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The love of the land

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BY MAURA WEBBER

It was when my mother brought a suitcase full of vegetables on a cross-country visit that I first witnessed the strong ties that come to bind together the community-supported agriculture movement.

Mind you, the basic concept was simple enough--I even admired the neat symmetry of it all. In the spring people buy shares in local farms that then deliver the produce to them in the growing season. This provides farmers a guaranteed market for their crops and gives communities access to fresh, locally grown food.

DETAILS, DETAILS

For more information about community-supported agriculture farms in your area, go to www.csacenter.org. The Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources maintains a list of the farms categorized by state.

vegetables and fruits that are readily available at the local grocery store. Truth be told, I thought Bonnie Lane Webber's unusual vegetable habit might be another idiosyncrasy to be endured.

Still, I learned about community-supported farms first from my mother, a dedicated environmentalist who has been known to collect banana peels from fellow airplane passengers to compost at home.

So--even though I respected how hard she worked to help start a community-supported agriculture (CSA) group in New York City--I had my doubts about going to such trouble to get

My attitude softened once I started tasting the vegetables. Their bright colors and intense sweetness made the best produce at specialty grocers pale in comparison. Even after a plane flight to the Midwest from New York, these crops were undoubtedly the most delicious potatoes, squash and Swiss chard that I'd ever eaten.

Soon after my enlightenment, I joined Angelic Organics in Caledonia, a community-supported farm about 100 miles northwest of Chicago. My conversion was complete at the end of my first season when I visited Angelics during a fall open house. I was stunned by the peace I felt watching my daughter, a toddler then, wander through fields that had grown our family's food and Halloween pumpkins.

That my experience wasn't unique became apparent to me last year when I had the chance to work on a cookbook designed to help home cooks store, cook and preserve seasonal produce. *Recipes From America's Small Farms: Fresh Ideas for the Season's Bounty* by Joanne Lamb Hayes and Lori Stein with myself, Maura Webber (Villard Books, \$16.95) was published this month. The book also aims to spread the word about community-supported farms to the unconverted; part of the book's profits will be donated to groups that foster community-supported agriculture.

The project gave me the chance to interview small farmers across the country who have embraced the concept. Along the way I came to understand that the programs' lure is about much more than getting the best-tasting food or maintaining local sustainable farms (many but not all farm organically). Those two ideals may be the reasons that new farmers or members first opt in. But consumers nationwide keep joining together each spring to support over 1,000 CSA farmers because they get something more back than the sum of its parts: a connection to the

land and a community of like-minded people.

It is this satisfying connection that seems to help both farmer and consumer rise to the system's particular challenges again and again. And there definitely are challenges. Farmers, many of whom once specialized in a single crop or two, must learn to farm a variety of vegetables to meet the demands of hundreds of shareholders rather than one or two wholesalers. Shareholders in turn must be flexible enough to adapt eating habits. They must handle the bumper crop of beets (maybe even bake a chocolate beet cake) and sometimes even suffer disappointment if too much rain makes for a patchy tomato crop. And they must figure out how to use their weekly vegetables even when they head out of town (which is why my mother ended up bringing her produce along with her to Chicago that time).

The cookbook too grew out of this sense of community. Co-editors Lori Stein and Joanne Lamb Hayes are both members of the Carnegie Hill/Yorkville CSA in Manhattan that my mother helped form. The group gets its produce from Stoneledge Farm in South Cairo, N.Y. Stein, owner of a book production company, previously spent several years as a dynamic volunteer for her New York City group.

Part of her time included writing the farm's weekly newsletters. Fellow shareholder Hayes, a veteran cookbook author and former food editor of Country Living Magazine, pitched in too. The cookbook evolved out of those newsletters--chock full of recipes and vegetable tips--and the discussions that Stein and Hayes had while volunteering together at their farm's pick-up site.

Though contributors to the cookbook are spread out across the country, their passion for their own farms also energized the project.

"I wanted more people to know about their food-buying options," said Terra Brockman, who works with her brother Henry of Henry's Farm in Congerville, which sells shares to the Bloomington and Peoria area as well as vegetables a la carte at the farmers market in Evanston.

The recipes were collected from shareholders, farmers as well as some chefs from the Chef's Collaborative, a national network of members of the food community who support seasonal cooking with locally grown ingredients. Local contributions include Mexican-style zucchini tacos from Chicago chef Rick Bayless; a roasted butternut-sage squash dish came from Hannah Bennett, a former cook for Angelic Organics' farm crew, and a lettuce sandwich spread (ideal for using up excess greens) from Brockman at Henry's Farm.

My co-editors and nearly every contributor each have their own stories about how they got hooked by their farms. For Hayes, it was a personal connection with the farmer that grabbed her. Hayes, who had previously been involved in food coops, attended a meeting about four years ago that was designed to attract new members to the Carnegie Hill/Yorkville CSA. Farmer Deborah Kavakos immediately won over Hayes with the tale of her struggle to keep her farm going by switching from undependable farmers markets to the shareholder system. Hayes chooses to remain a member of the Carnegie Hill/Yorkville group despite the fact that another farm has opened a pick-up site closer to her home. "It's like a great big family," Hayes said.

