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First Impressions, First Week of CSA, First Year Workers

by Thera Lombardi and Becca Roberts

Hello! We are Thera and Becca. We interviewed ourselves to relate to you, dear Community Sharers, our impressions of the first week of CSA. We hope you find this to be insightful and informative.

Do you have the best job ever?

Yes. Even on the occasional soggy day when swimming into the fields is unavoidable. We like to make vegetable puns, sing vegetable cover songs (ex: Guns N' Roses, Sweet Chard O' Mine), and enjoy breezy rides on vegetable-filled golf carts. Noticing a pattern? Since we started in April, things have changed in the same way that a piece of bread left out of the refrigerator for a month changes - it's warmer, there are insects all over the place, and things are growing as far as the eye can see.

What did you do all day on the farm before the CSA started up? Did you just stand in a field and pretend to be working?

The farm was indeed quiet. Lots of projects were in the works, but you could go an entire day without seeing anyone. Back then, a typical day was full of options: planting, weeding, greenhouse work, and planting. This was when working in the greenhouse was a pleasant,

non-sauna-like experience. We digress.

After much of the planting had been done and things started to flower from warmth and spring showers, we spent a lot of time admiring our young offspring. Hana, with her infinite agricultural wisdom, taught us that baby plants (scientific name *Babyus plantii*) grow faster when they are admired. That's clearly the easiest part of our jobs because they are so tootin' cute! We still get a li'l emotional and reminisce when we see our (perfect) rows of mature lettuce. And we naively disregarded the warning to enjoy the final "leisurely" weeks before the CSA.

Stop waxing poetic about pre-CSA days. What do you do now?

Generally in the mornings we pick and wash veggies, sort them by share size, count them and bag them. We have to account for which items bruise or leak the easiest and stack them accordingly at the top of the bag. There is a method to our madness! This is actually much more harried and complicated than it sounds (*Update: second week went much more smoothly than last week. Data suggests ease is positively correlated with experience).

The best part about CSA days is watching Hana orchestrate



her motley crew of farmhands. Now it's obvious why our pre-CSA days were "leisurely" - we have deadlines and have to practice communication skills and teamwork (ugh. Just kidding!). Lettucetellyou, the change of pace has been a pleasant one. There are more mature vegetables to deal with and more places to take them, but also more employees to handle them. The start of the CSA neatly coincides with the end of the college semester-- and the arrival of a boatload of academics (they're surprisingly strong). It's nice to see the murmur of the farm crescendo to a buzz.

You guys are great! I'd like to have you over for dinner. What are you looking forward to as the season progresses?

Someone told us that there is a roadside stand opening in July, but we don't believe them. They're going to need somebody to pick their vegetables. Hmm. High school lets out soon, right?

The Maryland Farm: Part One in a Series

by Hana Newcomb

In 1960, before they had even imagined running a vegetable farm, Tony and Hiu Newcomb (both 25 years old, recently married, one baby girl so far) first purchased a rowhouse near Dupont Circle. Hiu remembers: “It was after we moved to Q Street that Tony went looking for farm property in southern Maryland. We looked at several parcels on Mt. Victoria Road and decided on one he thought we could afford: 144 acres for \$45,000. The owner was Carl Salzman who used to live on the property 30 or 40 years before. The cropland was planted on shares to corn and tobacco (the allotment came with the land).”

The farm was 50 miles from Dupont Circle and 60 miles from the part of Northern Virginia where the Newcombs would eventually start farming. After crossing the Wilson Bridge, it was a full hour into the depths of southern Maryland, through the small towns of Waldorf and La Plata and lots of farmland. The tiny town of Newburg, just off of Route 301, was the last place to buy a popsicle before arriving at the farm, a little over a mile down the road.

The property was a mile-long narrow rectangle running east-west. The dirt road that went through the farm hugged the southern border, passed some fields, turned north to go past the house and then very quickly reached the northern border and headed downhill to the right, becoming a deeply rutted path, descending to the flat sandy lowlands where most of the corn and tobacco grew. The road ended at the marsh which emptied out into Allen’s Fresh which flowed into the Wicomico River which joined with the Potomac which went all the way to the

Chesapeake Bay.

At that point in his life, Tony was probably just as interested in boats as he was in being a farmer, so this property seemed particularly appealing. He said, with joy, “I can sail around the world from here.”

