

Community-supported agriculture at Jonai Farms & Meatsmiths

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My interest in [community-supported agriculture](#) started in early 2000 as an eater in search of local, organic vegetables for my dear little family of three, soon to be pregnant with the fourth of ultimately five Jonai. We were living in Santa Cruz, California, pursuing the granola, earth-mama lifestyle so prevalent in that part of the world in spite of the exorbitant cost of living. Living on just \$35,000 per annum with a rent of \$1600 per month, we didn't have cash to spare.

I was a vegetarian at the time, which helped keep food costs down, but I was also determined to feed the little people I had grown inside my own body organic produce only. And so after many months of joyful shopping at Santa Cruz's excellent twice-weekly farmer's markets, we stumbled across the CSA farm run by the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC).

Even now, the UCSC CSA veggie box is a mere \$25/week, payable as \$560 in advance of the 22-week season. It was a struggle to find the money up front, but UCSC offers low-income households a few options to improve access, and we were able to pay in two instalments instead of one.

The bounty was incredible – a box of seasonal fruit and veg plucked from the farm each morning before collection time. Interacting with the student farmers and hearing about the harvest – successes & failures – was a highlight of the week, often helping us understand better what was and wasn't working in our own little garden a mile away from campus.

A decade later we found ourselves setting up [our own farm](#) in the central highlands of Victoria, Australia. From the beginning we were keen to run the farm as a CSA, but until we tested our supply of ethically-raised rare-breed pork and beef, we didn't feel confident asking people to commit. It seemed wrong to ask the community to share our risk when we weren't even sure what the risks were, and had no production data to know what our average litter sizes or carcass yields would be.

The first year of meat sales (second year on the farm) affirmed our caution in waiting to start the CSA. We had a lot to learn about farming and butchering, and were pleased with the way demand for our produce grew rather organically as supply grew, without placing undue pressure on us to produce more.

Halfway through that first year of selling meat, [we crowdfunded a \\$30,000 boning room](#) and I trained as a butcher while Stuart built it, and we see the crowdfunding as our first foray into community-supported agriculture, because that's just what it was. People pledged an up-front payment for a reward of fresh pork we delivered once we had a licensed boning room. And that's how it works – people take a risk with you and you deliver, and so we did.

The same month we got our licence for the boning room was also the month we launched our CSA. It was also just a few months before we reached peak production – an average of eight pigs and a side of beef per fortnight. We'd watched our land carefully over the previous two years as we went from our original single boar and five breeding sows until we reached two boars and 12 sows on our 69 acres in addition to an average of 18 cattle.

We have sufficient demand to grow more animals for meat, but our land would suffer, so we reached the limit set by our soil and climate. We'd set out to be an ethically-viable no-growth model, and two years in, we found the limit of our start-up growth. It also just happens to be a very full and fulfilling schedule, and the workload, while sometimes quite intense, is sustainable for a small family farm.

So with those three variables – taking over our supply chain with the boning room, reaching peak production, and launching the CSA – in January 2014 we went from running a small loss to making our first profit, and we've been profitable since.

The first month, we had eight subscribers, which gave us an assured income of just over \$12,000 for the year. Six months into the CSA, we had 25 members, and by the start of the second year our community had grown to 40, with about two-thirds based in Melbourne and one-third spread around our region. As we enter the third year, we have 74 members and a waiting list for Melbourne, with room for about 15 more members in the region.

In exchange for 6 or 12 months payment up front, or a monthly payment, subscribers get 3, 5, 6 or 10kg bags of pork only or mixed pork and beef cuts, including our range of smallgoods. The bags now may also contain pet treats, bone broths, air-dried muscles such as coppa, lonza and pancetta, and charcuterie such as our popular pâté de tête made from the heads.

The CSA currently guarantees us an income of just under \$100,000 out of a total revenue of approximately \$170,000 projected for 2015-16. The remainder is about \$50,000 in ad hoc sales in the region and through farm gate, and approximately \$20,000 from our

monthly workshops. Our profit margin is around 30%, giving us an income of around \$50,000 after all farm expenses are covered.

Our cost of living here is so low as we grow and barter for the majority of our food and live a low-consumption lifestyle that we find this income meets all our needs, and will actually increase slightly as we improve certain processes and eventually stop building new structures!

Aside from a secure income, there are too many benefits to the farmers and the eaters in community-supported agriculture to possibly quantify, but I'll mention a few. For us, getting to know our members, their preferences, and their appreciation for our efforts and the uncommonly delicious results is invaluable. The emails, texts, and photos on social media sharing how people have cooked our meat, or how their children will no longer eat any sausages but ours are salve to knuckle-weary farmers at the end of a day of what must otherwise be thankless toil for those working in a disconnected, windowless industrial boning room or cavernous sheds full of shrieking, stinking, miserable pigs.

Even the critical feedback - not enough meat on the ribs, too much fat on the bacon, uncertainty about the grey colour of our nitrite-free bacon - is so much more welcome from people with whom we have an ongoing and genuine relationship. This feedback has helped me improve my butchering skills as members have guided me with their desires, just as it has taught many of them that fat is delicious and nitrites are the only reason most bacon is lurid pink.

Logistically, running a CSA with bags of mixed cuts enables me to ensure every carcass is fully utilized, and makes packing day a much simpler exercise than when I was cutting and filling bags to custom requirements. And the standard CSA set box model teaches eaters to be better, more resourceful cooks attached to seasons and the reality of just 28 ribs and two tenderloins per pig. It also means automated repeating invoices, instead of endless documentation of weights after packing followed by 100 tailored invoices into the night before delivering 400kg of meat.

Having attended the [Urgenci: International Network for Community-Supported Agriculture](#) conference in China in November, we've come back full of ideas from our CSA farming comrades around the globe, including plans to share our budget with members (starting with sharing the financial data here right now!), and preparation to host a members-only Open Day on the farm, with butchery & cooking demos, music, and of course a long lunch of Jonai Farms pork and beef surrounded with organic bounty from other growers in our beautiful region.

At Jonai Farms & Meatsmiths, we say we don't need to scale up, we need to multiply. In our region and across Australia we see this happening rapidly, and we're delighted to be amongst at least half a dozen small-scale free-range pig farms within 100km of us. There's room for many more if our waiting list is anything to go by, and imagine a land re-populated with families caring for the land, sending our kids to the local schools, and re-creating vibrant rural communities. You won't get that with scale - quite the opposite in fact.

Community-supported agriculture comes from an ethics of connectedness, care, and solidarity. It ensures accountability at both the farmer and the eater end of the equation, provides a viable living for farmers, and helps everyone learn more about the hows and whys of food production. As we enter our third year of running our farm as a CSA, we'd like to thank our members - those who've been with us since the beginning and those recently arrived - we couldn't do this without you.

If you're interested in reading further about CSAs around the world, have a look at the [Urgenci](#) website, and especially the [Principles of Teikei](#), developed in Japan, the birthplace of CSAs in the 1970s.

Principles of Teikei

- Principle of mutual assistance
- Principle of accepting the produce
- Principle of mutual concession in the price decision
- Principle of deepening friendly relationships
- Principle of self-distribution
- Principle of democratic management
- Principle of learning among each group
- Principle of maintaining the appropriate group scale
- Principle of steady development