

Jerusha Klemperer:

Grocery stores have gotten really good, one-stop shopping, and until recently, cheap prices. In the past decade, they've even started to offer a wide variety of natural and organic foods with Walmart and Costco becoming the largest sellers of organic goods. But in the process, they've wiped out many independent and family run grocers and posed an existential threat to natural food stores. So what happens to those places? And what about food co-ops? Do we still need them? If I can find organic milk and bulk granola at the Kroger, what do they offer that the big box and chain stores cannot? As grocery prices soar, it's worth asking where those profits go and who they benefit.

In today's episode, we look at two models of consumer cooperatives. Options for buying your food that rely on a less extractive model where profit stays in the community, co-op grocers and community supported agriculture. I'm Jerusha Klemperer and this is What You're Eating, a project of foodprint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet and people. We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices as well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for.

C.E. Pugh:

I grew up on a small farm in southwestern Virginia, grew up raising beef cattle. So as a kid, I was very much connected to the land at the production of food. My name is C.E. Pugh. I'm the CEO of National Co-Op Grocers. We are a purchasing and business services cooperative created by, owned, governed by 151 food co-ops in the United States.

When I was in college, I needed a part-time job and literally got a job at the local grocery store, the local independent there, organization called Wade Supermarkets, and just loved everything about it. I just couldn't believe it how much fun it was. It seemed like I had an affinity for it. Walked into that grocery store to get a part-time job and I never escaped. I think I spent about 14 years there and then I moved about 150 miles down the street to go to work for Whites Grocery, another family owned grocery that had more opportunity and was growing. Did that for about 12 years, and then Walmart started opening super centers in the nineties there. Walmart got into the grocery business and really just decimated a lot of the independence. I'm sort of looking around, all right, what do I do now?

Jerusha Klemperer:

Walmart opened its first grocery store in 1988 and almost immediately communities started experiencing what's been dubbed the Walmart effect, which includes the shuttering of local independent businesses like grocery stores when they're unable to compete with Walmart's extremely low prices. By 2022, 90% of Americans lived within 10 miles of a Walmart.

C.E. Pugh:

My wife and I were eating natural and organic, and we belonged to a buying club. 30 families meet in the church parking lot once a month and unloaded the truck and split it up. There were no natural food stores in the town I was in. This is a northeast Tennessee at the time. But anyway, I'm looking around for my next step and I see an ad in Progressive Grocer, which is one of the two national grocery industry trade publications for this [inaudible 00:03:32] co-op in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Made up my mind I'm going to get that job, whatever has to happen. Then prevailed and was able to do so. Literally just for luckiest day of my life. It was such a delight to find a place where my personal values were now aligned with my profession. Then did that for six years and became connected with the National Association. I

tell people I know an awful lot about this narrow little topic and that's retail food stores. Just had this tremendous opportunity to apply that to grow the cooperative economy, which is just so cool.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The cooperative economy is one where resources and capital are shared. Cooperatives, businesses or organizations that are owned and operated by a group of people for their mutual benefits. So, they're values based and member owned and member run. Cooperatives of all kinds gained popularity in this country in the early 1900s, and food cooperatives in particular have their own specific history.

Leila Wolfrum:

So the first wave of food co-ops is kind of a misnomer. I'll get to that in a minute. But the first wave referred to a group of co-ops that were started mostly in the Great Depression in response to a wave of essentially fake food marketing that communities got together and wanted to make sure that the food they were buying was genuine. So for example, there's a big co-op in Albany, New York called Honest Weight. It's a first wave co-op. It's name literally refers to making sure that the vendor is charging you the appropriate amount for the right amount of food. There are still several of them around. Obviously, it's been a hundred years and a lot of them are now closed, but they're some of the biggest food co-ops still in existence date from about a hundred years ago. My name is Leila Wolfrum. I am the general manager at Durham Co-Op Market.

We are a natural and organic food co-op, both consumer and worker owned in Durham, North Carolina. We've been in business since 2015 and we run a full service grocery store as a food co-op. Then the second wave was in the 1960s and seventies, which was really around access to natural and organic food after the second World War and the industrialization of the food system. White bread and canned foods and all of the things where we started to see nutrients and color and all sorts of things disappear from the food system in pursuit of this sort of better living through science. The second wave was a response to that and really became about creating access to natural and organic foods. It's really where that I think most people get their impression of what a food co-op is. Food co-ops developed their reputation for being the place to go if you really wanted flax seeds and brown multi-grain bread.

