Drew University

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Finding the Food Voice:

"Farm-to-Table" Experiences of Grow It Green Morristown CSA Participants

Thesis in Anthropology and Environmental Studies & Sustainability

by

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Abstract:

This project investigates the journey of produce from the Urban Farm Stand at Grow It Green Morristown onto the kitchen tables of community locals. The results provide insight into the life of the produce after leaving the marketplace and speak more broadly about participants' relationships to sustainable food systems. After volunteering at the farm for a month and a half through October 2024, I recruited CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) participants to fill out a Pre-Research Demographic Survey and an Informed Consent Form. During the last week of October into the first week of November 2024, 36 participants signed up for the project. They were asked to photograph all stages of the produce from the Urban Farm Stand for one week—including food preparation, cooking, meal times, finished dishes, leftovers, and any other processes they wished to document. 21 participants followed up with photographs that captured their food journey. Afterward, 12 of the 21 participants elected to conduct a follow-up interview with me, providing more insight into their personal relationships with their CSA produce and the photography stage. The consumer photos and interviews were analyzed thematically to display how these interactions with produce provide insight into North Jersey residents' relationship to fresh produce—and, by that measure, their relationship to their American and heritage identities, sustainability ethics, family values, and experimentation with food in the home. This research demonstrates the value of participation in Grow It Green's CSA program and calls to expand the farm-to-table experience by pushing for CSA and urban farming to spread further into the food-insecure communities that need it the most.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

"There is increasing acknowledgment that we should know where our food comes from; that our food is connected to the well-being of our community just as it is to our bodies; and finally, perhaps most important, that we need to find a sustainable food solution that supports and is supported by everyone. Farm-to-Table is the next step in the evolution of agricultural development" (Benjamin and Virkler 2016, 8).

In their book, *Farm to Table: The Essential Guide to Sustainable Food Systems for Students, Professionals, and Consumers*, Darryl Benjamin and Lyndon Virkler respond to the fraught industrial food system, suggesting that perhaps "assigning efficiency goals, such as increased yield per acre or engineering a faster-growing, more resilient crop can have unforeseen consequences, not just for the environment, but for the health of the workers who supply the food, and of those who consume it" (Benjamin and Virkler 2016, 17).

"Farm-to-table" developed as a movement in the 1970s to demonstrate this essential need for consumers to be closer to the production of their food (Janzer 2017). Food justice advocates such as Rachel Carson and Alice Waters led the charge, calling out harmful industrial farming practices and pushing for a reconnection to our food sources. By the 1990s, more farmer's markets began popping up again, providing consumers with fresh, local, and organic produce (Janzer 2017). "Farm-to-table" supports many pillars, including food security, local proximity to our food system, self-reliant communities, and sustainability for our food systems' future, addressing human and environmental concerns. In more urban environments, urban agriculture has arisen as a solution to providing fresh food in areas seemingly cut off from access to fresh food— otherwise known as food deserts (Benjamin and Virkler 2016, 22).

"Farm-to-table", in its simplest terms, is a call to cut out the middleman and food distributors that add distance between farmers and our forks. However, "farm-to-table" seems to be a term more colloquially associated with fine-dining restaurants and sky-rocketing prices. Why is it that the farm-to-table experience became inaccessible to the average consumer? As Benjamin and Virkler suggest, "If this movement is to truly impact the food industry, and improve both local economies and the quality of our food supply, it has to reach beyond the elite few" (Benjamin and Virkler 2016, 104). In response to that sentiment, this project aims to elevate consumer perspectives, transforming the term "farm-to-table" to be associated with accessible, fresh, local produce through Grow It Green Morristown's CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program.

I propose to illuminate "farm-to-table" experiences as more accessible than its Michelin-rating counterpart context. However, it should be acknowledged that there are gaps in this research and multiplicities to the term "farm-to-table". The experiences I highlight in this paper aim to reshape "farm-to-table" into an urbanized household context, nonrepresentative of larger, rural agricultural operations or the farm stands in less densely populated areas. Because of the urban, often middle-to-upper-class context I worked within, this project's aim should be considered on that scale. This research does not suggest that urban farming and CSA programs similar to Grow It Green's structure immediately replace more rural, larger food systems. In order to support both local and rural agriculture, residents in urban and suburban areas should view CSA programs as a supplement to their shopping practices and a movement toward more seasonal eating.

