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Published version available:

<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cuag.12107>

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Abstract: From the vantage point of northern Illinois, this article considers how the availability of organic, heirloom, and other specialty foods through a wider variety of grocery stores and online venues is affecting local food systems. Farmers concerned about these new forms of competition develop coping strategies to woo customers, but many of these strategies demand new skill sets and drain farmers’ time and resources away from the fields. How sustainable are local food systems when small-scale farmers must be not only skilled producers, but marketing gurus, gregarious spokespeople, and public educators as well? More contextually grounded qualitative and mixed-methods research is needed to help local food advocates and farmers understand and ease this entrepreneurial treadmill. [local food systems, direct market agriculture, small-scale farmers, competition, United States]

Paul and I bumped along in his truck between meticulously tended rows of tomatoes, herbs, and fennel. Sales have slowed for the last couple years, Paul told me as he showed me around his farm. But this year [2017], “CSAs are disintegrating.” Paul runs a large Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm where memberships brought in \$300,000 less in 2017 than in previous years. That’s a huge shortfall, and my own conversations with farmers, as well as reports from other fieldworkers and farm advocacy groups, confirm that farmers across the Midwest who rely on direct sales, primarily through CSA memberships and farmers market sales, have reported similar drops (AOLC 2017; Bishop 2018; Huntley 2016).

Illinois sits in America’s heartland of industrial corn and soybean agriculture, but some farmers here identify their practices as clear alternatives to conventional agriculture. For the past two years, I have been conducting ethnographic research with such farmers, including formal and informal interviews with several dozen farmers and participatory observation on four farms. While some grow certified organic commodity crops like corn, soy, and oats at a large scale, the vast majority grow a diverse mix of produce in smaller quantities, including meat, eggs, fruit, and vegetables.

These diversified farmers are business entrepreneurs. However, most entered farming driven by a set of motivations and values among which accumulating profits was not primary. Some aim to tackle “problems with industrial food” and “localize our food system,” as one farmer explained, or want “to change the reality of how human beings interact with the natural world and their bodies,” as another put it. Others were motivated by more individual goals. One couple took the husband’s extreme obesity as “a wakeup call” and began “growing our own food and understanding what real food tasted like.” Many parents want their children to “connect with their food” and enjoy rural lifestyles.

The vast majority of these diversified farmers operate at a small scale not by default, but by design. The typical agricultural treadmill pushes farmers to intensify investment in new technologies to keep up with rising yields of commodity crops. Rather than climbing aboard that treadmill, these farmers focus on specific forms of high-value agriculture, including pesticide-free production, diverse field ecosystems, and heritage varieties of produce, and accept smaller overall yields (Rissing 2016).

But diversified farmers face a different sort of entrepreneurial treadmill. These types of specialty food are wildly popular in the United States right now (Robinson and Farmer 2017; Nielsen 2017). Despite this popularity, though, the farmers I work with anxiously report that direct sales have suddenly declined in the past two years. As one veteran farmer said at a workshop for beginning farmers, there is “a major tectonic disruption going on in the food industry.” These veterans warn of an array of new players offering “organic,” “local,” and “heirloom” foods at ever larger scales of production and distribution. Small-scale farmers develop new coping strategies to woo customers, but many of these strategies demand new skill sets and drain farmers’ time and resources away from the fields. This multi-tasking poses a

logistical challenge to farm businesses and pushes farmers to reframe their identities in jarring ways.

Fresh Competition

Direct-sales farmers worry in particular about new types of competitors with vastly greater capital to invest in cornering markets. It used to be, said a farmer at the abovementioned workshop, that CSA farmers were the only ones doing home delivery of fresh produce. Eaters eager for organic, biodynamic, and heritage varieties of food had to buy directly from small farms. “Now,” he said, “there’s all kinds of competition.”

Farmers markets offer low-barrier markets for both beginning and veteran producers to sell their own crops, as well as small-batch value-added products like cheeses, baked goods, and jarred pickles, sauces, and jams. While farmers markets remain popular and many report high attendance, I’ve spoken with producers across the upper Midwest who rely on these markets and report lower sales in 2016 and 2017 than in past years. None in my study reported higher sales. Many farmers see the wider availability of specialty foods as a main cause.