Then the third wave really became about how all sorts of community values could become more mainstream. That is once it became ... really, I think in some ways in response to whole food success of bringing natural and organic to the mainstream, the third wave really recognized that if we were going to continue to thrive as food co-ops, we needed to provide a better customer experience. Third wave co-ops tend to be bigger, they tend to be professionally managed, often more customer focused in their design and in many ways more accessible to shop at.

But back to where I started, I think the first wave is to misnomer because there was also in fact an entire wave of co-ops that predated first wave co-ops in America based in the agrarian movement at the turn of the 19th to 20th century that were really amazing. Often sharecropper based co-ops, often multiracial in their organization that were designed in many ways to fight back against the tyranny of the company store or the farm store that sharecroppers who were getting taken advantage of by their landlords and didn't really have access to food and supplies that they needed, got together and formed cooperative stores in order to provide their own needs and really started to recognize their ability to build community power.

They got shut down pretty hard for reasons that I'm not sure I need to explain. It was a pretty radical counterculture movement, but also a lot of the kinds of values that co-ops have started talking about again. When you talk about communities that have been subjected to histories of marginalization and

resource drain are really starting to look to co-ops as ways to build community wealth again and retake community power.

C.E. Pugh:

People form cooperatives usually to address a market failure. It's usually about access. Rural electric cooperatives were created to provide access to electricity in areas that there was no one else serving us, so they had to do it themselves. Most of the natural food cooperatives were formed in the seventies and most of them came out of buying clubs. Next thing you know, the church parking lots got 60 people in it, you got 90 people in it, and somebody finally said, maybe we should open a store and create a more convenient access to this food we all love and we can't find. Folks come together to address a need. And often it is about access. Now most of our system, the 151 natural food crops that we serve are natural and organic.

Now there are a couple of exceptions. There are some hybrids, but these things were formed by folks seeking to buy natural organic food and there wasn't a store that sold it. In our cases, consumer owned. Consumers come together, they all put up some money, they open a little store. That store does great. What happened was, if you were working in the natural and organic industry in the seventies and eighties, and co-ops were really some of the early adopters of that before Whole Foods and before Wild Oats and Sprouts and et cetera, we all looked like geniuses because the business just grew and grew and grew and grew. It was because of the demand. Fast forward 40, 50 years later and we're founded out how little we do know. But back in the day, it was quite the amazing run to hang onto all that growth as the demand for natural organic just grew like crazy.

To the point where in 2013, every grocer in the country got serious about it. If you go back as far as early 2000s, mid 2000s, they would dabble with it. You may have seen it. You go into a store and there'd be this eight foot section of natural organic out of nowhere. They set it up and then three months later it'd be gone. Or they'd be a little four-foot section in the produce department. Organic, you go over there and look at it and stuff wasn't being taken care of, didn't look that good. You just knew, well that's not going to work. But 2013 they got serious. It was just the growth opportunity. I think when the executives of the conventional grocery industry, it dawned on them this is not a fad, this is here to stay. That really changed the game for the pure play, what I call a pure play in those stores, like a co-op, like a Whole Foods. Well, today if we want to make that decision and we're shopping in Kroger, all we got to do is go over to aisle six and it's all there.

Leila Wolfrum:

We certainly have a lot in common with mainstream grocery stores. Certainly you can buy a lot of the same products, especially the national brands. Mainstream grocery stores in many cases, stock products similar to ours or try to look very much like they do. It can be really challenging from a customer's perspective to tell the difference.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So what are the differences? What exactly does a third wave co-op grocery look like at this moment in time?

Leila Wolfrum:

So when someone asks me what a co-op is, I often try to think about what they might know about in their own lives that they might then be able to make the leap into cooperative. So if for example, I'm

talking to a group of children, I often talk about the word cooperating, which is a word that kids are made very familiar with. So we talk about co-op being a place where a lot of different people get to contribute and a lot of different people get to benefit and that people are working together towards a common goal. Obviously for an adult audience, the answer's a little more sophisticated, but it's fundamentally the same, that co-op is an organization or business owned by the people who benefit from it. Then when I'm talking about what that means, what the point of that is, I talk about how in a standard for-profit business making money or turning a profit is the primary goal.

