

The branding of community supported agriculture: Myths and opportunities

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Submitted September 22, 2013 / Revised September 25, 2013; February 24, May 6, and December 1, 2014, and February 4, 2015 / Accepted February 4, 2015 / Published online May 29, 2015

Citation: White, T. (2015). The branding of community supported agriculture: Myths and opportunities. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(3), 45–62.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.053.008>

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Abstract

Since the mid-1980s, participants in community supported agriculture (CSA) have promoted, proliferated, and adapted the CSA model, resulting in CSAs gaining popularity as a trusted “brand.” They have developed and expanded CSA by pursuing common branding strategies, such as building name recognition, differentiating the brand from other farm and food producers, and developing CSA narratives and mythologies with positive associations that attract advocates. However, CSA has not been branded via a typical centralized, hierarchical process, but rather through the independent, informally organized collective efforts of its farmers and members. With no standardized licensing or certification process (unlike “organic”), CSAs remain liberated from a strict set of allowed practices, yet debates still occur about what constitutes a “real” CSA. Despite the fact that many idealistic promotional claims of CSA have been validated, one glaring weakness is that

many CSA farmers still struggle to achieve financial security. The positive brand mythology surrounding CSA has made it difficult for participants to acknowledge and confront this shortcoming. Drawing on qualitative field research and review of archival CSA materials, this paper examines the identity making and branding of CSA. I constructively critique some of the most fundamental aspects of CSA: its constructed image and its actual practice. Through this lens, I ask how the independent, open-source branding has helped or hindered CSA proponents in achieving goals. By focusing on these aspects my hope is that a variety of advocates, academics, farmers, CSA members, and others, can collaborate on developing a positive next era for CSA and its offshoots both within and beyond agriculture and food—projects aimed at strengthening consumer/producer alliances, cooperative practices, and ethically based community economies.

Keywords

community supported agriculture; branding; cooperative; open source; social movements; diverse economies

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We did not want to craft a tight definition or try to establish the criteria for identifying “the true CSA farm.” Rather we hoped to honor the diversity of this young, but quickly spreading movement.

—Elizabeth Henderson, pioneering CSA farmer
(Henderson & Van En, 2007, p. 8)

If there is a common understanding among people who have been involved with CSAs, it is that there is no formula.

—Traugher Groh, pioneering CSA farmer,
and author Steven McFadden (Groh &
McFadden, 1990, p. 107)

Introduction: Branding CSA?

Despite the widespread use of the unifying term “community supported agriculture” and its abbreviation CSA, a multitude of participants continually define, redefine, and expand the methods and goals of CSA. A symbiosis of independent *and* collective identity making has constituted a vital part of CSA history and is, I argue, at the core of CSA success. Could this process of identity making and proliferation be viewed as the “branding” of CSA? With its connotations of corporate power building and centralized control, branding might seem to be an unlikely (and perhaps unappetizing) term for the unfolding of a decidedly grassroots food and farming movement. But branding theory and literature do provide a useful framework to better understand how CSA has created name recognition, built a reputation, spread widely, and articulated a variety of goals and aspirations. The analytical lens of branding (especially cultural branding) provides an especially valuable perspective, as branding is one of the central means by which material, cultural, and political expressions take hold of the public consciousness and lead to action—or dissolve into obscurity. As Schroeder (2009) points out, “we live in a branded world: brands infuse culture with meaning, and branding profoundly influences contemporary society”; in essence, “brands themselves have become ideological referents that shape cultural rituals, economic activities, and social norms” (p. 124).

Consciously or unconsciously, CSA participants have taken part in branding CSA by building associations between the name and certain ideas,

values, and relationships. In this paper, I analyze the branding of CSA and examine how this unique movement represents itself within a larger context of food and farming, straddling a line somewhere between the institutional and the renegade. By looking at the way CSA is branded, I explore some of the more successful positive dynamics generated by CSA and also examine some CSA shortcomings and suggest ways they could be remedied (such as making the economic and financial realities more transparent—more of an “open book”).

Simply put, the process of branding involves producers presenting positive stories about their products that will motivate consumers to buy those products. Though many producers share basic facts about their operations such as “established in...” or “made in U.S.A.,” a significant part of branding is done through a more abstract expression of the attitudes and ideals intended to be shared with consumers. Marketer and author Seth Godin expounds on this idea, stating that a “brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another” (2009, para. 1). Branding theory applied to CSA helps to understand the way CSA has evolved and come to be known. CSAs are noteworthy for fostering collaborative rather than adversarial producer/consumer relationships. They exist beyond typical notions of how brands and consumers interact. In many cases, CSA members do not see themselves merely as consumers, nor do they behave merely as consumers. Instead they practice a great deal of agency in promoting, problem solving, partnering with, and protecting the CSAs they are involved with. This paper uses branding theory to provide an analysis of how participants have co-created CSAs, and also explores new ideas of branding as a potentially non-exploitive practice with many possibilities for interpretation and application. Conclusions expressed here may be applicable to CSA directly, and/or to other agricultural or environmental efforts aimed at building ethical commerce, increasing consumer/producer interdependency, and initiating sustainable place-based economic development.

Since the origins of CSA in the United States around 1985, individual CSAs have identified and

promoted themselves both as unique localized operations and as part of a larger movement and brand. They engage in cooperation and occasional competition with other CSAs, but with an overall effect of collectively strengthening and validating the CSA model and name. Counter to the tightly controlled top-down branding campaigns of larger corporations, the branding of CSA has been a largely independent, unorganized, non-unified process conducted by countless CSA participants in a variety of settings.

To better understand the process of identity making and CSA branding, it is useful first to acknowledge how branding is very much tied to the creation of accompanying narratives and myths (Holt, 2004). I define myth for this purpose as a story that “embodies and provides an explanation or justification for something” and also generates “a popular conception of a person or thing which exaggerates or idealizes the truth” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2003). At the forefront of CSA branding is an alluring mythology that has been constructed consciously and unconsciously by CSA participants and observers. This mythology depicts CSA as ecologically and economically sustainable, and presents CSA as a symbolic and “enchanted” place and space that produces superior food, dignifies farmers, preserves farmland, and builds an enlightened and engaged community of supportive eaters (Farnsworth, Thompson, Drury, & Warner, 1996, p. 91; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007).

