

**FOOD WITH A FARMER'S FACE:  
COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE  
IN THE UNITED STATES**

STEVEN M. SCHNELL

[Agrarians] are asking what is the best way to farm in each one of the world's numberless places, as defined by topography, soil type, climate, ecology, history, culture, and local need. . . . The agrarian standard, inescapably, is local adaptation, which requires bringing local nature, local people, local economy, and local culture into a practical and enduring harmony.

—Wendell Berry, 2002

Agriculture in the United States is a far cry from Wendell Berry's agrarian standard. Few Americans have any knowledge of the anonymous and distant systems that provide their daily bread, systems that operate with utter disregard for the particularities of place and for the impacts they have on local environments and communities (Berry 1977; Bonanno and others 1994; Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel 2000; Kimbrell 2002; Duram 2005). As the United States becomes increasingly urbanized and suburbanized, people have, understandably, become more disconnected from the distant land and people that stock their supermarkets. But this is starting to change.

Increasingly, large numbers of farmers and of consumers are looking for, and finding, alternatives to the dominant fossil fuel- and chemical-intensive agribusiness paradigm. Whether through the rapid expansion of organic agriculture (Duram 2005), the growth of farmers markets (Lyson, Gillespie, and Hilchey 1995; Brown 2001), or the rise of the Slow Food movement (Petrini and Watson 2001), many farmers and consumers are consciously redefining their relationship with food and the land that produces it.

One increasingly popular alternative is community-supported agriculture, or CSA. In CSAs,<sup>1</sup> which numbered more than 1,700 nationally in 2005 (Weise 2005), farmers solicit local members—anywhere from 10 to 1,000 or more—who, for an annual membership fee, receive a share of the harvest throughout the growing season (Figure 1). Such a setup guarantees farmers financial support and enables many small-scale farmers to make ends meet, or even to thrive.

The goals of CSA, however, go beyond being a simple economic exchange. CSA is, its defenders argue, a fundamental rethinking of the relationship among food, economics, and community, a move toward a greater degree of ecological sustainability and an attempt to partly disengage from the global supermarket and reestablish vital local agricultural economies (Henderson 1999). CSA is also a powerful geographical idea, because it promotes the formation of local connections,

---

\* DR. SCHNELL is an associate professor of geography at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, Pennsylvania 19530.