But by putting all of the interests of the community into the ownership of the co-op, we can really incorporate all of the values and goals of our community into our primary goal. So while we need to make a profit in order to stay in business, our actual primary goal, the thing we're trying to accomplish is much broader than that and is really based in the values of our ownership community. The very first thing that a co-op is, a food coop like ours is a grocery store. From the consumer's perspective, the first time you walk in the store, it would feel very much like any grocery store. Hopefully a nice one. We are open to the public, everybody can come in and shop. The prices are the same for everybody. Really we're just trying to meet the daily grocery needs of our customers.

The co-op is really about our ownership structure. It's about our value structure. We are owned by our community and by our staff, and that community and that staff elected board of directors. The board of directors main goal is to write our value statement. It's a policy we refer to as our ends policy, which is one of a million co-op jargon words. It ends as in the old saying, the ends justify the means, like this is the thing we're trying to accomplish. That policy is different for every co-op. It's written by our community, but overall basically says that we want to be a store that welcomes the entire community, that creates a diverse and equitable environment, the practices environmental stewardship, creating a work environment that includes equitable pay and respect and dignity.

But basically that statement, our end statement becomes the guiding light for every decision we make in the store. That is literally maybe thousands of decisions a week or a year when we're talking about our personnel policies, when we're talking about our product choices, when we're interacting with customers.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Second wave co-ops were places where you went to find the natural and organic foods you couldn't find in a mainstream grocery store. As third wave co-ops try to be more welcoming to a wider range of people, they've diversified their offerings, but it doesn't mean they've abandoned their original values.

Leila Wolfrum:

Part of what customers can experience by coming to our co-op is they can put their trust in us to do the work, to really figure out what those differences are and to make sure that they have options that not only look like they uphold values or make a difference or have a positive impact, but actually have a positive impact. At our meat counter, we stock all North Carolina raised, all pasture raised beef and pork, and it's raised through a series of local farms and co-ops of local farmers to a standard that we have investigated and we can give you the details of and that we are extremely proud of.

We recognize that there are all kinds of ways you could play tricks with words to make products sound better or more trendy or greener. But if you don't really know what those words mean or what those standards mean, or in fact even better, even get all the way back to the farm and actually see how things are grown and how they're treated and every step along the way. We know about the processor that those animals come through and we know about the distributor that we work with to get them. We

recognize that their environmental impact is real. We also try to make sure as much as possible that the human impact is real, that workers are being treated fairly and with respect in a way that values their contributions to the product.

Then in addition to that, yeah, there's a lot of national products that you will see in every grocery store that we also stock in ours. We want to make sure that we can meet all the needs of our customers, but there are also a lot of kinds of businesses that really can't get a foothold in a national grocery store that we're very proud to work with. For example, there are several dozen local businesses that started in Durham, North Carolina or nearby for whom we were their first retail outlet. Often that was a person, usually an individual, sometimes a family who had created a product. Sometimes they had gone to the farmer's market to sell it or done a little bit of a start and an idea that they wanted to start a business and they would come to us with a paper lunch bag full of their granola or a product that really wasn't quite ready for primetime and certainly wasn't ready for wide distribution.

We take real pride in partnering with those kinds of products and the people who make them to help them develop that product into something that really can sustain a business and maybe a family that comes to depend on it, and also really bring wealth and root wealth in our community, which is a big part of what the co-op is about.

C.E. Pugh:

That's one advantage the grocery store has over other entities and nonprofits working to develop local ag or local others. We start with market. So we've got pull. We've got customers coming in, we've got cash registers. The goal is to improve the economics of your local producers. Yes, they can go to the farmer's market and do quite well, but it's very limited. Farmer's market may be open one day a week, they got to go there and show up all day. It's really not what ... they'd rather be out in the field producing stuff. So I like to think that for a lot of local, particularly produce, the folks that would ordinarily do the farmer's market, if I can just get them to put in an extra half acre for me, go ahead. Do your farmer's market thing, cool. But then I could add another row or two. Or the dairy guy, Scott Rasban in New Mexico we got to know very well helping him develop his dairy.