For Stein, the land itself turned out to be the real draw. Though Stein has produced numerous books on gardening, she grew up in Manhattan's lower east side neighborhood where her mother's house plants were as close as she got to growing seasons. Through her publishing work she was ultimately alarmed to learn how much pesticide was used on commercially grown lettuce.

Her concern pushed her to join the Carnegie Hill/Yorkville CSA back in 1997, its first year of operation. Initially the pickings were slim but the vegetables improved. She was ultimately won over when my mother took her to Stoneledge, where they spent hours hoeing weeds out of the spinach crop.

"That was the day I really got hooked," Stein recalled. "I had never really worked the ground before and--jaded as I am--it got to me."

Here's where a bit of motherly advice might come in handy for those commitment-phobes considering joining a nearby community-supported farm. My mother has warned that these types should most definitely avoid trips to see any farm in question. For city folk especially, the beauty can be overwhelming.

"There's something about getting out there and weeding," my mother said. "It's magical."

Maura Webber is a Chicago-based writer.

Heirloom tomatoes with fresh herbs and tapenade toast points

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

Tapenade:

1 cup pitted, rinsed Nicoise olives

2 tablespoons orange juice

1-1/2 tablespoons grated orange peel (colored portion only)

1 tablespoon whole almonds, chopped lightly and toasted

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 chopped garlic clove

1/3 teaspoon Pernod (optional)

Tomatoes:

2 pounds assorted heirloom tomatoes

6 white or whole wheat bread slices, crust removed

Extra-virgin olive oil

Balsamic or red wine vinegar

Sea salt and freshly milled black pepper

2 tablespoons chopped assorted fresh herbs and blossoms

2 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted

To make tapenade, combine all ingredients in a food processor fitted with chopping blades. Pulse until coarsely chopped. Set aside.

For tomatoes, cut larger ones into slices, removing the stem ends; cut the smaller tomatoes into wedges. If using cherry or Sweet 100 tomatoes; leave them whole. Divide among salad plates.

Cut bread slices diagonally in half and toast. Spread the tapenade evenly over the toast points in a thin layer, covering completely to the edges.

Season the tomatoes with oil, vinegar and sea salt to taste. Sprinkle with herbs and pine nuts. Place 2 toast points with each salad and serve.

From Recipes from

America's Small Farms

Nutrition facts per serving: 301 calories, 21 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 24 g carbohydrates, 4 g protein, 894 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

Rick Bayless' Mexican-style zucchini tacos

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

1-1/2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 medium white onion, chopped

1 pound (6 to 8 plum or 2 medium-large round) ripe tomatoes, roughly chopped (see Note)

2 garlic cloves, finely chopped

2 large fresh poblano chiles

Kernels from 1 large ear fresh corn (about 1 cup)

4 medium (about 1-1/2 pounds) zucchini (or Mexican calabacita cut into 1/4-inch cubes)

Leaves from 1 spring epazote (or 3 tablespoons fresh cilantro)

2/3 cup homemade crema, creme fraiche or whipping cream

Salt

1/2 cup (about 2 ounces) Mexican queso fresco

24 fresh warm corn tortillas

Measure the oil into a large (12-inch skillet) and set over medium-high heat. Add onion and cook, stirring frequently, until richly browned, about 8 minutes.

While onion is cooking, coarsely puree the tomatoes in a food processor or blender. Add garlic to the browned onion, cook 1 minute, stirring, then add the tomatoes. Reduce the heat to medium-low, cover skillet and cook, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Remove from heat.

Roast the poblanos directly over a gas flame or on a baking sheet 4 inches below a very hot broiler, turning regularly until the skin has blistered and blackened on all sides, about 5 minutes for an open flames, about 10 minutes for the broiler. Remove from heat and cover with a kitchen towel and let stand for 5 minutes. Rub off the blackened skins, then pull out the stems and seedpods. Rinse briefly to remove stray seeds and bits of skin. Slice into 1/4-inch strips.

Uncover the skillet, return to flame and raise the heat to medium-high. Stir in the poblanos, corn, zucchini, epazote and crema. Cook, stirring frequently, until the zucchini is crisp-tender and the liquid has thickened enough to coat the vegetables nicely, about 8 minutes. Taste and season with salt, about 1 teaspoon or to taste. Serve in a decorative bowl, sprinkle with crumbled cheese and pass hot tortillas separate for do-it-yourself tacos.

From *Recipes From America's Small Farms*

Nutrition facts per serving: 453 calories, 18 g fat, 8 g saturated fat, 43 mg cholesterol, 66 g carbohydrates, 12 g protein, 604 mg sodium, 8 g fiber

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