

# Know Thy



## A trend toward buying locally-grown food brings out the best in local farms

*Story and photos by Hannah Miller*

**W**hen Laura Benoit opens the bag of produce she gets regularly from Laughing Owl Farm, she never knows what delights she'll find inside. She retrieves her bag at the Charlotte Tailgate Farmers Market on West Park Avenue, which is the designated drop-off point for Laughing Owl Farm, located in Stanly County

"It's like Christmas every week," she says. Laura is a baker in Charlotte who is on her second year of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) membership. She says she looks forward each week to getting "all sorts of great, awesome things. Super-duper-delicious garlic, lettuces, spinach. I get eggs. I love his eggs."

Laura Benoit is one of the hundreds of North Carolinians who, in essence, have become partners with their region's farmers by signing up as members of the farms' CSA co-ops. They pay a set fee in advance to share in the farm's bounty over a certain number of weeks. Owner Dean Mullis of Laughing Owl, whose CSA season runs May-October, says, "It gives us working capital in the spring when we're planting crops." It enables Laughing Owl, he says, "to get started, order seeds, order drip irrigation lines." Laughing Owl's fee is \$600, \$690 if members opt for a dozen eggs weekly from free-range hens.

The risks of farming are shared along with the bounty as customers receive what's in season. "We're at the mercy of Mother Nature," says Tony Phillips, operations manager at Poplar Ridge Farm in Union County. If there's not enough spinach to go around to all the CSA members, he'll give them a mix, filling out their allotted bushel with Bibb lettuce or green lettuce.

"The amount varies in weight and volume and value depending on the time of year," explains Sammy Koenigsberg, who with his wife Melinda runs New Town Farms in Union County. "The value works out over the whole season." As for the weekly amount, "A bushel is probably a good average," he says.

### The popularity of local food

CSAs, which sprang up in Japan and Europe before appearing in the U.S., have grown along with the nationwide trend

toward locally-grown, often organic food. [Localharvest.com](http://Localharvest.com), a national Web site devoted to locally grown and organic agriculture, reported some 50 in 1990. Now, there are more than that in North Carolina alone. The Pittsboro-based Carolina Farm Stewardship Association's online guide to local and organic farms lists 56, up from 41 in 2006.

The demand is far outstripping the number of CSAs. Kathleen Purvis, the food editor of *The Charlotte Observer*, recently got up early to buy eggs from one farmer at a farmers market, only to find his supply limited because the rest was reserved for his CSA customers. "Want to sign up to be on that CSA, too?" she asked in an *Observer* column. "Too bad, Bertha—get in line."

When New Town Farms, one of North Carolina's CSA pioneers, had four openings this year, it filled them from a waiting list of more than 75 people.

Elizabeth Gibbs of Firefly Farm in Celo advises people who want to join a CSA to do it at the end of the previous year's growing season. Even though her farm added 16 new slots this year, she soon found herself saying all too often, "I'm sorry. We're filled."

### Electric co-ops are "partners"

An unseen partner of the farms as they meet the growing CSA demand are the electric co-ops in their areas. Produce is cooled by air-conditioning units and refrigerated coolers during North Carolina's sweltering summers. Irrigation lines are powered by pumps. And for some farmers, electricity runs the golf carts and scooters used to navigate their acreage.

At Laughing Owl, New Town and Poplar Ridge, the co-op is Union Power Cooperative in Monroe. French Broad Electric Membership in Marshall serves Firefly Farm.

At New Town, a golf cart and well pump run on electricity from Union Power. "Today," says Koenigsberg, "we have everything we picked in a room of the barn with an air conditioning unit." At Firefly, "we start our peppers and tomatoes early" before the summer sun can warm them, says Gibbs. Electricity offers both heat and light for germination in their greenhouse.

At Firefly, Laughing Owl and Poplar Ridge, coolers keep

the produce fresh until it can be dropped off or picked up. “Broccoli must be on ice and refrigerated,” notes Marianne Battistone, who with her husband, Philip Norwood, runs Poplar Ridge. Poplar Ridge offers a choice of CSAs: the produce CSA, and also a cut-flower CSA, with the flowers grown on the farm and chilled, along with the produce, in an 8 by 10-foot refrigerated unit. The farm also offers poultry, eggs and pork on a CSA basis. They’re raised by other farmers and kept cool in Poplar Ridge’s unit.

“I’m turning this whole farm electric,” Battistone vowed as she watched gas prices rise earlier this year. At \$4 per gallon, she said, gas and diesel for the farm would cost her \$150 a week. “If you hope to break even, the last thing you need is to spend \$150 a week in gas.”

She already had taken steps. Employees park their vehicles and make their way across the farm on bicycles. She herself rides a battery-powered scooter, and she planned to order another. An ATV that pulls a trailer to haul manure to Poplar Ridge’s compost heap would be traded in for two electric carts, she said.

Battistone, who grows for 70 CSA

customers, had high praise for Union Power. “When we have problems they come fast,” she said. She has the direct phone numbers of employees to call in case of emergencies, she said. “We know them by name. You can’t imagine how important that is to me.”

### Connecting people and food

Marianne Battistone’s CSA grew out of her own interest in health and nutrition. A former dancer and longtime fitness consultant, she commutes to New York as a contributing editor on health and fitness at *Self* magazine. She and her husband, Philip Norwood, first put in eight beds of plants to feed themselves healthfully, then decided to sell their produce, grown without synthetic chemicals, directly through a CSA.


It’s that interest in healthy eating that’s driving the current popularity of CSAs, says Sammy Koenigsberg, whose farm is certified organic. “People in CSAs know more about where their food comes from than even people who shop with us at the farmers market,” he says. “They’ve been to the farm.” New Town requires new members to take a farm tour. Before logistics prevented it, some members worked in the fields in exchange for a discount.

Michelle Leek, a CSA member of Laughing Owl Farm, works one day a week in the field on the farm’s grounds near Richfield in northern Stanly County. The rest of the week she spends in sales with Grateful Growers Farm, a specialist in naturally grown poultry and pork located in Denver, N.C. At Laughing Owl, she says, “I weed and prune. And play with the geese.”

Connecting consumers with the source of their food was one of the reasons the Koenigsbergs pioneered their CSA back in 1990. “If people knew their food came from the soil, they’d care more about the soil,” says Koenigsberg. That disconnection, he believes, is behind many of the problems that beset the environment. Believing that CSAs have a communications role, he sends out a weekly newsletter to members. It touches on agricultural issues but also educates in another way, familiarizing people with foods they’ve never seen before. Being small, the farms that supply CSAs can afford to experiment, and the gourmet restaurants that many of them supply often demand it.

Koenigsberg grows 80 to 90 different things. When a CSA member opens a box, he or she may find kohlrabi, Koenigsberg says, “or a weird potato. Fennel.”

At the Tailgate market, Michelle Leek was picking up, among other things, long fronds called garlic scapes, which Dean Mullis explained were the top part of the garlic plant, used in salads.

And Laura Benoit confessed that her weekly grab-bag of goodies from Laughing Owl is putting a new taste in her life—radishes. “They’re growing on me slowly,” she admitted. 

*Hannah Miller is a Carolina Country contributing writer who lives in Charlotte.*

*Far left: T.J. Rohrer, employee of Poplar Ridge Farm in Union County, carries broccoli from the walk-in cooler powered by Union Power Cooperative.*

*Above left: Poplar Ridge CSA members received a box of collards and bok choy brightened with marigolds.*

*Lower left: At the Charlotte Tailgate Farmers Market, Ed Globowski, a member of Laughing Owl Farm’s CSA, picks up a share that he splits with another member.*

