

Church Farm CSA Case Study

Introduction

Situated near Stevenage in Hertfordshire, Church Farm is a 175 acre mixed agro-ecological farm rented by Tim Waygood and his wife Emma from his parents. The farm produces a very wide range of products including meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables, and employs two main growers. The CSA is an offshoot of the farm, and currently has around 120 members, with around 150 farm boxes a week provided to local households, including delivery to drop off points in London. Recipients are given the opportunity to become closely involved in the farm, through free farm experience days every season, camping weekends, family farm tractor tours, and a discounted offer on a full programme of workshops. The farm is open seven days a week and welcomes visitors interested in seeing methods of production.

Getting Started

Church Farm CSA was initiated by Sam Henderson, who looks after farm membership, and who was keen to start providing to households in London. Having met a Londoner who was keen on creating a relationship with a farm, the scheme went ahead with the aim of supporting the farm and providing members with a direct connection to the source of their food.

It started in January 2011 with a loose group who had been involved with food and sustainability issues in Crouch End and the borough of Haringey. Meetings were based around a Transition group – with whom the CSA has links – and a monthly film night. Sam describes the process as ‘largely forming itself out of existing groups, with a lot of people already knowing each other and naturally taking on communication and coordination roles’. The idea was promoted via word-of-mouth, including giving talks, various email lists and pre-existing groups. A group of interested parties was brought together on the farm, and the first delivery was dropped off in London in July 2011.

Membership and distribution

There are between 30 and 50 boxes on the London round, and the team have recently been concentrating on expanding the number of drop points and ensuring the logistics all work, before a big push towards the end of the summer to increase numbers. The London round currently generates about £500 a week, although this fluctuates.

Initially members collected from a delivery van which was parked on the street for three hours, but there are now four drop points – Crouch End, Archway, Muswell Hill and Dalston, with members mostly located in or around these points. Cafes and community centres act as the drop off points in these locations.

These points are seen as an opportunity to connect with the people that produce the food, and people are encouraged to make the weekly drops a social occasion. All members are encouraged to get to know each other and invited to take initiative to help set up new drop off locations, arrange trips to the farm, give feedback and

suggestions etc. The CSA is currently considering a more formal role for an individual to help manage the members in return for a small income.

The minimum cost of a member's share is £10 / week. Box customers are provided with a direct connection with the source of their food, and the chance to have a break from the city and visit the place where it comes from. The large majority of members visit regularly and become involved with the farm in some capacity.

Land and Produce

Church Farm CSA has a secure tenancy – from Tim's parents – on 175 acres of land. Planning permission was applied to for multiple structures, including polytunnels, a farm store and café. Produce is hugely varied, and includes over 200 varieties of vegetables, and 130 varieties of fruit, including apples, gages, plums, cherries, quince, medlar, pears, damsons and mulberries. The farm keeps sheep, cattle, pigs and poultry, has three bee hives and an apiary garden, and a two acre walnut orchard. There are plans to diversify to include production of grains and dairy. Produce is, in Sam's words, grown to 'organic standards and beyond', but is not certified.

The two senior growers decide what is grown and which produce will be distributed in the boxes, farm store and café. The horticultural work is split between the growers, and the interns, who are long term volunteers. The head grower is paid the minimum wage in addition to food and board.

The cost for produce depends on the amount received, with no additional membership costs. Some members pay monthly in advance by standing order, cash or cheque, but more often card details are taken and the box customer charged what they owe after a period of time.

Funding and admin

The CSA is part of an existing farm, which helped reduce costs and administration. Insurance is covered by the farm's existing scheme, and it is run as part of the farm business which is run as a private company, meaning no separate legal structure was required. No initial funding was necessary.

Community Involvement

Community workdays and events are held about once a month. One of the main aims of the CSA team is to build community and give opportunities to connect people with their food. Sam recognizes the connection with the community as the best basis for a sustainable business; "it is ideally how the farm would basically support itself; better cashflow, less waste, customer loyalty / more dependable sales."

The farm also runs a care farming operation integrated into the farm, which provides training and work experience for people with learning difficulties and mental health issues.

The aim for the future is to expand the enterprise to include 200 committed members, and eventually to develop the scheme to collaborate with other land based enterprises. The CSA group would like to bring 150 acres into farming operation and incorporate dairy and freshly baked bread into the available produce.

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