I remember calling him and said, "Scott, you got to put on a couple more cows. We've grown the market." So we helped them expand their market, find him a stable market. Many food co-ops will give them a loan in the beginning of the season and they pay that back by selling us the product. Local's hard. It's brutal. Their access to the national markets, they're too small. The answer is always no. The national food system is kind of independent on a certain scale. You got tremendous amount of folks who would like to farm or ranch or make jam, but they need market. We work to provide them market in a growing market to help them grow. But their economics are important because I need the economics to be attractive for their children or the next generation, or it all goes away. This is critical because there's lots of people sitting down at kitchen tables, maybe like to stay on the family farm and can't make the math work. So our job is to help make sure that there's a livelihood there.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So why do people join food co-ops?

C.E. Pugh:

We survey co-op members across the country and the number one answer is the same and has been the same the 20 years or so I've been associated with the system. The organization's support for local product, local and regional producers is the single ... that's the primary reason we choose a cooperative.

Other reasons, better wages for staff, better staff treatment. The fact that all the money remains in the community, that's important. It's not an extractive situation, it's adding to the economics of the community is important to people. For some folks, the opportunity to vote and the election and elect a board of directors, these things are governed by other consumers that choose to volunteer to serve on the board. So you do have input. Something's going on you don't like. There is somebody, your neighbor, you can go see them. They're on the board and effect change, where you're not going to have much luck affecting change the large organizations. So those are a handful of things I think that I would say are most important to folks.

Jerusha Klemperer:

There are also financial incentives for membership. So according to C.E. Pugh, most food co-ops return a portion of their profits each year to members based on their purchases. Something like 2% of their purchases during the year. Could be less, could be more depending on each year's profitability. Each co-op's board of directors determines the amount to be returned. These are called patronage dividends since they're based on each member's patronage of the business during that year. Most co-ops also have member only specials or sales or discount periods during the year that are only for members.

Leila Wolfrum:

We opened to the public in 2015, but our store, Durham Co-op Market was founded in 2006 and went on a long, almost 10 year journey putting together the community support and the financing to open a store. It took a tremendous amount of dedication and community support and community organizing and fundraising in order to get that business open. Durham Co-op, in fact has a much deeper history if you look beyond that, which speaks to I think a lot to the funkiness and the wonderful variety in what co-ops have been in this country over a long period of time. There was an original co-op in Durham, which was called Durham Food Co-Op, that was founded in the 1970s and closed doors in 2006, more or less the same time when a new group came and started to found Durham Co-op Market, which eventually became the store that I'm the manager of.

The history of that previous store and our current store are very much intertwined. The original store that was quite small, it was a place where you really did have to be an owner if you wanted to shop there, and you've got a discount, and you had to work a couple hours a month as the cashier. It was all very funky. It was kind of a hippie paradise, which over many years, and I think not coincidentally after Whole Foods really became mainstream, turned out not to be everybody's paradise. Customers really started to look for much more comprehensive grocery store and a much more friendly customer experience. The club that felt very comfortable to the people who were most dedicated to it started to feel very exclusive to a lot of people who were not really a part of that core.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The co-op grocer movement has done a lot of soul searching in recent years. And not just because mainstream supermarkets started selling natural and organic foods. Co-op grocers have a well earned reputation for being mainly white spaces situated in affluent neighborhoods. As conversations about race have evolved around the country, coming to a head in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd, co-op Grocers started to ask themselves who co-op grocers are for and how they can expand who feels comfortable there?

Leila Wolfrum:

So when the founders of what became my store started to think about why Durham Food Co-op had eventually sort of petered out and eventually failed, they did a lot of turning a lot of the original logic on its head and thinking about how we create a store that welcomes the entire community in and makes people really able to feel like it can be welcoming to all different kinds of people and that they don't have to be dye in the wool hippies in order to really feel like the co-op could be something that they were proud to participate in.

C.E. Pugh:

The natural and organic food cooperatives were formed by affluent white people, hard stop. That's who created them. By and large, the business was built on an exclusive product line, expensive exclusive product line with lots of values attributed to that, but nevertheless. Okay, fair enough. That's what a cooperative it is. It's people that come together, generally like-minded folks, come together to create a solution for often an access problem. In this case it was access to expensive food, the food that was more expensive than could be bought elsewhere. So by definition, that's somewhat limited. What do we do about that?

