

Canada's first grain CSA

First time effort yields producers \$1,000/acre

BY JON STEINMAN

On October 26, 2008, dozens of Nelson, BC, residents formed a human chain to help unload 5,000 pounds of grain from four sailboats.

The grain, grown locally and shipped across a lake bordering the town, is the product of what organizers believe is Canada's first community supported agriculture (CSA) project for grain.

The idea was conceived in August 2007 when Matt Lowe committed to a Nelson-centred 'eat local challenge'. When Lowe discovered that grains were missing from his local diet, he embarked on a journey to find someone nearby who could grow grains.

In less than a few months, three farmers in the Creston Valley had committed to growing organic grains.

"The CSA model was chosen to ensure that this project would not replicate the food system models of the past, which have resulted in bankrupt farmers," says Lowe. "I wanted to ensure that the farmers would receive a fair price and be guaranteed a market for their product," he adds.

The CSA model also places money into the pockets of farmers at the beginning of the season, thereby passing some of the risks of farming onto the eaters. If the crop faces lower than expected yields, CSA members absorb the costs.

Without any marketing required, the CSA secured 180 members and one local bakery to commit to a total of 200 shares. Each share was expected to be worth approximately 100 pounds of grain and the cost to the 180 individual members was set at \$100/share (\$1.00/pound). The bakery's 20 shares were set at a reduced \$75/share (\$0.75/pound). That translated to \$19,500 in revenues for the CSA.

The three farmers each put five acres of their land into production for the CSA, and it was expected that 15 acres would satisfy the 20,000 pounds needed for the 200 shares.

Five crops were planted among the three farms; Red Fife wheat, Khorasan wheat, hard spring wheat, spelt and oats.

So how much money did the farmers receive?

At the beginning of the season, the CSA agreed to put aside a percentage of each share's price towards the cost of seed, bags and other unforeseen expenses (such as the transporting of an oat de-huller from Alberta). What remained ended up in the farmers' pockets. That worked out to \$1,000 per acre for each farmer to put towards their time and equipment costs.

Even though the September harvest turned up about 2,000 pounds short of the desired 20,000 lbs, the farmers financial return per acre did not change. The eaters and bakery on the other hand will be faced with a slightly higher price per pound.

One of the challenges faced by the project was not giving



Grain produced for Nelson members of the CSA was shipped by sailboat across Kootenay Lake

the farmers enough time to prepare their land for the crops. This led to weed suppression and soil fertility challenges. It was also unforeseen that the de-hulling of the spelt would require special equipment, however, approximately 70 per cent of the spelt was de-hulled using the same equipment used for the other grains. Then there were the oats, some of which



Producer Roy Lawrence talks to CSA members earlier this year. The program yielded participating farmers over \$1,000 per acre.

were harvested too early. While the oat variety chosen was a “hull-less” one, some of the harvest required de-hulling. Fortunately, a retired and inexpensive de-huller was found in Alberta and purchased for use by the CSA.

Keith Huscroft is a fourth-generation farmer who planted this year for the CSA. A part-time horse farmer, he hopes that the CSA will help accommodate his interest to use horses full-time and keep his costs down.

On the other side of the equation are individual consumers and the bakery. The final price works out to 1.11\$/lb for individuals and \$0.83/lb for the bakery, which is very fair for organically grown whole grains.

It was the outpouring of community support that allowed the CSA to be financially rewarding. Volunteers have come forward to help organize the CSA, bag the grain, and provide weekly milling services to members.

Then there’s the free transportation—sailboats!

With 75 per cent of the CSA shares being purchased by Nelson residents, four sailors approached Matt Lowe and volunteered to sail the grain on Kootenay Lake from the Creston Valley to Nelson; a 56-hour round-trip, fossil-fuel free. The entire 13,500 pounds for Nelson members was unable to fit on the four boats, but plans to expand the fleet for next year are already in the works.

The three farmers’ are all willing to expand their production next year and Lowe expects that the CSA will triple in size for 2009. “We’ll also be exploring the possibilities of accommodating the enthusiastic interest from local bakeries, restaurants and retailers,” says Lowe. The farmers also expect as the years go by, and as they develop a better relationship with their land and the new crops, that their costs will decrease.

In a Nelson backyard also sits a newly-constructed shed that now houses a small flour mill for CSA members. The mill is rather lonesome in the shed, which has quite a bit of extra room. As the mill’s owner/operator David Everest suggests, “that extra room is for the oil presses should the CSA ever head in that direction.”

“We also hope to experiment with new crops next year,” says Matt Lowe. “One of our farmers grew a successful one-acre test plot of lentils this year. The possibilities are endless.”

Jon Steinman is the Producer/Host of Deconstructing Dinner—an internationally syndicated radio show based in Nelson, B.C. Jon has been documenting the evolution of the CSA since its conception. The Local Grain Revolution series can be found at www.deconstructingdinner.ca

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