It was a hot, steamy place with no electricity, no running water and a lot of ticks and snakes. There was a large house with four chimneys, in bad condition. The back wall was collapsed and the house was littered with clothes and newspapers, left by squatters. There were just a few agricultural buildings near the house and down the hill there was an old tobacco barn.

A big corn and tobacco farm right next door, on the north side, was run by the Bowlings—four brothers who were all curious about the new owners of the property where they had been growing crops for many years. They wore identical dust-colored khaki pants and shirts, their foreheads white where the baseball caps met their tanned faces, and their eyes crinkled closed when they smiled. Their names were Cracker, Peanut, Calvin and James.

Over the years, we got used to seeing the Bowlings whenever we went down to Maryland – they could see us from their houses perched way up on the hill and they would get in their pickup trucks to come down for a visit. To small children from the DC area, their accents were completely unintelligible – they spoke so fast, with what seemed like a mouthful of marbles – probably tobacco. And they were always amused when we looked at them, dumbly, as we tried to decode the rapid questions, usually about the whereabouts of our parents.

First, Tony and Hiu got a little house trailer and parked it out in front of the old house, and that was the kitchen. They started

to work on two rooms upstairs in the house, one bedroom for themselves and one bedroom for the kids (pretty soon they were up to three little girls). The rest of the house was full of spooky stuff which the kids explored, with some amount of anxiety.

Tony eventually built a little shed at the entrance to the farm and called it The Electricity Shed. The power company brought electricity to that rustic little building and Tony charged up car batteries so they could have lights and a radio after dark. There was even a refrigerator out there for the orange juice.

On the way to the farm, we often stopped in Newburg at A.G. Hungerford’s to see the proprietor of the farm supply store. A.G. stood behind the parts counter, a cigarette at the edge of his lip, and greeted us with a dry smile and a raised eyebrow. While the adults chatted, we ran around the store, playing in the piles of tractor tires and surreptitiously licking the big salt blocks. The store smelled like feed and rubber and diesel fuel.

It is hard to say how often we went down to Maryland in those days, but we all have a lot of memories of driving back and forth, hauling equipment, hauling construction materials, bringing civilization with us little by little – and reading in the night by the kerosene lamp with bugs flying all around us. The Maryland farm was an ongoing project for several decades and we made the trip between Vienna and Newburg scores of times a year, almost every day during the weeks of melon and corn picking.

This is the beginning of a series of stories about the Maryland farm – which is now the home of Next Step Produce and Heinz and Gabrielle and their three daughters.

Back from the Land of Powdered Potatoes

by Ashley See

Mashed potatoes.
Baked potatoes.
Powdered potatoes.
Potato bread.
Potato pearls.
Potato chips.
Potato soup.
French Fries.
Hash browns.

You name it and the Idaho Food Bank had 'em – 13 different varieties to be exact. But it wasn't the potatoes that did me in.

It all started last July. Just a few months into my first season of farming, I was asked if I'd farm after the season was over. Without looking at my poor, blistered hands, without feeling the sharp pain every time I stood fully upright in my lower back, I choked with laughter. I looked at her, rolled my eyes and shouted, "Heck no!"

Four months later, I found myself behind a desk in southeast Idaho. I had taken an Americorps job as a Cooking Matters coordinator in Pocatello – equidistant from Utah and Wyoming; the fourth largest city in Idaho. There, I was to assemble classes for families who were at risk of going hungry and enrolling them in cooking and nutrition classes—so they could build the confidence, skills and knowledge to feed themselves well and affordably.

At first, I found charm in change: unpacking all my pretty dresses, curling my hair each morning, sipping my coffee in front of a fire, whilst staring out at epic peaks at the foot of the Rockies from a view only the likes of a Craigslist-fourth-



roommate-needed opportunity could afford. At this point, I had moved over a dozen times in three years (albeit it to new countries, cities or apartments), so epic moves were a mere habit. Idaho? Why not. Not knowing a soul, nor having been there before taking the job didn't scare me. After all, I did the same thing in coming to PVF.

Three weeks, a cross-country move and a dearth of green in the land of potatoes and Wal-Marts made me realize that I missed farming. I missed freshness.