Leila Wolfrum:

I would like to think that our store was part of the instigation of that soul searching. In fact, if you look at the long history of co-ops, including food co-ops, but also many other kinds of co-ops, there is a tremendously diverse history in the world, but also in our own country of co-ops in very diverse communities and co-ops in primarily communities of color, really focusing on the aspect of cooperative economics that is about community wealth building and community ownership and community empowerment. There is a burgeoning wave of co-ops across the country, largely in communities of color doing what I think is the most exciting and most innovative thinking about what co-ops can be and what they can do for their communities.

It is hard not to notice, as a part of the existing food co-op community and natural and organic food coop community, how dominantly white the existing food co-op community is and how different the startup co-op community looks. I think that my co-op, when we open, we're really right on the bolt line there that we really open with the intention to be serving the full community and reflecting the full diversity of our community.

C.E. Pugh:

Well, I think first you start with, and we measure all this in the system and provide resources to help people with this, but does your staff match the demographics of your community? Does your board of directors match the demographics of your community? Do you even know? Let's start measuring. You move what you measure. A lot of what I do is help people measure things. We're beginning to see that change. We're making progress, I think system-wide now, 18% of food co-op staff in our system identified as bipoc, 13% of managers, 17% of board members. These five years ago would've been nowhere near this.

Second is the great example of the Seward Food Co-op in the Twin Cities who opened a second store in a more diverse neighborhood and they went through a difficult lesson, a difficult experience. I think they found themselves unintentionally in the white savior sort of thing. Oh, we're going to come build this store in your neighborhood. The community said, well I don't know. Why don't we talk about that? They had to sort of reset and redial it.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Seward Co-op worked very hard to do community outreach for their friendship store, especially around hiring and making membership more accessible, opening its doors in 2015 and becoming a well used and well regarded fixture in the community.

C.E. Pugh:

We used to think, and I think the USDA used to think, well the problem is there's just a store missing. We just need to put a store here. Problem solved. Well, it turns out that was completely false. The problems go way upstream from that. We got to start further up. That's one issue. Second issue is someone coming in and doing it for you. How much community passion and support is there around that? So there's a shift now to how organizations like ours or other cooperative development organizations can support communities to do it for themselves. Cause that's where the power is. That's what happened in the seventies. No one did this for these communities, they did it for themselves. Now you've got loyalty, now you've got engagement, now you've got ownership. That's what cooperatives are. It's ownership.

You never choose a cooperative form of business because it's going to be cheaper. It's not, and it's not going to be easier. It's going to be harder. You do it often because there's no other choice or option, or the options that are available to you are not adequate. Whether it's a Kroger coming in, or let's don't pick on Kroger, any publicly traded or large organization coming in to do it. By definition that's extractive. That's taking money out of the community. Even if it's successful, still, that money's coming out of the community. The cooperative, all that money stays right there. Assuming they're profitable and they generate revenue, it all remains there in the community.

Brooke Bridges:

One of the reasons why just plopping a grocery store down in a neighborhood isn't a good idea is, for one, the grocery stores choose the zip codes that they want to be in. So if they know that a neighborhood is very low income, I don't really know how the economics of running a grocery store work, but they'll choose where to put their store. So most likely they don't even want their store in that neighborhood, so they're not going to put a store there. Then there's also this idea of cultural relevancy of food, making sure that the grocery store is actually stocked with food that the people in the area are going to eat. Then obviously making sure that they have some sort of way of accessing it in terms of financial resources because maybe the store is there, but maybe it's a really nice organic grocery store and they can't afford the high cost of those vegetables.

So it really needs to be more different types of access resources and government programming and SNAP and all of these other benefits need to come along with that in order to actually make an impact as well as some education around food and public transportation, and making sure that people can have ways of getting to these grocery stores. My name is Brooke Bridges. My title currently is the Food Justice Assistant Manager at Soul Fire Farm. Next year, my title is going to be CSA Assistant Manager.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Soul Fire Farm was founded by Leah Penniman and Jonah Vitale-Wolf. In the training manual, the farm is written called Sewing the Seeds of Justice, it describes how when they first moved to Albany. There was no access to supermarkets via public transportation and no open plots in the community garden. Without a car, their only option to access fresh vegetables was to join a pricey CSA and walk the 2.2 miles to the pickup point with children in tow. It also did not accept SNAP or WIC, and that experience helped shape how they built their own farm and the CSA within it based on the concept of cooperative economics. Brooke and I discussed this and the need for money to stay inside of a community and how

Soul Fire Farm has built its operation and trains other farms to do the same on a marriage of financial viability and social responsibility.

