



A box of Bolinas greens

by Jacoba Charles



A young onion fresh from the ground. This week's CSA box contained parsley, chard, beets, zucchini blossoms, radishes, lettuce, carrots, zucchini, black beans, kohlrabi, artichokes, fennel and spinach. Photo by Jacoba Charles.

Corn is just beginning to push up through a well-tended bed of earth at the Gospel Flat Farm, but the kale and the chard are already in their full leafy glory. The first produce taken home last week from the Bolinas farm contained mostly leafy greens – reflecting what is in season, right now, on local farms.

On Friday, June 22, Mickey Murch held an open house celebrating the start of the season. There was homemade bread and live fiddle, and Murch played guitar. Every week between now and December, he will sell boxes of produce as part of a system called community supported agriculture, or CSAs. Murch goes a step further than many CSAs, allowing customers to harvest their own produce on Fridays, if they prefer. “We like to focus on farm pick-up and other “agritourism” aspects,” Murch said.

It is the second year that Murch, 23, has filled local kitchens with his assortment of straight-from-the-earth food. A box may contain 12 to 15 items, including staples such as lettuce, zucchini, and carrots as well as more unusual items like kohlrabi and zucchini blossoms.

The main difference between CSAs and traditional small farms is that the business serves local consumers. It eliminates shipping concerns and middlemen. Customers pay directly for a season's worth of produce up front – in this case, \$500 for five months, or \$25 for a single box. Farmers hedge against a lack of customers, while customers benefit from a fixed cost for the season and the knowledge of where their food comes from. It's not a bad deal, either – it would cost \$26.39 to purchase the contents of the first CSA box at the Palace Market in Point

Reyes, and some items such as zucchini blossoms can rarely be bought at all.

CSAs are associated with local, organic produce and meat. They encourage ecological sustainability by providing an alternative to monocrops and long-distance hauling. Plus, carrots taste better with a little dirt on them.

Gospel Flat Farm, which also houses a brussel-sprout business, represents the growing popularity of CSAs since the mid-1980s. The brussel sprout farm, which Don Murch manages, offers an additional hedge. “There's a diversity of markets,” Murch said. “The old crop that's guaranteed to make money, and the experimental crop (CSA) that's designed to make pleasure.”

Murch's interest in food burgeoned at Reed College in Portland, where he was an art student. During one summer he grew his own food, and returned to college with jars of beans in an experiment in self-sufficiency. That experience progressed into a desire to work in the nexus of people, food, and education. So he moved back to his family farm and began to plant seeds.

This year, he has two 21-year-old ‘apprentices,’ Jeremiah Church and Jonah Bourne, both from Vermont. Church stumbled upon the Gospel Flat Farm after following Murch's handmade signs while hitchhiking last summer. He stayed for a few months, and returned to “experience an entire growing season” with Bourne. Their apprenticeship includes plowing the fields, feeding donated bread to the hogs, and tending the baby turkeys that will become Thanksgiving dinners.