To a lesser extent, CSA also engages in a form of “anti-branding,” a force that draws strength and resilience from activist sentiments (Schnell, 2007, p. 562) to position the brand as a necessary alternative. As an anti-brand, CSA has no singular logo, trademark or central control, and is viewed as a vital, perhaps even incorruptible rebellion *against* industrial agriculture, exploitive supply chains, processed food and passive consumerism. CSA the anti-brand cannot be encapsulated or privately owned. It *rejects* hierarchical control and fixed meanings. Thus, the positive branding mythologies of CSA intertwine with critical anti-branding sentiments. This results in CSA embodying a variety of dynamic and hopeful possibilities, including “a decommodification of food *and* land” (Guthman, 2004a, p. 185) in response to the

unhealthy and unjust conditions created by industrial agribusiness.

Applied to CSA, Holt’s ideas about “iconic brands” and their narratives or mythologies suggest a powerfully transformative pathway for CSA:

Iconic brands function like cultural activists, encouraging people to think differently about change. These brands don’t simply evoke benefits, personalities, or emotions. Rather, their myths prod people to reconsider accepted ideas about themselves. (Holt, 2004, p. 9)

The research presented here identifies CSA as operating on a thin line. In one aspect, CSA does “simply evoke benefits, personalities, [and] emotions.” But CSA has also prodded us to “reconsider accepted ideas” of ourselves. Today, the CSA identity-making process, its branding, is in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” phase. Its powerful myths both guide and restrict progress. CSA members (or shareholders) are reluctant to interrogate CSA too deeply, for fear of invalidating the brand mythology, and for the same reason farmers are often reluctant to reveal too much. But by building on and demanding more from their relationships, farmers and shareholders could deepen their conversations about CSA and influence its practices. Giving voice to this, CSA pioneer Jan Vander Tuin warns against complacency, stating that CSA participants need to confront and engage more boldly in larger issues of environmental degradation and economic inequity, while admitting that some of these “values are not in the culture yet” (personal communication, November 18, 2012). Complementing Vander Tuin’s point, another CSA pioneer, Traugher Groh, suggests that CSA progress could not have been achieved without a “higher ideal,” yet he also admits that is necessary to “explain this higher ideal and live it” (personal communication, January 2, 2103).

CSA has flourished in large part because of its elasticity regarding definition, philosophy, and operating methods. CSAs do not require certification or licensing and in general do not expect government support *or* oversight specific to operating as a CSA. Aside from early CSA pioneers who discussed the potential of CSA at great length

and who worked hard to promote the model in its first manifestations, the overall proliferation of CSA has been a decidedly organic and independent effort. Since the origins of CSA, a growing number of CSA collaborators have argued about and reaffirmed how CSA should work and why it is an invaluable alternative to industrial agriculture. In this paper I demonstrate how the branding of CSA has included some traditional practices but also has employed some radical departures from them, reflected in particular by the lack of centralized control and no singular CSA identity.

Methods and Approach

The initial data for this inquiry emerged as a by-product of qualitative field research I undertook at five CSAs in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts between September 2009 and November 2012. The idea of CSA branding did not guide the initial research, but rather grew out of it. The intent of the initial research was to explore the concept of “diverse economies” (Gibson-Graham, 2006) as exemplified by CSAs. My goal was to see how participation in CSA influenced economic perceptions and economic behaviors. My research revealed that CSA participants become more engaged in diverse economic activity as a result of their involvement with CSA. CSA provides a fertile opportunity for participants to barter, volunteer, share, donate, self-provision, initiate work-trades, and band together to pursue collective community-based land ownership. The five CSAs were selected to represent many facets of the CSA movement: large, small, old, new, rural, urban, horse-powered, mechanized, biodynamic, nonbiodynamic, associated with nonprofits, independently owned, or cooperative.

I conducted 40 in-depth interviews accompanied by participant observation. Some of the questions had to do with how participants discovered CSA, what about CSA attracted them, and what their actual experiences were, both positive and negative. Farmers allowed me to recruit in person at CSA distributions, which provided most of my member interview contacts. In addition, I sometimes selected research subjects through purposive snowball sampling (asking one interviewee to recommend another). I interviewed

all farmers at each of the five CSAs, and I interviewed at least one apprentice or assistant farmer at each CSA. In other cases, I selected interview subjects from acquaintances whom I knew were associated with these CSAs, and in a few cases I contacted individuals who were leading educational events at or had other connections to CSAs. Over a three-year period I also did extensive participant observation at these five CSAs during food distributions, volunteer workdays, educational workshops, board meetings, festivals, and many other events. I created an ethnography based on these interviews and participant observation.

As I analyzed and began coding this data, I began to notice the range of perceptions about what CSA is and what it symbolizes. I paid closer attention to how CSA was represented in discourse—from farmer to member, member to member, member to nonmember. I reviewed each CSAs website and noted the use of imagery, narratives, and the many updates and re-articulations about what CSA was intended to achieve. I also spoke informally to additional CSA members and CSA advocates. Everyone had a definition of CSA, definitions that demonstrated both uniformity and uniqueness. I examined how farmers “advertised” their CSAs to the public, and how CSA members engaged in recruiting new members, sharing positive stories about what they liked or critiques about how CSA fell short of their expectations.

The coding of my ethnographic data, a grounded theory-driven approach, became the impetus for a new point of inquiry: could the evolution and proliferation of the CSA be considered a form of branding? This led me to review branding literature, confirming its relevance to understanding the evolution of CSA. I also carefully reviewed academic and popular literature on CSA, and examined early CSA promotional materials, including a rare (now on YouTube) promotional video documentary, *It's Not Just About Vegetables*, made in 1986 by CSA pioneers (Friedman, McGruer, & Vander Tuin, 1986).