As a bandage, I printed and strung up 30 or so farm pictures above my desk. And after learning their co-op was at risk of bankruptcy, that the two organic farms in the area (places I vowed to get weekend hours at) had actually packed up and moved to areas where their produce was actually in demand, I began to hang out in the produce section of Fred Meyer – the only organic vegetables I could find. I would marvel at how their chard leaves had no holes, how wee their basil was, that they had a rainbow of sweet peppers despite it being -16°.

Hanging out at grocery stores on Friday nights isn't what did it either. It was after handing out food from a mobile pantry in a microscopic town that I realized I needed change. Tons and tons of food were unloaded from a semi and set out for locals to come collect – packaged goods first, fresh produce second, then onto baked goods, dairy and meats. I took station at the winter squash and romaine, or what I forecasted to be the hot spot, as this was just a few days before Christmas. Hundreds and hundreds of passersby refused my five pounds of butternut squash and three bags of lettuce, yet all had their six packages of Oreos. No matter how many cooking tips I had, the few that took the squash squealed in excitement over what lovely table decoration it would make for the holiday. My heart sank. All the vegetables that took hours to sort – mostly conventionally grown veggies that were donated by local grocers that had reached their expiration date – sat in their boxes long after the last people had shuffled through.

That day, I returned to my office stumped. The food banking world is tough, as it's a constant battle between calories versus nutrition. As much as they'd like to give everyone boxes and boxes of vegetables, they're subject to giving out what they receive – which is often shelf-stable food like Oreos and powdered potatoes – and giving people enough calories, in whatever form, to live on. These wilted, lackluster ingredients were the very things I had to work

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Notes from the Field

Feeding the Soil a Scrumptious Diet

by Casey Gustowarow

Everybody needs a vacation. On those long summer days of picking tomatoes, preparing fields and getting ready for market, I sometimes fantasize about a leisurely wintertime vacation. For me, vacation serves the purpose of rejuvenation and recharge and allows me to prepare for another season of productive farming.

In much the same way people need this time off, so does our soil. At PVF, we try not only to give our ground time off of vegetable production, but we also try to recharge it by seeding cover crops. At PVF West in Loudoun, we have the luxury of lots of land. That means we can give almost half of our fields a full year off with a scrumptious diet of three cover crops before they go back into veggie production. Even at PVF East in Vienna with the relatively small piece of ground, we are able to fit in at least one cover crop a year in between veggies.

Cover crops not only 'cover' the soil to prevent erosion but they also increase organic matter in the soil, outcompete and/or prevent the germination of weeds, fix nitrogen from the atmosphere, keep the microbial life in the soil healthy and mine nutrients from the soil so that it can be available for the next crop. When I seed a cover crop, I like to use seed mixes of multiple crops to increase diversity on our farm and these mixes also allow the cover to serve multiple functions. For example in the winter, I might seed rye and hairy vetch. The rye will grow tall and lush, add organic matter and keep the soil in place over winter. The vetch will climb up the rye stalks, fix nitrogen and offer a habitat for pollinators when they begin to flower. This summer I am seeding a mix of sorghum sudan grass, soybeans, buckwheat and sunflower. The grass will reduce soil compaction

because it has very deep roots, the soybeans will fix nitrogen, the buckwheat will mine phosphorus in the soil and along with the sunflowers will provide habitat for wildlife and beneficial insects.

While we cannot feed you cover crops in your CSA shares, they make it possible for our soil to grow healthy vegetables. By taking the time and care to nurture the soil, we are able to nurture you.



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with in my classes.

To go from the freshest, cleanest ingredients I had ever tasted to some of the oldest and dirtiest felt wrong. For the first time in years, I was uninspired to cook, let alone teach others how to do so. Vegetables there had no allure, as even buying organic produce

was grown from afar. It was too cold to grow my own. And on an Americorps budget, I could only afford organic thanks to SNAP.

So each day, I'd glance up at those farm pictures and close my eyes; suddenly, I could smell the freshly bunched chocolate mint; feel the sensation of the red clover tickling my ankles—I could even hear a Carmen -- a sweet

red pepper – crackle and crunch beneath my feet.

Something happened. Something changed. I fell for farm life. And I fell for it – and missed it – hard. And I had to return. So here I am at PVF for a second season, exploring the possibility of growing food for a living long-term and avoiding potatoes at all costs.