I also encourage the reader to consider that although I perceive a need to expand Grow It Green's impact and see this project as a cog in the wheel to do so, Morris County, in which Grow

It Green is situated, is ranked 13th in the country for healthiest urban communities (U.S. News & World Report 2025). Even so, Grow It Green calls for an expansion of their CSA and Farm Stand operations into not just upper and middle-class spheres, but also those in the 7.8% of Morris County who are food insecure, or lacking "physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (New Jersey Department of Health 2024). Evaluating the immense impact this program could be applied outwards to areas experiencing more and less food insecurity. As GIG Director of Agriculture and Education Farmer Shaun explains, "In the next couple of years, I would like to see us dial in what we're doing and make sure that people understand they have this resource in their town."

Though there is no shortage of compliments and positive interactions within Grow It Green's CSA program on-site, the life and value of the produce remain largely undocumented beyond the fence of the Urban Farm. This study illuminates participants' relationships to their produce through consumer-created photos and interviews, displaying the transformational impact of Grow It Green's CSA Program as it reaches the kitchen table. Using Annie Hauck's *food voice*, Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burtis's *photo voice*, and Warren Belasco's Culinary Food Triangle as evaluative measures of understanding the impact of conversations about food and participatory food photography, I identified insightful themes within these CSA experiences— an increased connection to American and immigrant identities, a prioritization of sustainability ethics, an evaluation of the CSA program as a supportive family effort, and the discoveries of new ways to experiment with food in the household. These themes and photographs provide evidence that the diverse uses of similar produce staples demonstrate the versatility of the produce available at GIG, which could draw more people to consider integrating a similar

program into their lives and pushing themselves to eat more seasonally. Doing so could positively impact Morris County not only on an individual household level but on a systemic level, addressing public health concerns and increasing nutritional equity if programs using a similar CSA model were to expand into new communities.

Grow It Green Morristown

Urban agricultural farms, such as Grow It Green Morristown, have developed rapidly to meet the demands of the "farm-to-table" movement, especially in the last twenty-five years. In New Jersey alone, community farmers markets, often centered in more urban areas, have grown tenfold since 2000, with over 140 markets to choose from as of 2024 (Weston 2015, 14; New Jersey Department of Agriculture 2024). As an urban farm, Grow it Green Morristown is a 501(c) non-profit organization whose mission "is to promote health to strengthen communities through urban agriculture, discovery-based learning, and equitable food access" ("Home").

GIG functions through four main locations: The Urban Farm, Early Street Community Garden, Winter Farmers Market, and Greenhouse at Saint Elizabeth University. The Urban Farm served as the main site for volunteering, learning, and researching for this project during October and November. Operating on just one acre of land, the farm consists of 92 garden beds tucked behind the Lafayette Learning Center on Hazel Street in the heart of Morristown, NJ ("The Urban Farm"). The farm was previously a playground; though the land has been transformed from asphalt to nutrient-dense soil capable of cultivating produce, reminders of the playful infrastructure remain—Wildflowers weave through the old jungle gym, and the faded funnel ball stands as a reminder of the playful energy that the farm cultivates as a community value.

The Urban Farm is a site for innovation as much as it is a site for working with traditional and Indigenous growing methods. All produce on the Urban Farm is grown using sustainable and

regenerative practices without toxic chemicals or non-organic fertilizers (“Sustainable Practices”). Reduced tilling, cover-cropping, and composting build healthy soil, while intercropping and succession planting help with increasing sustainable production and working within the limited space. Furthermore, this pushback against monoculture “breaks the cycle of insects, diseases, and pests, provides a variety of nutrients, builds up organic matter in the soil, reduces soil erosion, and improves yield over time” (Benjamin and Virkler 2016, 49).