Brooke Bridges:

Soul Fire Farm is an Afro-Indigenous centered community farm, and we started off as a family farm grassroots. We are now a 5013C nonprofit, and we're committed to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system. So part of what we do is we raise and distribute food as a means to end food apartheid. So folks who are living in areas where there is low access, we grow food and drop it off to them. We are also an educational center. Hopefully, we'll eventually become an educational institution. We've started kind of calling ourselves that, and the reason why is because we host between four and seven immersion programs every summer that teach people how to farm, how to start their own organizations, how to build things. But our primary one is our fire immersion, which is farming in relationship to earth, where folks come from all over the world to learn how to farm and get back to their ancestral wisdom of the land and that deep reverence for the land that our ancestors had.

We also have a program called Soul Fire in the City. So instead of bringing food to people, we bring gardens to people. So we go to people's houses in the capital district and we set up raised garden beds for them so they can dip their feet into the world of self-sustainability and growing their own food. So we're really trying to do wraparound services when it comes to this idea of food sovereignty to where we're not only bringing the food to the people, but we're bringing the people to the knowledge around growing their own food. When we talk about food access at Soul Fire Farm, and a lot of people who are in the food justice and food sovereignty movements have changed some of the terminology that has been previously used by politicians and just people in the world when we're talking about this. So I'm sure most people have heard of the concept of a food desert, and that used to be the term for people who were living in areas that didn't have access to healthy food.

But the term has kind of shifted to using food apartheid. So the reason why we want to shift from using the word food desert to food apartheid is because a food desert, if you think about a desert, it's a natural occurrence. It happens naturally and it's completely barren landscape. You can't find food anywhere unless you're a lizard and you know what you're looking for. That's just not really the case when it comes to access. There are places that are considered being under food apartheid, but they have food, it's just not healthy food. They have bodegas and they have fast food restaurants and they may have some grocery stores, but the produce is not that good and it's coming from far, far away. So the quality is really lacking. So that's a part of the access and food apartheid aims to address all of the issues around access, not just the fact that the food is missing and it's like, why is it missing?

Yes, part of it is geographic. Part of it is most of the neighborhoods that are lower income, predominantly people of color, have been structured that way based on histories of redlining and a lot of stuff that you could probably read on the website because it can get really, really in depth. But it also refers to public transportation and how people are able to actually get to the grocery stores. Obviously financial wealth as well. Maybe there are some grocery stores within five miles of a neighborhood. But again, these people don't have public transportation, they don't have a car and they're considered really low income. So Food Apartheid talks about this system of segregation that prevents mostly poor and non-white people from accessing affordable food.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Brooke manages Soul Fire Farms CSA, or community supported agriculture.

Brooke Bridges:

So we are located in upstate New York. We are about 45 minutes away from the capitol, from Albany, and we are in the mountains. We're on top of a mountain. We're over a thousand feet of elevation and it is covered in snow right now. Yeah, so our growing season is from mid-June to mid-November, sometimes late October. Depends on what's going on with us over here. So we really provide food during those months. Again, that's why we focus a lot of our attention on education because we don't have the capacity to provide food year round.

Jerusha Klemperer:

As interest in local food grew in the early 2000s, community supported agriculture programs proliferated, and there are now thousands of them across the country, but it's hard to count exactly how many, partly because there's a pretty wide variety in how they're structured at this point. Early on, the idea was simply about direct marketing of local produce and households demonstrating financially that they believed in the farm and were willing to have a stake in it. But more recently there have been moves on the part of CSAs to see how they can work better for consumers too. Soul Fire Farms is CSA definitely reflects that.

Brooke Bridges:

A typical CSA model is, you have a share for whatever your growing season is and someone just pays for that full share. So let's say it's a \$600 share for a 22-week delivery and the farmers will put in X amount of produce per week. You either go and pick it up yourself. Oftentimes, it's a pickup situation and that guarantees income for the farmer. Then it obviously guarantees fresh local produce for the consumer.

