

Retail Notebook: Farmers feeding a desire for fresher produce

Saturday, February 24, 2007

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Andrew Stout, founder and co-owner of Full Circle Farm, gets excited just talking about the turnips and arugula growing on his Carnation land, the salad greens that were just planted and the summer crops he has planned.

Stout is a farmer, a willing teacher, and a big fan of Community Supported Agriculture, which helps him sell his crops directly to consumers.

"We feel the direct relationship between the producer and the customer is the strongest one a farm can have. It takes the relationship far beyond the vegetables-for-money exchange," Stout said this week.

"We have a lot of passion for what we do, and it is fun to get other people ignited and excited about it," said Stout, who owns the organic farm with his wife, Wendy Munroe.

Full Circle is among the growing number of farms that focus on selling directly to customers, whether it's at neighborhood farmers markets or through subscriptions for delivery of weekly produce boxes.

With a subscription, customers pay the farmer up front, around this time of year as planting plans are laid, for a share of the summer produce when it is ready.

Programs vary. A 20-week subscription with weekly boxes -- usually June through October -- costs around \$400. Some farms, such as Full Circle, offer weekly baskets year-round for \$28 for a small box and up to \$46 for a large box -- enough for a big family.

In most cases, boxes are delivered to pickup locations scattered throughout the city. Full Circle delivers weekly to two dozen locations.

Farmers get reliable customers for their produce. Customers get fresh fruit and vegetables.

While most farms offer boxes only from late spring to early fall, Full Circle partners with other farms to provide a variety of fruit, vegetables and herbs year-round. Some farms also offer organic eggs or honey in addition to the fresh produce.

Dozens of farms offer CSA programs in the area, many with colorful names, such as the Whistling Train, Rising River, Zestful Gardens and Moonshadow Farms.

When Pike Place Market leaders voted last month to end its decade-old Market Basket program, which delivered fresh produce to downtown offices and certain neighborhood locations, one reason directors gave was the increase in Community Supported Agriculture programs offered by farms.

Full Circle Farm participated in the Market Basket program for five or six years. Stout said the program worked well for them, bringing in about \$25,000 a year in income.

"It was a nice-size account for us," he said. "It was a reliable and consistent program that furthered our connection to



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Andrew Stout, owner of Full Circle Farm, a certified organic farm in Carnation, checks out the soil on his farm Friday. Stout's is one of dozens of farms in the Seattle area that participate in a Community Supported Agriculture program. Under the programs, customers pay subscriptions to pick up weekly baskets of farm goods at drop-off spots scattered throughout the city, or at the farms themselves.

the customer."

The Pike Place program was losing between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year.

"They were serving the needs of the farmers and the needs of the customers, but not their own needs," Stout said.

He said his farm plans to continue selling produce at Pike Place Market, along with several other neighborhood farmers' markets. Dozens of farms surrounding Seattle offer customers ways of getting fresh produce delivered directly from the farm. The turnips, collards and carrots often arrive with recipes, a bit of background on the farm, and the satisfaction of eating locally grown vegetables rather than food that has been shipped from several states away.

On average, food travels 1,500 to 2,500 miles before reaching your plate, according to Worldwatch Institute, an environmental and social policy research institute based in Washington, D.C.

But as more people seek fresher foods, and are more interested in where their food comes from, Northwest farmers increasingly find ways to meet the demand.

Consumer Supported Agriculture programs started in Switzerland and Japan decades ago in response to growing corporate agriculture. The idea caught on in the Northeastern United States in the 1980s, and is taking root throughout the country, including the Seattle area.

"There has been a significant movement toward buying locally and getting to know the grower," said Mark McIntyre, marketing director for Full Circle Farm.

"It provides a stable market for local growers' products," he said. "You pay up front to help cover operating costs for the season.

"Food is such an essential part of everybody's life, and people tend to lose perspective about where their food comes from," McIntyre said. "This is one method of reconnecting the increasingly urban population with farmers and food producers."

ON THE WEB

More information on Consumer Supported Agriculture and Seattle-area farmers markets is available online:

dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/farms/

seattlefarmersmarkets.org/

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