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The Hierarchy of Consumers: From the Very Top to the Very Bottom

by Hana Newcomb

You will be glad to know that our CSA customers are at the very top of the totem pole, the first in line, week after week. We pick vegetables every day and we wash them and package them carefully – just for you. You get the best of what we have, every time. Sometimes we don't have enough of something super special (like tomatoes, right now) but as soon as we do, they are yours.

The next tier down, just a small step, is for our wonderful farmers market customers, but they get what is left after we have finished picking for the CSA. There is less variety in the market loads than there is in the CSA shares – but

of course the quality is still the same. Everything is handled just as carefully.

And our stand customers get food from our farms as well as other farms that grow conventional produce – like sweet corn and watermelons and peaches. Lots of beautiful local produce, but not the same as ours.

When we have big surpluses of vegetables that are not good enough to sell, we call the local food banks and they send out a truck to collect up the mountains of unwanted squash or cucumbers or even (alas) onions that have started to go bad.

So who else is there? There are the chickens! They get the vegetables that have returned

from market too wilted for humans. They love all the leafy greens and they eat a surprisingly wide variety of vegetables. They don't like green peppers or green beans or onions – unless they are cooked.

And the pigs (who are not here yet, but we hope to find some soon) eat basically the same menu as the chickens but in much higher volume. They are starving as soon as they finish eating the last pile of tomatoes and squash. And if it is in the form of leftovers from the kitchen, they will eat anything at all.

If we chop the chicken garbage up into little bits, we can feed it to the worms in my mother's worm bin. They love everything. They eat slowly but without stopping, it seems.

In the last few days, I have found the vegetable consumer who is both at the top and very close to the bottom of the hierarchy, in terms of access to fresh produce. It's the big, fat groundhog who gets first dibs on anything within 50 yards of his hole. Groundhogs will mow down every dandelion green and escarole head they encounter. I can always tell if there is an active groundhog nearby when I see that the tops of the bean plants have been methodically chewed off. They



Low man on the totem pole.

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Notes From the Farmer's Messy Desk: My Winding Path to PVF

by Stacey Carlberg

Hana mentioned to me that I never shared my complete story about how I arrived at Potomac Vegetable Farms. Casey and I have just started our fourth year as managers out at PVF West, so it seems like it's about time for me to share my path.

I am a Buckeye (from Ohio – if you're unfamiliar with that terminology). I attended Ohio State University and studied Ecology and Evolution. After I graduated college, I moved to Seattle to work for an organization called Heart of America Northwest as an advocate for nuclear waste clean-up at Hanford (WA). It was at this job that I learned to make nice-looking flyers, graphics and newsletters, which has come in handy on the farm for outreach and marketing at times. But, after a year, I decided I didn't want to think about nuclear waste every day. That was too depressing.

So, I took an AmeriCorps position at the Metrocenter YMCA in Seattle with the Earth Service Corps. I worked in 5 high schools to coordinate environmental service projects for students. (In Seattle, you have to do 60 hours of service to graduate high school.) I found that I really enjoyed organizing groups of young people to do dirty projects outdoors. This seems to be a lot of what I do now on the farm as well!

Working in the non-profit sector as an AmeriCorps volunteer meant I needed another job as well to foot the bills of city living. So, I picked up a part-time job at Touchstone Bakery in the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle (because I loved their raspberry croissants). It was here that I really had my first intro to cooking things in large batches, preparing soups, salads and sandwiches for the accompanying cafe. One day, when our delivery

came from Keany Produce, I thought "Hmm, I wonder where this food is really coming from." It was at a happy hour with a co-worker shortly afterwards that I declared, "I think I should go work on a farm." My co-baker, Pepper, immediately responded, "You should go to Waterpenny Farm in Rappahannock County, Virginia." (He was from Rappahannock and had picked LOTS of tomatoes at Waterpenny in previous summers.)

So, two months later, after being interviewed and hired, I packed up all my belongings into 7 cardboard boxes and a gigantic backpack and shipped them to Virginia. I told all my dearest friends and roommates that I would be back to Seattle in 9 months. This was February 2006.

Needless to say, the farming bug bit me. I was so pleased to work outdoors and enjoyed the hard physical labor, teamwork, and, even, competitiveness of the work. I always wanted to beat my boss, Eric, at any job. He would probably say that I never beat him. I would say I pulled a bed of plastic faster than him once. And, that's something you'd celebrate and remember if you were me.

I liked the work enough to want to stay a second season

at Waterpenny to take on more responsibilities to determine if I REALLY liked the work. It was during my second season on the farm that I saw how unpredictable farming can be and how drastically different two growing seasons on the same exact piece of land can be. And, it's also when I met Stephen Bradford, nephew of Hana and grandson of Hi.