The CSA is always credited to two New England farmers, two white New England farmers. But we personally recognize the true history. Booker T. Watley was a horticulturist and a professor at Tuskegee University, a black man. He's actually considered one of the pioneers of not only sustainable agriculture, but this CSA model, which he called the clientele membership clubs. It was a way to ensure in the 1960s and the 1970s, that black farmers had that consistent income. So it was a way to ensure that folks knew what they could at least rely on throughout the season to keep themselves afloat because, during this period in time, during the Civil Rights movement, black farmers were being systematically just denied farm loans by the government. Black landowners were being foreclosed on, which in turn obviously prevents future generations of black farmers from owning land and being farmers. So he developed this model to help these small black-owned farms stay in business and also to support the black community by providing this affordable access to healthy food.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The typical model is really great for the farmer in terms of getting all of that money up front, and it more than works itself out for the shareholder by the end of the season. But obviously having \$600 all at once is not something that everyone can pull off. The model really highlights that tension between what farmers need and then what is actually financially viable for an individual consumer.

Brooke Bridges:

So during the growing season, we have one to two ways that we give away our produce. Our primary is our solidarity share CSA. That CSA previously was a sliding scale CSA where some folks would pay a third above market, some folks would pay at market, some would pay nothing or below market depending on what they could afford. Then we would also get donations from people to just buy somebody else an entire share. So we did it that way so that the community members could mutually support each other. Then we as farmers would have this guaranteed income throughout the season that we know that we

have X amount of boxes that we're going to send out every summer. Now because of generous grants, we are able to offer that food for a hundred percent no cost. So all of our families get the food for free, which means we focus on families that are low income, very low income in areas that they can't access food, don't have cars, elderly.

We really focus on those folks. So that's the primary thing. The way that we get the food to them, since we are not really accessible to the city, is through a doorstep delivery. So every Thursday through the season, from the middle of June to the middle of November, somebody comes and picks up the food and drops it off to everybody's doorstep. So that is one way that we do it. Then we also have community partnership shares. So there is a brand new grocery store in the south end of Albany, which is actually where Soul Fire Farm became an idea in Leah and Jonah, the co-founders heads. It's black owned, and we send them a box or three every week during that growing season where they distribute the food, and they have membership programs similar to a CSA where folks pay what they can and get to take home this fresh food.

Then we also partner with the Free Food Refrigerators in Albany and Troy and the capital district where people can come to the refrigerator and just take out whatever it is that they need for a hundred percent free. So we'll send them eggs often and we'll send them any excess produce that we have. Then we also have a partnership with a refugee center and a food bank. So we have our individual families and then we have these community partnerships that have their hands in more of the community, which means they have more people from the community coming to them to pick up our food. So one of it is through our own distribution and the other is through the distribution of these community partnerships.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Original CSA share program was called the Ujamaa Farm Share CSA, named after one of the seven principles of Kwanza.

Brooke Bridges:

The Ujamaa is the concept of cooperative economics, and it talks about the commitment to the practice of shared social wealth and what the work is that's necessary to achieve that. So that's where our CSA model came from is this idea that if we all cooperate together, we're going to be able to be more wealthy as a whole, as a social whole versus a big box store just getting richer and richer and richer, richer and other people who still need the food and the help just getting less and less of what they need. So that's where the concept, especially of the solidarity share came from, where other community members can assure that us as farmers in this small scale farm are being able to provide our workers with money and health benefits and making sure that we have jobs provided for people, and then also making sure that our neighbors are getting food that they need, whether or not they have the money.

That's really what underpinned it was just this concept of making us all wealthier through this subscription-based CSA service so that we can all have social wealth, health wealth and food wealth really, and making sure that we're all working together to achieve that as a whole.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Just like co-op grocers who maintain a close line of communication with members, CSAs also can have a short chain of communication with their members.