Foods marketed as organic and “artisanal” are now available not only at specialty grocers like Whole Foods, but also at large general-service and discount grocery stores. Because these large distributors demand high volumes of food and standardized appearance, these market opportunities tend to benefit larger farms, rather than providing new sales outlets for small-scale diversified farmers. Meanwhile, these large grocers drive specialty food prices below the production costs of many small-scale farmers.

For CSA farmers, the growing presence of mail-order meal-in-a-box providers like Blue Apron and Hello Fresh looms particularly large. These meal-kit services provide recipes and

ingredients that are pre-portioned, and often pre-washed and semi-prepared. Some services offer customized gluten-free, vegetarian, and organic meals, and many of their websites display prominently that “no commitment” is required. “Skip or cancel delivery at any time.”

“Meal-kit delivery services have destroyed the market,” Paul told me with dejected certainty. He has been worriedly tracking news coverage of these providers and said he had heard a report that they now feed five times the number of CSA shareholders nationwide. Paul believes that vast venture capital is the basis for their success, as “they shovel meals onto people for free or incredibly cheaply at first” to corner markets and kill competition. He suspects that only after local food purveyors decline will meal-kit providers raise prices to meet their costs.

Rather than simply capital, Mallory, who recently folded her CSA venture after three years, sees a different problem at the heart of CSAs’ struggles. “It’s the Amazon world,” she lamented. “[It’s people] getting what they want so easily and not being a part of the locavore type of mentality.” For decades, CSA farms, in which members invest cash with a farmer at the start of a season and receive in return a share of the season’s harvest, have been a mainstay of efforts to localize food markets. Today, many members still sign contracts describing their shares in these terms, but a sense of shared membership is growing highly attenuated, as reflected in the transactional behaviors of both farmers and buyers. Consumers buying from CSAs report increasingly utilitarian motivations in recent years (Galt et al. 2016; Lang 2010). Similarly, during conversations in 2016, CSA members in my study regularly spoke about their share not as a set proportion of a variable yield, but as a fixed volume of produce and level of variety to be received each week. Average member retention rates from one season to the next that hover around 50% also suggest that people in many areas are shopping around as often as they are committing to long-term farmer-eater partnerships (Member Assembler 2016; CAFF 2016).

Many farmers I work with lament a lack of collaboration between eaters and farmers and feel pushed to provide the same flexibility, customization, and delivery as their larger-scale competitors. When pests or unseasonable weather killed off a crop of carrots or peas, rather than simply sharing the news that members' shares would be smaller that week, farmers regularly bought produce from another farmer to fill share boxes. Though this cuts deeply into their profits, farmers feel compelled to do it in order to retain customers. Other farmers experimented with various "add-on" shares of dairy, bread, eggs, and meat; more flexible delivery options; customized vegetable selection; cooking lessons; and other marketing innovations.

Pulled and Pushed from the Fields

While competition is nothing new for small-scale farmers, my research finds farmers dealing with a qualitatively different set of challenges that seem tied to the entrance into "artisan" and "local food" markets of competitors that are both large-scale and highly customized. Of course, farmers work toward efficient production. They calibrate row spacing precisely to equipment, squeeze vegetable rows as close as possible to reduce water loss and weeds, and experiment with seed varieties. Farmers also develop creative approaches to labor and cash flow. They harness the labor of every family member, children included, and rely on multiple sources of income. In married couples, one spouse often works off the farm, bringing in cash and benefits like health insurance. Among the dozens of farmers I interviewed, only two were single, and they relied on significant parental assistance.

Now more than ever, the quest for financial viability also pushes farmers to adapt and improvise in ways far removed from the actual growing of food. Those striving to sustain small

farm businesses must be not only skilled producers, but also marketing gurus, gregarious spokespeople, and public educators.