It was June of 2007 when the Waterpennies noticed something strange happening on their farm and determined that a lot of their crops were contaminated with herbicides. An herbicide (2,4-D) had been sprayed on the hay that we were using as mulch all around the farm. Every time it rained more herbicide residue seeped into the soil to slowly kill the plants. It was devastating and unbelievable. Stephen arrived to make a documentary film about the farm – hoping to help educate others about the effect of these strong and readily used chemicals. He also did other jobs on the farm to be helpful in this stressful time. At some point during this time, he jokingly said "You are going to work at PVF one day." And, I laughed.



Touring With my Grandma in Provence

by Alissa Groisser

This spring, Alissa spent several months traveling abroad. She was joined for two weeks by her grandmother, Mariette Newcomb, and together they visited the south of France and Iceland. The following is adapted from Alissa's meticulously-kept travel blog.

2 Mai 2014

I don't know about your grandmother, but my grandma is a Master of Waiting. Any time I think it would be more efficient or easier or feasible to accomplish something by myself, Grandma is perfectly willing to sit and people-watch, read, or sketch -- for as long as it takes, without complaint. And she doesn't even have a watch! Her patience and unflappableness are unparalleled -- unlike any I've ever encountered. You know what it's like traveling with your child? Well, this is the opposite of that.

This is especially relevant because I left her at the hotel this morning while I set off to collect our rental car. When I arrived, they didn't have the car ready and took some time to find me a new one, then tried to sell me everything under the sun. So by the time I finally escaped and headed back to Grandma it had been much longer than I'd hoped. But there she sat in the center of the hotel dining room,



amidst the mops and overturned chairs, placidly reading.

We made a quick stop to pick up a road map at the Tourist Information Centre, then doubled back to go to the large grocery store outside of town. It turned out to be the largest grocery store I've ever seen outside of the United States, something on the order of a Wegmans. All those options sucked us in and before we knew it we'd been there an hour.

I made a few wrong turns, but we (Grandma) figured it out quickly and it didn't take long

to find the way to our first destination by car, L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. Sometimes called "the Venice of Provence," it is of course built on and around waterways. It's not anywhere near as precarious as Venice, but the rivers and canals do feature prominently in the infrastructure and aesthetic of the town in a way that most don't. We didn't actually stop here because parking was tough and we knew we'd be coming back (Sunday is market day). So we kept on rolling and followed signs for Fontaine de Vaucluse.



Fontaine de Vaucluse is a small town built around a mysterious spring whose water rushes forth out of the cliff wall. But before you get there, there's the Sorgue river to admire, the town to wander through, and a paper-making operation that hasn't changed much since the 13th century.

We were wandering along, following the people, not far from the spring and its magical exit from the cliff, when I looked at my watch and saw that it was 4:45 and we were supposed to meet our Airbnb host at 5:00 in a town I estimated to be 20 minutes away by car. I don't think Grandma's moved so quickly in years. We made it back through town in ten minutes flat, a fraction of the time it had taken us on the way in. Jumped in the car, hoped not to run into any police cars as we ignored the speed limit. And, fortunately, my estimate had been pessimistic. We made no wrong turns, and in the end we were only eight minutes late.

We followed the nice British lady out of town and down a long skinny road, through freshly-tilled and planted fields (with what, we couldn't tell), wincing at every bump as we experienced first-hand our car's dismal clearance. And finally, to our gorgeous home for the next few days.

Notes from the Field



We harvest seven days a week, but at PVF East the biggest day seems to be Thursday. We pick for the CSA and the stand and for the Saturday markets. By this time of year, the fields that used to be pristine and beautifully weed free in May have turned into that familiar wilderness of midsummer. We search through the weeds for onions that are growing on biodegradable plastic mulch (biodegrading at a fast pace). We pull weeds from the perennial herb beds before we can cut sorrel and mint and oregano. It would be hard for us to be ready for a photo shoot for a magazine at this time of year.



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do not skip around, they eat every plant straight down the row.

In what way is the groundhog at the bottom of the ladder, then? Well, while I wait for Jon to have time to catch this fat guy, I have decided to deliver the nastiest garbage I can find – right to his front door. Once a day, I dump a bucket of garbage down his hole. The next day it is all gone, either eaten or stashed for later. My nephew Michael says I should start dumping doughnuts down there so he gets too fat to come

out (think Pooh Bear). It is a brand new strategy, and I imagine I am distracting this escarole-eater while he cleans up the mess at the entrance of his house every day.

In the last few days, we have been collecting raccoons in the Havahart trap so this tells us we have another appreciative audience dining in the squash patch. Raccoons are very messy eaters – they like to leave a trail of scratched up produce behind them – they can practically eat their own weight in sweet corn overnight, but we don't grow

corn anymore so that battle is in the past.

The very last consumer is the compost pile. It eats everything, even raw peppers and green beans. Those microbes are the most appreciative diners of all – they don't let anything go to waste and they have no food issues.

Everything we grow gets consumed – perhaps not always with a financial transaction, but always with gusto. It is fun to watch the food flowing to all the many mouths, and we never get tired of feeding you all.