In some respects the branding of CSA includes strategies similar to typical corporate branding, but in other significant ways it is a conscious rejection of these strategies. After the initial field research in the Pioneer Valley was completed, I also engaged

in additional participant observation at Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire, one of the first CSAs in the U.S. and subject of the influential book on CSA, *Farms of Tomorrow* (Groh & McFadden, 1990). Additional interviews were conducted with CSA “pioneers” Traugher Groh, a co-founder of Temple-Wilton; Jan Vander Tuin, a co-founder of Indian Line Farm, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts; and Perry Hart, the founder of an early CSA based in Santa Rosa, California. I also consulted with staff at the national Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources and the regional advocacy group Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) in western Massachusetts. Last, I conducted a short series of interviews with participants in emerging community supported enterprises based on the CSA model, including community supported fisheries, art programs, bakeries, and a community supported yoga program. These subjects talked about what the CSA brand meant to them, and described how and why they had modeled their initiatives on community supported agriculture. In total, I conducted 56 in-depth interviews with farmers, apprentices, members, and others associated with CSA or CSA-inspired enterprises.

How CSA Engages in Branding

Besides creating myths that define a brand, another fundamental role of branding involves differentiating a product from that of competitors (Palazzo & Basu, 2007); CSA has been carrying out this differentiation since its beginning. CSAs generally offer fresh, locally grown, non-uniform, organic produce (DeMuth, 1993). This produce is often distributed directly from the farm, a supportive local business, or via noncommercial settings such as members’ homes, schools, churches, or other community centers. Thus the CSA “product” stands in stark contrast to chemically grown and/or genetically modified food, trucked hundreds of miles and distributed via supermarket chains. One CSA member I interviewed expressed satisfaction knowing “no one was harmed in the production of this tomato,” and stated, “I don’t have to feel a little brightly packaged thing is yelling, ‘buy me, buy me.’”

One particularly interesting element of CSA

branding has been the focus on unpredictability as a revolutionary selling point. In CSA, diverse foods come out of a system that results in surplus quantities of some vegetables but lean quantities of others. As opposed to the consumption practices enabled by supermarkets and their supply chains, CSA members can only *hope for* rather than *count on* an abundance of tomatoes in late summer. The possibility for consumer pleasure and for what Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) refer to as “enchantment” have also become part of the brand, as CSA members experience a reconnecting to land and seasonality. These ecological and emotional narratives surrounding the operation of CSAs exist in counterpoint to “McDonaldized” visions of corporate rationalization, predictability, and control (Ritzer, 2008) in which producers and consumers conspire to celebrate uniformity. However, despite consumer enchantment and the stimulating surprises of seasonality, at the same time these deeply ingrained and ever-increasing social expectations of choice and instant gratification also put pressure on CSA farmers to pursue greater efficiency, predictability, and control.

In addition to product differentiation, the strategic naming of “community supported agriculture” has played a significant role in the shaping of CSA as a model, a movement, and a brand. In his book *Brands* (2006), Danesi writes that humans claim specificity, individuality, and identity through naming themselves and myriad other elements of the world. When products or services are named, they become in a sense “humanized.” Thus, the naming or branding process involves blending character attributes, virtues, aspirations, and relationships. Corporate branding often involves a fastidious and calculated naming process in order to optimize brand identity. Although the overall branding of CSA has been a loose process, the creation of its name indicates an attempt by CSA founders to achieve a very strategic positive association. Regarding the naming of CSA, prominent CSA pioneer and Indian Line Farm co-founder Robyn Van En wrote, “Please know that every word was chosen after lengthy consideration” (Henderson & Van En, 2007, p. xiv). She and the other CSA pioneers at Indian Line Farm spent hours debating and carefully

crafting the initial language and principles that would describe and guide the replication of CSA (Henderson & Van En, 2007). Reflecting on the syntax of “community supported agriculture,” she commented, “we knew it was a mouthful and doesn’t fit easily into conversation or text, but to this day I can’t think of a better way to name what it’s all about” (Henderson & Van En, 2007, p. xiv). Van En also claimed she was “adamant” about using the word “agriculture” rather than “farms,” because she “didn’t want to exclude similar initiatives from taking place on a corner lot in downtown Boston” (Henderson & Van En, 2007, p. xiv).

This sense that CSA could grow in new ways and forms, through new participant collaborations, was expressed by many of its pioneers (Henderson & Van En, 2007). *It’s Not Just About Vegetables*, which provides a very early look at the Indian Line Farm CSA, closes with head gardener Hugh Radcliffe saying, “I see no reason why the general idea could not be realized in many locations, but each of them would have its own identity. Each would have its own particular character.” Following Radcliffe’s statement, another voice, the unseen narrator, furthers this notion: “In the years to come, community supported agriculture hopes to...help encourage the development of similar projects” (Friedman, McGruer, & Vander Tuin, 1986). As additional early CSA projects did sprout up, some called themselves similar names, such as “CSF” for “community supported farm” (Van En, 1992), and today some projects still choose to identify CSA differently, such as “community sustained agriculture” (Live Power, n.d., para. 4). However, the vast majority of projects identify themselves specifically as “community supported agriculture,” thus strengthening the recognition and power of this name.

Despite the initial strategic naming process, use of the terms “community supported agriculture” and “CSA” has remained free, untrademarked, and unrestricted. “Community supported agriculture” provides an essential identification tag, but it also brings forth larger notions about powerful relationships. Three-word identifications can carry strong implications, from “military-industrial complex” to “food not bombs.” The three words “community

supported agriculture” suggest a broader dynamic that is informed by a certain politics and worldview. While the words suggest positive relationships, it also hints at a larger project of cultural intervention, by implying that other forms of agriculture may *not* be community supported or community benefitting.

