the program has introduced them to many new vegetables. "I've had to go to the library to get vegetarian cookbooks to find out what to do with some of this stuff, like kohlrabi," Ms. Kovatch said. "You wind up hearing what other people are doing with the vegetables. I often ask for ideas." Nearby, Caroline Kovatch, 5, eagerly counted out the four cucumbers included in the week's share.

"Anyone have any idea of what to do with fava beans?" Katie Ginsberg asked at her first share pickup. Ms. Levitt quickly described a recipe for a bean dip, "like a chunky hummus."

Ms. Ginsberg said she had joined because "it's the most sustainable way of eating, and it's local." Another factor, she added, was the high price of organic produce in health food stores, an expense fueled in part by the shipping of produce grown across the country or abroad.

Cora Greenburg, who has been a member for four years, remembered the rain and cold temperatures of last spring, which made for a thin June harvest. "It was neat to go through it with the farmer," she said. "There is not that sense of entitlement, like expecting ripe tomatoes in February."

Neeru Girdhar says she tries to take her daughter, Tishya, to pick up their share.

"She loves the fruits," Ms Girdhar said. "My husband doesn't get to eat them. We pick the fruits up in the afternoon, and before he gets home "

"I eat them all," the 5-year-old proudly said.

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com>

LOAD-DATE: August 8, 2004

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Photo: Hall Gibson, at his farm in Brewster, spraying organic lettuce with a calcium-and-water solution to promote growth. (Photo by Scott Mullin for The **New York** Times)

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