Brooke Bridges:

We here at Soul Fire Farm, we always poll and survey our applicants who are members, and ask them what foods are you familiar with? What foods will you eat? What foods have you cooked with before? Because if you give somebody who's never seen kohlrabi, they might just let it sit in their fridge and rot until they have to throw it in the trash because they don't know what to do with it. A lot of times, not only grocery stores that sell produce, but even community programs that are attempting to teach people about nutrition will come in and talk about these foods that are not culturally relevant for the community, which means they might be like, here's a box of produce, and it never gets cooked with because they don't know what to do with it. So one of the things that we do here is we pull people to ask them what foods are culturally relevant for them, and we grow that.

So we grow a lot of Asian American food because we have a couple people who are on our CSA who are Asian American, and one is a Buddhist monk that lives down the street at the pagoda. So she has a very specific idea of what is nourishing for her because of her culture. We obviously grow a lot of African American crops and Latinx American crops. One thing that, when I took over the CSA management, that I really, really wanted to do was send recipes to people. So every week when we send out our CSA share, we send out a list of our ingredients and then I will oftentimes link recipes in there for people so that, if it's something that maybe they're not familiar with, they'll know what to do with it. Especially during the end of the summer when we have a whole bunch of certain things like peppers and tomatoes, we also send them food preservation ideas.

So part of it is, yes, offering culturally relevant food, making sure that it's who they're going to eat, and then also if we're going to send them other things, to also give them the education to be able to cook with it through sharing recipes and ideas around what to do with this produce. One of the ways that we communicate with our members is through our application process. We'll send out the application at the beginning of the season, people will respond. I often call people to make sure, because people have varying degrees of computer literacy, so we try to make sure that there's access even just to the application where we call them and fill it out with them sometimes.

We have a few folks on our CSA especially who have been with us for a really long time, and so we have very specific close relationships with them, and they'll just send us random emails sometimes like, Hey, I would like a melon every week. It's like, all right, well, we've got melons. We got to make sure Ronnie gets one every week. Make sure that that's in that bag. That's part of what I love about managing the CSA and having a small scale CSA like this, is that we really get to know our folks and they feel safe to share feedback with us.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Soul Fire Farm has trained many other farms and farmers to introduce cooperative models into their own lower income communities.

Brooke Bridges:

One of the organizations that I just want to shout out, they're dear friends of ours and who are practicing this Ujamaa Cooperative Economics Solidarity Share is Rock Steady Farm. They're in Millerton, New York, and they currently run a 500 member CSA utilizing this CSA solidarity share practice. I really want to shout them out because they're doing an excellent job of maintaining this cooperative farm model and working with other organizations and food hubs in their area to make sure that the food is getting out to folks who really, really need it. The CSA, the success of it is that it is financially viable. Rock Steady Farm is doing well and it is reaching a lot of people, and it is also providing fresh produce to people who need it. I believe it's hitting all of the points.

It's hitting the financial viability for the farmers. It's hitting also this element of community engagement. They do tons of on-farm volunteer days and engaging the community to come and help out on the farm and get their hands in the dirt and provide help in that way. Then they're also being able to provide food beyond what they could reach in their own delivery area by partnering with, in particular the Northeast Community Center near them. They're really doing it, hitting people close to them. They're hitting people far away from them by partnering. They're really using this model, this sewing the seeds of food justice model in a way that's been really successful.

Jerusha Klemperer:

CSAs, let alone affordable or sliding scale ones, are not available or accessible to everyone, and co-op grocers are not available everywhere. But when and where these options are there, they're worth supporting. They shorten the chain between you and your producers, allowing for better communication, increased trust and products you can feel good about. Many of them are values driven and have commitments to paying their workers better. They keep the profits local, and if you're a co-op member, possibly even return some of that money directly to you.

C.E. Pugh:

Well, we're teeny. We're two and a half billion a year in sales. Sounds like a lot. I think the grocery industry is probably 800 billion. We're holding up very well over the last couple years. Now through the difficulties with the pandemic and the difficulties now with inflation. But no, we're nobody's market share leader, that's for sure. We got to continue every day to tell our story, and that's one thing that hurts us a little bit. Our competitors are much better at their marketing than we are. Our system spends more of its time actually doing the work, and then we forget, oh gosh, we better tell somebody about it. Don't they know? Well, no, they don't.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and foodprint.org, which is a project of the Grace Communications Foundation. Special thanks to C.E. Pugh, Leila Wolfrum, and Brooke Bridges. You can find us at www.foodprint.org where we have this podcast, as well as articles, reports, a food label guide and more.