In this sense, the founding of CSA can be seen as an attempt to compress a much larger vision into a seed, ready for sowing and transplanting. The eventual products from that seed were intended to contribute to an alternative economic vision and practice. To help spread the concept of CSA, early advocates produced a variety of promotional materials: articles, books, and the aforementioned documentary film, which Van En considered “the best way to present the CSA concept” to an audience of potential new CSA initiators (Van En, 1992, p. 5). The authors of these resources repeatedly encouraged others to replicate CSA in their own contexts, providing detailed suggestions as to why and how to start a CSA, but they expressed no interest in franchising or controlling CSA offshoots. Thus a culture of autonomy was created, providing the freedom to adapt existing principles and practices and allowing the right for anyone to call their operation “CSA.” However, rather than cultivate a strictly maverick culture, these CSA “how-to” materials also encouraged a sense of camaraderie and collective resource sharing between CSAs, openly describing and referring to other CSA projects as valuable case studies (Friedman, McGruer, & Vander Tuin, 1986; Groh & McFadden, 1990, 1997; Henderson & Van En, 2007). While the first CSAs began autonomously, they did share some common influences, notably, connections to ideas developed and promoted by Rudolf Steiner. They adopted biodynamic farming practices and principles that promoted “organic practices,” envisioning the farm itself as a self-sustaining ecological “organism”; most enacted “associative economies” by creating interdependencies and risk-sharing between consumers/members and producers/farmers, and most formed relationships with nearby Steiner-inspired Waldorf schools or other “anthroposophic” institutions that became supportive collaborators (Friedman, McGruer, & Vander

Tuin, 1986; Groh & McFadden, 1990; Henderson & Van En, 2007).

Over time, new self-labeled CSA farms or farm collaborations both replicated aspects of the CSA concept or brand and reworked it. The independence with which CSA entrepreneurs could do so fueled the movement's growth and creativity. One long-time CSA farmer, Dan, whom I interviewed described the sense of optimism and reproducibility central to building the movement:

In a sense the entire CSA experience for people is about one other possibility. And the strength of this thing from a more grandiose standpoint has to do with the fact that...it can be sustainable year after year, then you have one example of something that happens—then people say, “Oh, that *can* happen. If that can happen, why couldn't you do that a hundred times?”

As the establishment and success of early CSAs encouraged others to adopt the concept, it proved to be a solidly replicable model. The promotional efforts of CSA pioneers and the enthusiasm they helped generate facilitated the social construction of CSA as a known entity—effectively, an established brand. By 2006, the number of CSAs in the U.S. was well over 1,000, according to the Robyn Van En Center for CSA Resources (C. Vosburgh, personal communication, March 2, 2011). The “buzz” and popularity of CSA was increasing. The CSA brand was strengthened through reputation building often performed by its own participants. This exemplifies a kind of “viral branding” in which a brand is able to “motivate the right consumers to advocate for the brand” (Holt, 2004, p. 14).

The broader process of CSA “cultural branding” aligned brand engagement—becoming a CSA member—with cultural affiliation and values. As one study noted, “CSA shareholders’ social objectives dominate their decision to join” (Farnsworth, Thompson, Drury, & Warner, 1996, p. 97); in other words, the motivation for becoming a CSA member can be not just getting farm-fresh foods but also being part of a like-minded community, one motivated to build a more

sustainable food system. Cultural branding also connects with the idea of brand loyalty. Several CSA participants I interviewed were members of several different CSAs simultaneously. More than being loyal to one particular CSA, they expressed loyalty to the CSA brand itself and the communities it helped form. They spoke of CSA as a desirable cultural alternative to supermarkets and even farmers markets, and were stimulated to try different versions of it. One member of multiple CSAs revealed the strong attraction of being part of a CSA:

If we were to move somewhere else tomorrow, it would be like “all right, we need to figure out what the good co-op is and what the good CSA is around here.” It would be like finding a new church. Like where is this element of community that is important?

Other interviewees reiterated this feeling, describing CSAs they belonged to in the past and mentioning that after relocating to new areas they had actively sought out new CSAs to join. This demonstrates that the broader CSA brand reputation can carry beyond a specific locale. As with any successful brand, CSA has its followers who continually seek it out as something known and desired—a trusted resource within changing territory.

An Iconic Brand

CSA can also be seen as an “iconic brand.” According to Holt, iconic brands have “distinctive and favorable associations, generate buzz, and they have core consumers with deep emotional attachments” (2004, p. 35). The following example of CSA as an iconic brand comes from my field research in western Massachusetts. The operators of several CSAs decided to collaborate on hosting a fundraising event to support local food pantries and land preservation efforts. Their first dance-party fundraiser was a success and became a popular annual event. Advertising for the event specifically highlighted the contributions of the local CSAs as the key sponsors and positioned CSA farmers, and, by association, their members, as cultural leaders; there were no large corporate

sponsors. This collaboration reveals the potential for CSA farmers to brand their projects through positive associations, garner attention, and act on the emotional and/or ethical attachments expressed by many of their members. This example also illustrates how CSA farmers can embrace and promote cooperative principles such as “cooperation amongst cooperatives,” and “concern for community” (International Co-operative Alliance, n.d.). In addition, most of the CSA farmers I studied also cooperated by occasionally combining with others’ crops to achieve more quantity and diversity, especially in off-season “winter shares.” One CSA received external produce from other farms when a severe storm destroyed much of its harvest. Explicitly practicing cooperative principles, one CSA I examined (Common Wealth CSA) was in fact a group of farms of various sizes that continually combined their produce to form shares that could be distributed at a single site. Such camaraderie and cooperation—or at least their possibilities—are solidly part of the CSA brand identity.