A guiding principle of the farm is increasing access to food education. Day-to-day operations, especially with Farmer Kim Haupt’s help, include preschool and elementary school programming to engage children in activities that promote the importance of local produce to the health of their bodies and the community (“Education”). Furthermore, the farm fosters an environment for high school and college-aged students, along with anyone else interested, to volunteer and work directly with the land. As such, the partnership forged between my research and Grow It Green quickly grew to become mutually beneficial for the sake of educating the Drew community and beyond about the value of the farm’s mission and programming. Farmer Shaun attested, “I think it's going to make people more comfortable taking the jump to do the CSA”.

Incredibly important to Grow It Green’s mission is to address nutritional inequity. To combat food insecurity in the area, in 2024, the farm produced over 25,000 lbs of food, with 7,000 lbs being donated through distribution networks, such as Interfaith Food Pantry, nourish.NJ, Table of Hope, and Newark Science and Sustainability (“Our Reach”). Grow It Green punches in where supply chains and food deserts fall short, offering access to a diverse array of localized, fresh, seasonal, and accessible organic produce, including Arugula, Lettuce, Kale, Swiss Chard, Collards, Spinach, Cabbage, Fennel, String Beans, Celery, Bok Choy,

Cucumbers, Zucchini, Eggplant, Bell Peppers, Hot Peppers, Cherry Tomatoes, Heirloom Tomatoes, Regular Tomatoes, Ground Cherries, Leeks, Carrots, Beets, Radish, Salad Turnips, Watermelon Radish, Delicata Squash, Acorn Squash, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Fresh Garlic, Red and White Onions, Walking Onions, Scallions, Okra, Sweet Corn, Eggs, Flowers, and Herbs.

The Urban Farm Stand operates annually from early June to mid-November on Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings to midday. Many customers during this time choose to invest in Grow It Green's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, which asks participants to pay upfront before the season, selecting a Quarter, Half, or Full share, which determines how many types of produce they can select for the 21-week season ("CSA Share"). CSA programs demand a successful season from urban farmers. The expertise of Farmer Shaun and his staff requires a "strong understanding of succession planting, crop yields, and season extension techniques", alongside strong people skills to build consistent relationships with consumers (Benjamin and Virkler 2016, 206).

Families who are a part of the Atlantic Health Family Care & Guidance can pick up produce from the farm each week for free. Other incentives, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) work with Good Food Bucks to offer double the produce for the same value when SNAP members participate in the Urban Farm Stand ("Farm Stand"). Grow It Green is unique in offering SNAP members not only the opportunity to pay half-price but also to pay a non-committal weekly participation fee as opposed to an upfront investment. Alternatively, the pressure of investing in a CSA for 21 weeks is where many other CSAs go wrong, mainly appealing to the upper middle and higher classes (Parot et al. 2023).

I. Before the Farm Stand: The Project Design

Background

To illuminate how Grow It Green's CSA Program and this project interact with the food history, personal taste preferences, dynamic with sustainability, familial heritage, and food photographs of participants, I refer to the *food voice* and the *photo voice*. Both terms help to reveal the transformative result of cutting out the middleman between farmer and consumer and reveal implications about the importance of improving our relationship to fresh produce and increasing accessibility to such programs. After all, a study by Diana Mincyte and Karin Dobernig (2016, 2) on reconnecting food production and consumption supported that urban farms "emphasize transforming a passive shopper into a skilled, knowledgeable co-producer who works to make their own food".

During the late 1980s, Food Studies pioneer Annie Hauck introduced the term *food voice* into her ethnographic fieldwork as a tool to analyze food's symbolic and physical power to help us communicate with one another (2024). Hauck argues that the food voice "expresses stories and experiences that the spoken voice may struggle to articulate", providing a mode of inquiry to reconsider the deeply embedded roles of food in our individual and group lives (Hauck 2024). As such, I've adapted this term to help contextualize the importance of illuminating Grow It Green's CSA participants' stories, photographs, experiences, and insights. If describing one's *food voice* can reveal broader ways to communicate identity and expression, then I am hopeful the food stories in this project demonstrate how CSA programs, such as Grow It Green, positively impact one's relationship with local food systems—an impact that can benefit urban communities disconnected from fresh produce or facing health inequities.