Farmers often feel pulled to extra-field responsibilities, especially in the service of a particular moral economy of non-industrial agriculture that asserts the need to support community among eaters and producers (Galt 2013). At workshops and field days, experienced farmers repeatedly urge farming newcomers to be present on social media, tell the personal story of their farm, and establish and maintain constant contact with their customers. Said one CSA farmer, Theo,

I keep telling lots of farmers I know “Just because you grow food well doesn't mean you're a good CSA farmer or a good market farmer.” You need to— people aren't just coming and buying your food because, oh, it's expensive food and it's at a farmers market.... You have to fit and you guys have to get along and, our whole intention in doing this was to get communities back to the farm and build a new farm community.

Indeed, monthly on-farm events like potlucks and camp-outs are integral to Theo and his wife's farm. While harvesting kale or stringing up tomatoes, Theo often pulled out his phone to snap a picture and post it to the farm's website. Farmers like Theo also volunteer at county fairs and speak at community gatherings to teach the public about sustainable farming and the CSA model. “Education is an important component of CSA sales. Period,” insists Lisa Kivirist in her podcast to fellow farmers (Kivirist 2017). Some run for their local Farmers Union chapter to advocate for small-scale farmers' needs and urge fellow farmers to do so as well. These sorts of endeavors add onto what is already a dawn-to-dusk occupation during the growing season, but many farmers embraced these tasks as their duties within a larger community.

However, farmers also feel pushed, through their perceptions of new fresh-food competitors, onto a treadmill of ever more marketing, innovation, and customization. Small-scale farmers somehow carve out hours in the day to post to social media and websites, track hundreds of individual payments, and develop new marketing campaigns. But they do so without the large customer volumes and support staff that make these features feasible for larger corporations.¹ “I mean you’re great at producing,” said a long-time CSA farmer named Rachel, “but how do you market it? How do you find the time and expertise to market it? You’re always playing catch up.” Farmers are pushed to innovate new ways to distinguish themselves and their offerings, though successful strategies may then be taken up by competitors with more resources, forcing these farmers to innovate again. Several area CSA farms that have attempted to meet the expectations of “Amazon world” have since abandoned their efforts and, in some cases, closed their farms.

Other farmers resented the push to boil down their efforts to the pursuit of a bottom line in ways that contradicted their initial motivations for becoming farmers. “I really wanted to build a community,” Mallory explained. “And I thought this farm idea would do that, and that wasn’t as much as what happened. I would say probably ten to twenty percent of our customer base became our community, and the rest weren’t. It was more transactional. And that, that didn’t satisfy me.” Similarly, Paige reported that reaching out to too many markets had stretched her thin. “I was losing my love of farming,” she said. While Paige and her partner managed to reshape their business to focus more on growing, Mallory folded hers. Being stretched so thin

¹ Farmers are not the only small-business owners concerned about the shifting norms of competition, price cutting, and customer convenience that online retailers, epitomized by the giant Amazon, are prompting. Across sectors as diverse as retail, higher education, and health care, some analysts are identifying an “Amazonification” of the economy (Imbert 2017; Thompson 2018).

between fields, markets, and computers also takes its toll on one's personal life, including as one farmer put it, "burn out, marital splits," and other family strife.

Faced with the daunting array of expectations, some farmers turn to marketing professionals for help, whether through workshops on social media use, software platforms to help customize deliveries, or non-profits that educate eaters about organic agriculture and the CSA model (Janssen 2010). Alternatively, cooperative grocers, food hubs, and farm-to-customer delivery services focusing on one metropolitan area, such as greater Chicago, promise to take distribution off farmers' hands, while using farm-specific labeling to keep the connection between farmer and buyer clear. These marketing and distribution professionals see that farmers feel stretched too thin, pulled too far from the food growing on which many of them want to focus. Said the manager of one produce delivery business that works primarily with small farmers in Illinois, "We've convinced some farmers to screw the farmers market. Don't bother with country bullshit; sell us all that you produce." But these brokers also take a cut of profits, and this leaves many farmers wary of both feasibility and motives. One market and CSA farmer stated particularly bluntly, "I'm baffled at the way co-ops have been put forward as something that can help the small farmer, when in fact, they only enrich the people who run the co-op."