Holt also writes that “iconic brands” must be attentive to “cultural disruptions” (2004, p. 39), that after a brand’s mythic identity has formed it can be damaged or made irrelevant by cultural shifts. For example, cigarette sales have declined as cultural perceptions about smoking have become increasingly negative. Within the realms of agriculture and food, many cultural disruptions (some of which CSA itself has helped bring about) have generally strengthened CSA relevance to consumers, and contributed to its becoming a cultural icon and iconic brand. CSA is widely seen as a key symbol both in the disruption of industrialized food regimes and in the co-creation of a broad and swelling movement promoting fresh, diverse, organic foods, produced on small farms for local knowledgeable, engaged consumers. As an actual model operating in the real world, CSA inhabits a unique space as it is viewed as both established and yet also still emerging, a social institution in its own right that simultaneously serves as a vehicle for rebellion against other institutions.

It is important to note that CSA has proven over time its ability not just to make claims but to deliver on them, enabling CSA to gain authority.

As Holt explains,

successful brands develop reputations for telling a certain kind of story that addresses the identity desires of a particular constituency. In other words, iconic brands accrue two complementary assets: cultural authority and political authority. (2004, p. 211)

In the case of CSA, cultural authority has become a means to wield political authority. CSA resonates with people’s shared desires for a more ethical and sustainable food system. In addition to this, CSA wields some political authority by being, arguably, the flagship of the grassroots local organic food movement and by remaining independent of government control. While some CSA projects have received government support in the form of grants, loans, and extension services, the CSA brand or concept itself has not been co-opted or regulated by government. This is in contrast to the organic certification movement, which has seen its own organic standards threatened by the USDA and its fundamental principles partially co-opted by industry (Guthman, 2004b). In the U.S., CSA is not certified or controlled by any agency or nongovernmental organization (NGO) representing its “mission.” So, in essence, some of the cultural and political authority that the CSA brand holds is through its independence from the corporate realm and its freedom from rigid ideologies and imposed standards.

This largely unorganized proliferation of CSA is a counterpoint to typical notions of capitalist franchising and is a noteworthy departure from traditional branding strategy. The multitudinous efforts to explain, promote, and improve CSA are characterized by a continual environment of independence and have some similarities to the activities of the open source software movement, a “pragmatic methodology that promotes free distribution and access to an end product’s design and implementation details” (Open Source Ecology, 2015, “What is Open Source Permaculture?” para. 3). Kloppenberg (2010) has explored the notion of a “biological open-source” in examining the battle over seed ownership, and draws compelling connections between the need

Photo 1. Two Generations Examine Their CSA Farm Up-close in a Pick-Your-Own Field at Simple Gifts Farm



Photo by the author.

for smaller farmers to control and develop their own seed collections and the efforts of artists, musicians, writers, and other innovators to control and develop their own creative endeavors. Vital to this control is the capacity to remain free to share and build upon each other's work (Kloppenber, 2010). The feeling that CSA participants are also free to share and build on possibilities together has been inherent since the origins of CSA.

“CSA is...”: Examples of How Five Diverse CSAs Define and Brand Themselves

Despite lacking traditional economic building blocks such as hierarchical control, profit-seeking investors, efficiencies of scale, and subsidies, CSAs continue to proliferate. The lack of hierarchical control of CSA has become emblematic of the brand as represented by its continual redefining. While many CSA operators adopt core unifying concepts, they also embrace the opportunity to define CSA in their own spatial and cultural contexts. The following profiles represent these varied definitions from the five CSA enterprises I researched in western Massachusetts between 2009 and 2012.

Founded in 2006, Simple Gifts Farm is a relatively new suburban CSA in Amherst (<http://www.simplegiftsfarmcsa.com>). Operating on over 30 acres (12 ha) of community-owned and preserved farmland nestled among single-family

homes, it serves a very localized consumer community, as the farm is within two miles (3.2 km) of 10,000 residents (see Photo 1).

The farm hosts a variety of farm-related public workshops. Its website describes some of the basic multifaceted components of CSA; its definition of a CSA speaks of economic interdependency, local and seasonal production, and fostering more meaningful relationships between producer and consumer:

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a relationship that brings farmers and eaters closer together. Members have the opportunity to enjoy seasonal eating and a deeper connection to their food source, while helping local sustainable agriculture flourish. When you become a CSA member, you pay for a portion of the farm's expenses and receive a share of the harvest in return. (Simple Gifts Farm, n.d., para. 1)

Natural Roots CSA, founded in 2006, is in a remote and scenic riverside location in Conway, Massachusetts (<http://www.naturalroots.com>). The farmers utilize draft horses rather than tractors (see Photo 2).

The farm's website describes its CSA in place-specific terms, emphasizing consumer potential for becoming significant participants in this landscape:

Each distribution offers a great opportunity for connecting with friends and neighbors. Many families come and stay for hours. Kids love to climb the pine tree near the distribution barn, splash in the shallows of the river, watch the horses at work, and race to the berry patch together...The farm is a haven for wildlife, farm life, and human life as well. By becoming a shareholder you can help to preserve and enrich this treasured resource of

Photo 2. Visiting Farmer Apprentices Watch Draft-horse Plowing Demonstration at Natural Roots CSA



Photo by the author.

our community. (Natural Roots CSA, n.d., para. 4–5)

Founded in 1986, Brookfield Farm has a large membership (over 500) and is one of the oldest and most established CSAs in the U.S. (<http://www.brookfieldfarm.org>). It is located in a rural, though not remote, location and serves members in and around Amherst as well as an urban contingent in the Boston metro area. Brookfield's farmers are paid employees of the Biodynamic Farmland Trust, a nonprofit that owns much of the farmland.

Its CSA definition is more extensive and seeks to explain both abstract concepts and concrete systems while also emphasizing the relationships that can be built between consumer, producer, and landscape (see Photo 3):

Our prices are based solely on the costs of production which are kept to a minimum since we deal directly with you. We are working to ensure that farms are economically sustainable. We pay our farmers a living wage and provide you with the highest quality vegetables available at the lowest price around. We accept SNAP payments. ...Become a shareholder in Brookfield Farm and help promote our local economy

and preserve local agriculture. Our farm provides a practical step towards realizing a vibrant and healthy local food system....

