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Good Eating
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Natural progression: Organic farmers continue to gain ground across the Midwest, but it's still a tough row to hoe

By Thomas Washington, Special to the Tribune

If you have yet to sample a wide range of winter vegetables this season, don't feel bad. Chances are your supermarket doesn't offer the full line of *Brassic*as beyond cauliflower and cabbage. Although a supermarket may contain thousands of items, most of which are produced by a handful of multinational food and beverage companies, much of the array is more a matter of packaging than of real variety.

Yet a quiet revolution is overtaking modern agriculture. Call it a trend in anti-globalization or a way to reconnect with farmers. From the farmers markets throughout the Chicago area to the more than 1,000 community supported agriculture (CSA) networks sprouting across the country, an alliance between the independent farmer and the health-conscious consumer is changing what we're putting on the dinner table.

Few people expect organic farmers or a network of CSAs to replace conventional farming anytime soon. But if the same movement that swayed an entire population toward processed foods has been able to keep us in its grip for at least half a century, then a similar organic movement might be able to claim the same hold in the 21st Century.

"Taste and variety are replacing convenience and efficiency," said organic farmer Patty McPhillips of Mokena's Fresh Harvest Farm, one of at least 18 certified organic food suppliers in Illinois. "People want fresher, more wholesome food, and they're learning about all sorts of ways to find it."

For nearly a decade, organic farming has been one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. agriculture. Certified organic farmland for major crops more than doubled in the years from 1992 to 1997, and doubled again from 1997 to 2001, according to the USDA. The poultry and dairy sectors are growing even faster. Organic farmers devoted 2.3 million acres of cropland and pasture for organic production in 2001, with California, North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin holding the largest shares.

CSAs typically feature organic foods and represent a growing aspect of the organic movement. They bring consumers closer to the organic movement and the farm from which their food comes. About 1,300 CSAs are listed by the USDA for the U.S. Illinois has 17.

Last year, my wife and I joined a CSA. After a month of receiving weekly half-bushel shares of strawberries, tomatoes and, yes, even collard greens, it was clear this wasn't ordinary supermarket produce. There was a sense of common good in picking up our weekly shares, but the freshness and flavor of the produce really sold us.

Where was this stuff coming from? And who was behind it?

To find out, I followed the 200-mile CSA delivery trail from my home in Geneva to Tom Ulick's King's Hill Farm, an 850-acre refuge nestled among woodlands and prairie in Mineral Point, Wis., about one hour southwest of Madison.

Ulick has been cultivating organic fruits and vegetables in the Midwest since 1971, long before anyone was calling it cool, much less organic. He dropped out of John Marshall Law School in 1969 to become a farmer.

Cultivating a yen

"I had always wanted to become a farmer," Ulick said. "It's as simple as that."

With little information and few resources to guide him in organic farming, Ulick started on a small plot of land in Whitewater, Wis. In 1975, he returned to his mother's farm in Barrington, where he cultivated organic vegetables for a loosely defined "farm club" of 500 area members. Then, after a brief time in Hawaii, he returned to Wisconsin to establish King's Hill Farm in 1999.

When I met Ulick last summer, he was standing knee-deep in produce, sorting out bushel and half-bushel orders of kale, peppers, beets, radishes, and herbs for his upcoming delivery run to Chicago and outlying areas. He worked slowly, with an intense gaze and careful handling of every fruit or vegetable that went into his delivery boxes.

Ulick leaves King's Hill Farm on Friday mornings at 2 a.m., often alone, and makes his last drop-off in Rockford around 8 a.m. Sunday before returning to his farm. Ulick usually relies on one of his members to put him up for a night, but it's not always something he can count on.

The King's Hill CSA is just one of Ulick's projects. He has also organized a packing crew of 8 to 10 people on Chicago's South Side, who gather every Friday morning to help him organize his deliveries throughout the metro area. During the 2005 growing season on the farm, he plans to host and train a group of interns from the U.S. and abroad.

He also has partnered with the Chicago organic wholesaler Goodness Greeness to guarantee filling orders of good-quality organic produce throughout the year. Ulick gladly customizes any order, from farm-fresh eggs or a fruit surprise, a handpicked collection of organic fruit from across the country.

Like many other organic farmers, McPhillips and Ulick are experiencing dramatic upturns in their customer base. King's Hill has seen a 50 percent increase in subscriptions since last year; Ulick estimates his total membership base to be about 750. McPhillips started with three customers in 2004. By the time this year's growing season begins, she expects to have more than 50.

Ulick would be the first to say that no one is getting rich in the business of organic farming and CSAs. Still, he is hoping for greater awareness.

"King's Hill Farm's goal has always been to grow wholesome food in a system that respects our natural environment, and organic farming has been the way to do that," he said. "We also put a lot of emphasis on training young farmers to practice organic methods. So, the more we create new markets in Wisconsin and Illinois, the more we can encourage the large-scale conversion of conventional agriculture into sustainable growing methods."

Even large food corporations are taking note of organics. Dole Foods incorporated a certified organic banana crop in 2001, exporting them from Honduras and Ecuador. The firm continues to look for other supplies of organic crops.

Though organic farming showed strong gains from 1992 to 2001, only about 0.3 percent of all U.S. cropland was certified organic in 2001, according to the USDA. Small farms like Ulick's and McPhillips' face numerous obstacles establishing organic cropland—from the high operating costs to the years it might take to convert to organic.

Alternative sources

Jim Slama, president of Sustain, a non-profit environmental group that sponsored the FamilyFarmed.org Expo at Navy Pier earlier this month, said that despite organic farming's small

numbers nationally, people are more committed to seeking out alternative sources for healthful food. Sustain estimates that at least 25 percent of the public consider themselves “health seekers,” meaning they’re attracted to the basic ideals behind community supported agriculture.

“Farmers markets are booming for the same reason CSAs are booming,” Slama said. “Both food sources provide a venue in which they have a lot of trust. People like the idea of meeting their farmer, as opposed to dealing with the faceless company that’s selling their products to a large supermarket.”

Sustain and other groups estimate that the organic food industry is growing by 20 percent a year. “The only reason it’s not 30 percent is because we don’t have enough organic farmers producing more for customers,” Slama said.

The FamilyFarmed.org Expo offered a range of activities, many of them focused on ways for people to meet local organic farmers and to find out where to buy their products.

By all indications, Ulick’s and other farmers’ resolve is paying off.

“Knowing your farmer brings peace of mind,” said Julie Polglaze, who hosts the Geneva drop-off site for King’s Hill Farm.

“Of course, this is a great way to feed by family good vegetables, but I also like the idea of being connected to a real farm. Tom is on a real mission to get more organic produce into the hands of people who wouldn’t normally consider eating it.”