Engaging Scholarship

My own on-going research points to the cascading effects that both real and perceived consumer expectations for ever lower food prices and ever more customized delivery can have on farmers. Throughout the first year of participant observation and interviews, these small-scale Illinois farmers expressed their extreme frustration with uncertainty about current local buying practices, and I witnessed how this uncertainty stymied their businesses. To help these farmers better

understand local consumer practices, I initiated a pilot study of food-buying patterns in a nearby metropolitan area. I then hosted a workshop with small-scale farmers, at which I shared preliminary findings and facilitated the collaborative identification of research questions and study designs that would be most useful for these food producers. The concerns of small-scale farmers in the Midwest and elsewhere point to important roles for engaged social scientists interested in leveraging research to enhance the viability of diversified food systems in many locales, and in the U.S. in particular.

In an immediate sense, more contextually grounded qualitative and mixed-methods research is needed. Empirical descriptions of what is happening in different food markets around the country, especially those that engage in nuanced analysis of the multi-factor causes of shifts in preferences and buying patterns, are useful to farmers. Uncertainty about shifts in their local foods markets is as difficult for farmers to contend with as is an actual decline in sales. Individual farmers in my study, who know that their own CSA memberships and market sales have declined, repeatedly expressed frustration about the lack of data to clarify whether their experience was typical or anomalous among regional farmers, and equally importantly, what was causing these shortfalls. Neither the USDA nor individual farmers markets in Illinois gather robust data on sales trends in direct market venues. Furthermore, qualitative information on what consumers actually seek would help farmers determine whether and how to compete directly with grocery stores, meal-kit services, and other fresh food vendors. Small farmers do not have the same ability as large corporations to collect such data themselves. Without data to confirm or deny their suspicions, and only rumors to go on, farmers often expend considerable effort away from their fields experimenting with marketing tactics that may or may not be necessary, let

alone useful. Likewise, they may be missing key consumer trends for which their produce is well suited.

An overarching goal of research should also be to give eaters a clearer picture of the people and processes that bring them their food. This means systematically tracing the many costs and benefits of different types of food production, including the considerable costs often discounted by mainstream economic analyses. It also requires amplifying the personal narratives of food producers and eaters (e.g., Paladino and Janssen 2016). I write of “eaters” deliberately here, as opposed to “consumers,” because the tendency toward individualization within a “consumer ethics” discourse tends to exclude important ethical and political considerations from the conversation (Busa and Garder 2015). While a moral economy framework, for example, insists that economic interactions are driven by than just profit generation, it still characterizes people first and foremost as economic actors. Many of the alternative farmers I work with take part in growing food (and some “consumers” take part in local food networks) for reasons that are not entirely contained by this narrow economic frame. Relationships of care-taking, education, and place-making also matter deeply for them (e.g., Robinson 2016; Lyson 2005). Meanwhile, food systems are in no way removed from the class- and race-based social structures that constitute U.S. society, and even in the name of “good” food, working class and minority groups are often excluded (Reynolds and Cohen 2016; Guthman 2008). Anthropologists can play a stronger role in shaping the public policies and fostering the social norms that can support robust local food systems that are diverse in terms of both the variety of foods they provide and the people they feed. To do so we need to gain a realistic understanding of how price shifts, delivery expectations, and various forms of market competition actually affect food growers.

Local food systems cannot thrive through the coping strategies of farmers alone; they require active participation from eaters on individual and collective levels to address the economic rules of our food system and the values that guide it (Janssen 2010). Constructing a more complete and less economically reductionist picture of local food provisioning can help individual eaters better understand their roles within a densely interconnected web. Such a holistic picture can also be used to design public policies that adjust agricultural subsidies in ways that support both producers and eaters, facilitate cooperative endeavors like food hubs and joint shipping that allow for a more even field of competition between farmers operating at various scales, and shape support services and infrastructure that will foster vibrant rural farming communities. We as anthropologists have much more work to do in helping a broad public understand local food systems not just in economic terms, but in affiliative, ethical-political, and emotional terms, too.

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