Brookfield Farm becomes more than just your source of food, it can truly become your family's farm. (Brookfield Farm, n.d., para. 5–7)

Two of the CSAs profiled used less explanatory formats to describe their CSA projects. The website of the cooperative, multifarm Common Wealth CSA (<http://www.farmfresh.org/food/farm.php?farm=1843>), founded in 1998, begins with a stated intention of what a cooperative structure can bring to the creation of social bonds:

Photo 3. Young Field Workers Volunteer for a Potato Harvest at Brookfield Farm



Photo by the author.

As farmers we seek to cooperate with each other and with shareholders to develop an alternative food system that embraces our interdependence and uses it as a tool for change. By providing healthy and affordable food for all people in our community, we hope to grow our common wealth. (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture, n.d., para. 3)

The 2012 version of the Common Wealth CSA webpage concluded by referencing lines from a folk song (Rosselson, 2011) that celebrates the True Levelers, a.k.a. the Diggers, a 17th-century radical group of English agrarians who opposed private property and sought to democratize land use on a grand scale:

“We come in peace,” they said, “to dig and sow./We come to work the lands in common/ And to make the waste ground grow./This earth divided we will make whole/So it will be a common treasury for all.” (Red Fire Farm n.d., para. 5)

On the one hand, the authors of this website

romantically implicate CSA as part of a monumental undertaking to change radically the praxis of ownership and private enterprise. On the other hand, they succinctly describe the practical intentions of this collaborative CSA that has brought together both large-scale and microscale farmers in a nonhierarchical system (see Photo 4). By blending statements about communal agriculture 350 years ago with more contemporary notions of collective enterprise, Common Wealth CSA positions CSA within a larger historical context and links it to ongoing political and cultural movements.

The Pioneer Valley Heritage Grain CSA, founded in 2009, uses several growers and production sites to offer members shares of locally grown whole grains and dried beans (<http://www.localgrain.org>). The CSA operators have made a strong effort to educate and engage their members in opportunities local grain production offers by hosting meet-your-farmer events, where attendees can participate in grain cleaning and grinding (see Photo 5).

They often describe their CSA using highly personal and seasonally based narratives in a blog format:

Photo 4. Common Wealth CSA is a Collaborative of Several Farms, Rather Than a Single Producer, So Distribution Takes Place at a Central Urban Location



Photo by the author.

Between this weekend’s distribution and the previous one, we moved *Ten Thousand Pounds* of local, organically grown grains into the eager hands of our CSA members. There were over 200 people in my living room and kitchen Saturday afternoon scooping their shares, there were five fantastic folks helping us make it all possible, and one sweet toddler happily demonstrating the new electric mill by her daddy’s side. We’re a little tired, but very,

very happy. (Pioneer Valley Heritage Grain CSA, 2010, para. 1)

As these examples demonstrate, CSA operators choose to define CSA using their own terms, concepts, references, impressions and formats. Emphasizing difference, unique relationships, specific landscapes and producer/consumer interaction, CSAs draw on diverse expressions to collectively enact core values. These definitions tell stories about CSA: some rooted in daily experience, some imbued with mythic dimensions.

Interrogating CSA Mythologies: Farmer Finances and What a Real CSA Is

Farmers and shareholders have co-created the CSA brand, promoted the model, and built its popularity. Together, CSA farmers and members have also turned many of the myths into functioning realities that form the foundation of a new food system that is ethically and ecologically driven. Despite this, there's a rub. Within this co-creation, CSA shareholders are attracted to CSA as a form of ethical consumption, and assume that the CSA structure adequately addresses farmer financial needs. However, for farmers, CSA represents an ideal that generally has not delivered economic security. According to a 2001 national survey of CSA farmers, "More than 68 percent were unsatisfied with their financial security (health insurance, retirement, etc.); 32 percent of those respondents were very unsatisfied"; yet the survey found "over 57 percent of the farmers were satisfied with their stress level and quality of life" (Lass, Bevis, Stevenson, Hendrickson, & Ruhf, 2003, p. 27). Echoing the survey's findings, Pilgeram's ethnographic study of

alternative food production bears the unsettling title, "The Only Thing That Isn't Sustainable Is...the Farmer." She suggests, "we need to interrogate a system that uses the personal beliefs and ideologies of sustainable-agriculture farmers to justify the personal sacrifices they make" (Pilgeram, 2011, p. 391). This critique is repeated by Galt, who identifies and problematizes CSA's "moral economy" as a "double-edged sword" that couples the allegiance farmers feel to the values of the CSA model with their tendency towards self-exploitation and low wages (Galt, 2013). With regards to the economic mythologies that the CSA brand expresses, there is reluctance towards transparency, even though early CSA advocates identified this as a crucial element (Bloom, 2008). When I inquired of one CSA farmer whether they ever made yearly financial reports available to members, I was told that no members had ever asked to see them and neither had the farmers felt inclined to share them.

CSA farmers appreciate the model and want to foreground the image and ideals of CSA, yet are reluctant to share some of its dysfunctional realities. Pivotal questions emerge from this condition: "So what is CSA—*really*?" and "how can CSA

Photo 5. Grain Share Distribution Day at Pioneer Valley Heritage Grain CSA



Photo by the author.

evolve to fulfill some of its deeper original aspirations?” Critique and argument about what an authentic CSA is or is not have been around since the beginning of the movement and continue today. The rise in some food distributors (non-farmers) identifying themselves as CSAs and being labeled and counted as CSAs bothers some who feel these are “fake CSAs.” Today, some of this debate takes place via Internet blogs and readers’ comments (McFadden, 2015). Comments such as “resellers posing as farmers is a disgrace” (Allanballiett, 2012, para. 4) raise the question of whether CSA in its success as a “brand” may in fact be vulnerable to being co-opted or exploited. Other critiques of “fake” CSAs complain that middle-management entrepreneurs are calling their enterprises CSAs and “pay farmers wholesale prices yet charge full retail...These services are using the positive image of CSA while simultaneously competing with real CSA farms” (Paul, 2012). Critics feel that these operations are “confusing to consumers” and can “create falsely high expectations of what a CSA farm can produce” (Paul, 2012). The removal of a broader sense of ethics about land and sustainability also bother the critics of fake CSAs. Farmer Allan Balliet says: “I’m seeing way too much tolerance in the Food Movement for food writers who want to re-brand this important social movement as ‘Just about Food’...there are few food programs that have the potential to do as much for the Future of Food as does the *original* [emphasis added] grass root CSA movement” (quoted in Nickel-Kailing, 2012, para. 3, 5). Despite these critiques, since there is no official definition of what a CSA is and how it must operate, the question of authenticity remains subjective and contested.

