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## After All These Years, We Can Still Be Surprised

By Hana Newcomb

I always expect a few bumps in the road when we make the switch from the summer CSA to the fall. People who signed up in February can't remember what they ordered, new folks can't always remember what color bag they are supposed to take, and the deluge of leafy greens brings on a whole new round of questions. We expect this and we don't get ruffled.

But I have to say that we can still be surprised, even in our 12th season of packing CSA shares. Last Monday we got an e-mail from a new customer who finally decided to tell us that this was not working out for his family – life was too busy and they just hadn't been able to integrate the weekly vegetables into their schedule. This wasn't completely unheard of – but what took us aback was that he said they had thrown out "100%" of the first three bags of vegetables. He said it was "unconscionable" to waste all this food and he wanted to know how to cancel his subscription.

As it happened, we had already packed and loaded his share by the time he sent the message, and there wasn't time to confirm that

he truly did not want us to deliver his next bag. So we delivered it (but we really got on his bad side when we wrote to say we were leaving on delivery in 30 minutes and if we got a return message in time we would take the bag off the truck). Turns out he really didn't want those vegetables, and he was angry with us for bringing them after he had told us he couldn't use them. He immediately called his credit card company and began the process of getting a full refund. This is where we started to get ruffled.

We don't know the customer, but we can surmise that he was really hoping that he would be able to start eating locally grown, good food. Unfortunately, it didn't work out. And it seems obvious to me that he did not feel that we were in any kind of relationship. He had

not drunk the kool-aid in any way (or more accurately, he had not tasted the butternut). Before he signed up and paid lots of money, he did not take our warnings and admonitions to heart (the ones on our website under the headline: "Who Should NOT Join the CSA?") or he did not read them.

Should we create some kind of contract that customers have to read and sign? Would that have made a difference? It irks me that his first impulse was to turn to his credit card company to get all of his money back. That may not be a typical response, but is there something we could have done to avoid such an adversarial reaction?

Eventually we got it all straightened out, thanks to the host who spoke directly with our disgruntled customer and then got

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PHOTO BY JON GROISSER

Too bad he couldn't throw his food out the environmentally friendly way.

# Living, Breathing Sauerkraut

By Ellen Polishuk

Heinz Thomet, the farmer and owner of Next Step Produce, introduced me to the wonderful world of sauerkraut. Fresh sauerkraut. I had never met such a beast before Heinz came to live on my farm in 1996.

The difference between fresh sauerkraut and what we normally eat, which is canned or pasteurized, is just like the difference between a fresh green bean and a canned green bean. That's a big difference. While fresh is still sour, it is also crunchy and tangy and effervescent. That means it's a delicious snack food, or side dish for any meal. Now, for the nutritional difference, it's even more dramatic. Fresh sauerkraut is full of vitamins and minerals, AND all the beneficial bacteria, like those found in fresh live yogurt. Both of these foods are product of bacterial fermentation. The health benefits of these live foods are legendary.

Another amazing fact is that the sauerkraut is actually more nutritious than the raw cabbage itself. That's because the bacteria help make vitamin C during the fermentation process. Nothing good is lost, and more good things are added. Sounds like a no-brainer, eh?

So, to make sauerkraut you want to start with

ecologically grown cabbage, fresh from the farm, with the wrapper leaves still attached. You will use those bigger tougher leaves later to cover the cabbage in the crock. The basic recipe is simple: chopped cabbage and 1% salt by weight. That's it. You may chop or grate the cabbage depending on how fine a kraut you like. Then add the salt. Then put some of the mixture into your crock or bucket (clean clean clean!) and start crushing it with your hands (oww) or with a mallet or even a 2x4. The goal is to break open some of the cabbage cells so they leak and create cabbage water. Keep adding more raw cabbage as the crushing goes on. You want to end up with cabbage water covering the mash. That's what will keep the fermentation anaerobic (no oxygen present). Press the mash down down down, place the wrapper leaves over the mash, clean the sides of the crock, and then put a weighted plate on top of the whole thing to make sure the cabbage stays completely submerged. Put it in a room temperature space and start listening and sniffing.

Once the bacteria get started you will start to hear the crock "burp" as gases are released. You will also smell a krauty smell. When the burping has seriously subsided, most of the hard work for the bacteria is done. This could take between 4-10 days depending on the actual ambient temperature of the space. Now put the crock in a much cooler place – the refrigerator is fine. Now the "curing" begins. This is the last step in the fermentation and is important. You can eat it anytime along the way, but it is better not to disturb it much, as you may introduce unwanted bacteria. After 3-4 weeks, your kraut should be done and it's time to enjoy.

You may have noticed that we didn't inoculate with anything. That's because the proper bacteria already exist on the organic fresh cabbage. Way cool.

If all of this is just too much for you, then you can find fresh sauerkraut at your local co-op or natural food stores, in the refrigerated section. Give it a try and maybe next year you'll be ready to experiment at home with your own. Lots of info and pictures on the web.

I like this whole thing so much that it has become an annual tradition at my house to combine my November birthday with a communal kraut making extravaganza!



PHOTO BY JON GROISSER



### “Surprised,” continued from Page 1

to work on trying to find someone else who wanted to take over the vegetable share. As we learn over and over, a face to face conversation between two people was all it took to solve the problem. This is one downside to having so many CSA members who never meet us in person, never set foot on our farm, and probably never read the messages we send out.