Consulting the Perspectives of CSA Pioneers

To investigate CSA as a movement, a model, and a brand, I consulted a variety of data sources. In-depth interviews with two CSA co-founders, Jan Vander Tuin and Traugher Groh, provided particularly extensive views into the past as well as insights into the future of CSA. Early in my conversation with Vander Tuin, he said, “One of the biggest tragedies of life to me is that there isn’t enough time to explain things.” He went on to

discuss the significant initial resistance he encountered trying to describe and promote the CSA concept in the 1980s, even among some biodynamic farmers he assumed would readily embrace the idea. Discussing various examples, he reflected that his experience trying to explain the alternative nature of CSA had been neither easy nor rapid. He echoed the aforementioned observations about how the schism between CSA ideology and practice had resulted in shortcomings—especially financial ones. He regarded transparency as a particular and enduring sticking point for CSA. That a CSA farmer should earn a living comparable to the peers in his or her community had been a crucial original goal he and other early CSA advocates were passionate about. He said that CSA has become just one way that many farms sell and distribute their produce, and that “most CSAs are mixing systems—they lack the confidence to present the true costs of production and to stand by these costs as having to get met.” He wondered, “How do you inspire confidence?” Though deeply proud of the proliferation and many diverse successes of CSA, he pointedly referred to vital work still to be undertaken to create more economic equity and stronger environmental practices, saying, “For what it’s worth, the CSA thing is not done and established by any means.”

Conversing with Groh produced several statements kindred to those of Vander Tuin. He expressed excitement about the expansion of CSA and especially its cultivation of young enthusiastic farmers coming out of countless CSA apprenticeship programs. Temple-Wilton Community Farm’s decades of survival as a highly principled, radically alternative enterprise is a monumental achievement. As a longtime proponent of the self-sufficient biodynamic farm organism, Groh’s books and presentations have associated CSA identity with sustainability and localism in the deepest ways, arguing that a farm’s inputs should be derived on-site and that a farm’s output should be consumed locally. He admitted, however, that this CSA vision has not yet been fully realized, even at one of the oldest continually operating CSAs in the country, which he helped establish: “We have basic problems at Temple-Wilton, we

have no grain [produced on-site to feed the cows] so we are not an organism, we have to realize that.” He added later that, despite the visionary narratives that CSA participants use to inspire themselves, “one has to be careful with these things that one doesn’t get romantic.”

Some interviewees I spoke with were involved in pioneering new versions of CSA, beyond the realms of farms and food. Programs described as “community supported art,” based on community supported agriculture, are being replicated in a variety of geographic and cultural settings. In CSArt, local artists rather than farmers produce shares of a creative harvest. One CSArt organizer I spoke with who worked at a regional arts advocacy organization in the Midwest told me how the local food movement had kept recurring in conversations among peers about how to better serve their community of artists. “We should do something like a CSA,” they mused. This organizer said that she “had been a CSA member for several years at a variety of different farms” and said that this experience made CSArt seem like an ideal concept that was ready to be transplanted into another realm. “That was the most important decision we made...to not try to think we should improve on it or make it different or even call it something different.” The initial project was an immediate success and led her to help other groups start dozens more CSArt programs around the U.S. One of the most important recommendations she made to new organizers was that they also refer to their programs as “community supported art” and make use of the popular and positive associations of the community supported agriculture brand. A variety of other fledgling community supported enterprises (CSEs), such as community supported fisheries, restaurants, breweries, and bakeries, are also making use of CSA’s reputable identity and cultural clout. The ethical foundations and practical applications of these CSEs and their efforts to attract new members will help further enrich our understanding of the potential of the CSA/CSE brand and aid us in assessing whether these new initiatives are strengthening or weakening fundamental CSA ideals.

Possible Actions and Applications:

A Discussion of CSA Practices

With a more visible and more critical acknowledgment of what CSA has and has not accomplished, CSA participants could generate a variety of new “to do” lists to help guide future practices. After considering the data represented in this paper, I assert that the independent character of CSA participants and their agency in creating and shaping CSA has been a strength—making CSA more replicable, adaptable, and attractive. Anyone can “own” and contribute to CSA, and thus it is a powerfully democratic and cooperative endeavor. The collectivity that CSA demonstrates has also been a strength, as participants of different CSAs learn from, partner with, and often promote each other. These dynamics offer examples that differ from long-held notions of the need for hierarchy and competition in business. In this way, CSA still offers a highly compelling pathway to rethink not only agriculture but ideas about our societies, our economies, and ourselves as well.

Instead of codifying or giving strict definition to what is a “real” CSA, I suggest that more CSA producers could adopt voluntary new practices of disclosure, a simple concept I will refer to as “Open Book CSA.” This would allow any project calling itself a CSA to list its practices in a more tangible way as opposed to the softer, more vague statements (i.e., “myths”) commonly expressed via their branding language. Open Book CSA disclosures would aid consumers, farmers and others in evaluating for themselves whether this is a project they wanted to participate in, promote, emulate, or collaborate with. Open Book CSA could be implemented, for example, by a CSA producer providing a “How This CSA Operates” summary on its website and listing some fundamental information:

- **“Where does the food come from?”** An explanation of where the produce in the share comes from, mentioning each source and stating if the majority comes from a single farm.
- **“Where does the money go?”** A confirmation that the recipient of the CSA membership fee is actually a farmer, not a wholesaler or middleman.