We learned what it feels like to be treated like a

faceless corporation. It was so unexpected and bizarre that I was prepared to fight with the credit card company if it had issued the refund without asking for our side of the story. Thank goodness we aren't faceless and that our hosts out there can help us to connect with you faraway vegetable lovers.

There are no hard feelings on our part, except that those vegetables got thrown away – that still hurts.



PHOTOS BY BENJAMIN GROISSER

The PVF fleet is primarily made up of market trucks, golf carts, and station wagons from the 1980s.

## Driving Time

By David Giusti

We may be farmers working the land, but a surprising amount of our work actually involves driving vehicles to and fro. Four days a week, Monday through Thursday, two people go out on CSA deliveries from the Vienna farm. About three times a week someone drives from Vienna out to the Loudoun PVF (30 miles away) for the day, and of course there are the markets on the weekends. We pick up orders for the stand from as far away as Winchester, and occasionally one of us will drive to Heinz's farm (60 miles away), or Zach's farm (85 miles away) for a day of work.

Now, I realize that many of you spend this amount of time in your car every day on your commute, but we walk to work so this driving time can be a bit of a change of pace. Sure, I do like to simply sit and ponder sometimes, but there's ample opportunity for

pondering when we're in the field. So when in a vehicle, I like to take advantage of the radio. (Also, the heat and air conditioning.)

At PVF there are about six different vehicles I might drive around in, from the little white Volvo wagon to the big box truck, and each is of a different age and state of repair. And each contains a different radio. The box truck has a good bare-bones radio, but another van has a tape player too. Yet another van has a CD player, and the Volvo has a tape player but it doesn't work. Another van has a swanky new system that plays CDs AND has an auxiliary line in. For a long time I thought the old white van had a broken radio, until I discovered that it actually works.

As for what to listen to, I used to always take my chances with NPR – going out in the morning I am assured of good news coverage and interesting stories or at least Diane Rehm, but coming back can be at the mercy of the mid-day radio lineup. So now on a long trip I

try to bring my own music, which means that once I find out which vehicle I'll be taking, I go and check out the radio. It has a CD player? Bring a CD. A tape player? Tape adapter. Line in? Bring the cable and iPod. But like all new-fangled technology, sometimes there's a hitch and when something doesn't go as planned, the dependable radio is always there to back me up. Something interesting from NPR, a symphony or even a sonata on either of the classical stations, some pop music for a change of pace, or WTOP when avoiding traffic disaster. But mostly NPR. With luck I'll be heading home to Terry Gross. On Saturdays the market crew might get that parenting show before sunrise, and on the way back, opera from The Met. In past years if I left for Thursday's Annandale market on time, Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac would greet me just as I turned into the parking lot. That was a lovely way to start a market morning.

## Of All I've Learned, I Remember This the Best

By Becky Crouse

The past two years of farm life have taught or retaught me some important life lessons.

1. Be nice. Smile at people. Look them in the eye.

Mean it when you ask how they are and tell them to have a nice day. This is not just in customer service, but in being a human being.

2. People usually have good intentions. If they do something wrong, it's usually because they just had no idea and need help understanding so they will stop doing that really bad thing. Try to remember that they meant well and help them nicely.

3. It is a very good and beautiful thing to be surrounded by happy, strong, earnest, trustworthy, fun coworkers and community.

4. Physical strength and mental strength evolve in very different ways. But, improving one will help improve the other.

5. Flexibility is key—both in everyday situations and in your hamstrings.

6. Being outside all day on a rainy day, is way, way, way better than sitting at a desk wondering if it's raining.

7. If you're a farmer and you have dirt on your face, no one is going to tell you.

8. Clean fingernails are overrated.

9. Wear sunblock. Better yet, wear sunblock and long pants and long sleeves and a sun hat.

10. Sleep is very, very important.

11. Despite that you're constantly surrounded by all this food, you're still going to be scrambling to can or preserve it at the very end of the season.

12. It is a beautiful thing to be surprised by a bad day because you're just not used to having them anymore.

13. It's important to tell people how much and why you appreciate them. It's important to sometimes

hear those things too.

14. Successes are wonderful. Failures are lessons or challenges for next time.

15. Always, always, always ask if you're not sure.

16. Don't operate on autopilot. Especially when it comes to which bed of chard to pick.

17. Feed people. It's so easy and it makes them so happy.

18. The knowledge of the people around you is more powerful than the internet.

19. You can fit 14 crates of lettuce on my golf cart.

20. Stay in touch with the people closest to you. This will be very hard during high season, but the effort is so very worth it.

21. Challenge and be challenged by your coworkers. Friendly competition can improve speed like nothing else.

22. While some may scoff at your tote bag of tools and snacks, it can make the difference between completing a harvest before lunch and having a total breakdown.

23. Bedhead is fun.

24. Good rain gear and footwear are totally worth the money.

25. We all can do what we can do as we can do it. No one is better or worse. Different strengths and backgrounds make a very powerful team.

26. Farmers are educated people.



PHOTO BY JON GROISSER

Maria Camacho, perhaps our nicest and our most competitive stand worker (#1, #21)

*Of all you learn here remember this the best:  
Don't hurt each other and clean up your mess  
Take a nap everyday, wash before you eat  
Hold hands, stick together, look before you  
cross the street  
And remember the seed in the little paper cup:  
First the root goes down and then the plant  
grows up!*

-- John McCutcheon