- **“How much do the farmers make?”** An estimation of farmer (and farmworker and apprentice) compensation (annual net income, wages, or salary) derived from the CSA, either projected or based on the previous annual amount. This would be a bold but necessary disclosure of information. Presenting it would increase the visibility of the farmer’s economic condition—a potentially intimate and vulnerable self-expression of economic status, often not fully known to members.

Some CSAs already provide the type of information that I propose for Open Book CSA. Hawthorne Valley Farm’s “Fast Facts & FAQ” (n.d.) provides basic information on farm and farmer income and extensive information on growing practices. It appears that older, more established CSAs such as Brookfield Community Farm, Live Power Community Farm, Peacework Organic CSA, and Terra Firma may be more comfortable with or committed to doing the same. For years, Temple-Wilton Community Farm has shared in-depth financial information with its members in person at large annual shareholder meetings, which farmers and members feel has helped them form especially close bonds and weather difficult financial periods. Here the operating budget is presented to the members who are then asked to make share “pledges” of varying amounts that will collectively cover the full budget. This process rejects any notion of market pricing and instead directly engages members to meet the true costs of production by negotiating among themselves. Were such practices adopted by more CSAs, a culture of greater transparency could be cultivated and become a more pronounced characteristic of the brand. In addition, CSAs practicing Open Book transparency could marshal possibilities for clarifying to the public what the true costs of production actually are. As one farmer told me in the context of why he did not offer work trades to his CSA members, “Most people overvalue their labor, and they undervalue how much food should cost.” If CSA farmers and members could come to know each other better and change such fundamental misperceptions, this could fortify efforts to

provide farmworkers with higher incomes and increase support for conserving affordable agricultural lands.

The branding, evolution, and growth of CSA provide an invaluable case study for academics and activists interested in social movements, ethical enterprises, and community development projects. For those who wish to emulate the fundamental processes of CSA development and apply it to new projects, here is a rudimentary template in three phases:

- **First phase:** Careful making and naming of a bold, visionary strategic plan that balances hopeful desires for something better with insightful critiques about what is not working. This step makes use of unifying concepts, but anticipates the vital energy inherent in allowing participants independence and autonomy.
- **Second phase:** “Letting go” and proliferation phase, in which the effort can be practiced, democratized, shared, and adapted, but not “owned” or centrally controlled.
- **Third phase:** Willingness and commitment to revisit the concepts and mythologies created from the prior processes, to assess them, problem solve, and make new goals and plans accordingly.

Researchers and social innovators alike should carefully consider the branding process of CSA and its unique practices and expressions. Though not an unequivocal success, the branding of CSA presents a radical departure from many traditional hierarchical attempts simply to guide the will of the populace and render them passive.


Conclusion

This examination identifies CSA as a brand, replete with name recognition, a differentiated product, cultural symbolism, and some political clout. The overall identity of CSA matches Holt’s qualifications of an “iconic brand” (2004) by challenging its followers to reconsider accepted modes of thinking and being, by creating myths that powerfully address both cultural anxieties and desires, and by

embodying those myths over time. This paper shows that the process of branding CSA has been a largely independent and open-source endeavor, with pioneers and subsequent participants rejecting hierarchical control of the brand and instead prioritizing localized consumer/producer interdependence and collaboration. This is in stark contrast with the globalized visions and methodologies practiced and promoted by industrial agriculture and its food production partners. The multistakeholder branding of CSA is also reflected by the lack of a CSA headquarters or profit center, and by the absence of certification, trademark, or single identifying logo.

CSA has brought forth a passionate vision for a participant-controlled, multifaceted alternative to industrial farming and the market economy. In practice, CSA has indeed helped cultivate a powerful new engagement with food systems that prioritizes social and environmental ethics. CSA has also been a catalyst and a practice space for increasing diverse alternative economic activity—a place for participants to experiment with noncapitalist or hybrid-capitalist ideas. However, as CSA is replicated and adapted again and again, will the powerful visions that have driven its continued growth be more fully realized or gradually diluted? Further research and discussion should ask: How can CSAs most successfully continue to connect producers and consumers to cultivate trust? How can CSAs provide more clarity about the relationships and commitments necessary for sustainable production and consumption? Perhaps most important, how can farmers use their access to members to communicate their financial needs more openly and confidently, and work toward earning higher incomes? (The wider adoption of Open Book CSA-style transparency is certainly one possibility here.) Especially interesting to watch will be the farm apprentices who will become the next generation of CSA farmers and members. How will they restate or reshape the brand?

CSA has been branded through a variety of activities undertaken collectively. In addition to typical branding approaches, the CSA brand has been strengthened by an unusual complementary force that draws on the more politicized

associations of CSA as a kind of anti-brand symbol, a rebuttal to the leaders of agribusiness and to corporate food processors and distributors. While a proliferation of “fake” CSAs—distributors posing as farms—might detract from the CSA movement, I feel strongly that a centralized attempt to define, standardize, regulate, or otherwise police CSA would cause serious harm by shifting collective ownership and vision away from the thousands of participants who have infused CSA with a vibrant blend of individual and cooperative values. As Muniz and O’Guinn state, “Brand communities are participants in the brand’s larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand’s ultimate legacy” (2001, p. 412). The agency with which CSA participants can and have shaped the brand has been and will continue to be a powerful opportunity. With this in mind, the responsibility for strengthening the ideals and outcomes of CSA lies with its participants, who must call themselves to action and resolve to embrace a deeper commitment to transparency and ethical interdependence. Rather than remain too passive, and accept CSA myths as promised and fixed, CSA producers and consumers could respectfully inform and push each other to realize their most ambitious collective visions. 

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