Warren Belasco builds upon the power of Hauck's *food voice* in *Food: The Key Concepts.* Asserting that food is a cultural concept that can be categorized into a constructed "Culinary Food Triangle", his triangle involves an interplay between identity, convenience, and responsibility. This model provides a digestible, yet notably reductionist, model for understanding the importance of this project and many themes that came up in conversations with participants. "For the most part, people decide what to eat based on a rough negotiation- a pushing and tugging- between the dictates of identity and convenience, with somewhat lesser guidance from the considerations of responsibility," Belasco explains (2008, 8). Each point of the triangle carries a different weight on a sliding scale depending on the individual.

This project also works to bring the *food voice* into conversation with the *photo voice.* Created in 1997 by researchers Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burtis, the photo voice methodology encourages participatory photography as a means to highlight participant perspectives as valuable information, reach stakeholders, and enact change (1997, 372). They assert that "What researchers think is important may neglect what the community thinks is important" (Wang and Burtis 1997, 372). For this reason, I used the photographs as a tool to guide interview conversations and bring thematic uses of produce into broader conversations, allowing a participatory perspective that could've been otherwise overlooked or misappropriated. Similar projects, such as Martin et al's (2021) research entitled "Food justice in community supported agriculture – differentiating charitable and emancipatory social support actions" are useful in demonstrating that using the photo voice within a CSA context can help to promote a healthy lifestyle change and experimentation with new foods for those behind the camera. Furthermore, their research found that a "reduced-cost CSA membership that incorporates cooking education supports participants' ability to try new foods, build skills, and improve health

outcomes"— This model can be applied to the combination of the spread of participant photos across Grow It Green's website in tandem with their relatively affordable CSA program or opportunity to participate at a discounted weekly rate as a SNAP member (Martin et al. 2021). Grow It Green's CSA Program is a model example of an emancipatory community effort as referenced in this study, working to address larger systemic issues of food insecurity and empower participants in the long-term, as opposed to a smaller-scale, temporary effort.

The Research Process

On most Thursdays and Saturday mornings in September through the first week of November, I biked from Drew University's campus to the farm in Morristown, a 9.6-mile round trip ride. Rolling into the parking lot behind the Lafayette Learning Center, I found the Urban Farm Stand abuzz with customers. As I locked my bike up and hung my helmet on my right handlebar, Farmer Shaun, Farmer Marley, Farmer Kim, and Emanuel the Farm Stand Advisor greeted me with their excited "Hellos!" ("Farmer" is affixed onto their names as a part of their roles as Grow It Green staff members). The Farm Stand feels not unlike a miniature town square— Tables stand with their diverse array of produce for the week, and the market is alive with introductions, gossip, and family updates alike.

My undergraduate experience discussing the ethical implications of anthropological and environmental research served as a guiding point for how I prioritized integrating myself into the community at the farm. Before the research phase began, I spent many Thursdays volunteering, processing spring onions or garlic. As I peeled away yellow leaves, cut the long tubes of onions, and shucked away at the outside shells of garlic skin, I watched with keen eyes to find refreshingly genuine interactions. "No more yellow jeep… I finally got my car back!" "Did I miss the watermelons cuz I slept in?" "Did you get a haircut?" I was struck by how the Urban

Farm facilitated conversation and how Farmer Shaun stood as a pillar of the community—so much so, that upon my first weekend at the farm, Grow It Green had just celebrated its annual "Farmer Shaun Day". Naturally, hand-drawn shirts had been created to celebrate the momentous occasion, featuring Shaun holding a freshly picked head of lettuce.

As an undergraduate researcher, this thesis has been an intentional effort to bridge my unfamiliarity with a year-long research process with the inner workings of the farm into a mutually productive final project. Farmer Shaun and the rest of the staff create a space that provides tangible satisfaction within the work we complete as volunteers. As you wash vegetables, you peer through the fence at a bustling market where customers are stoked to pick their produce for the week and are even more stoked to interact with the staff. On the surface level, as a volunteer who shows up as they please, the work is incredibly satisfying, especially during the late summer into the fall season; the sun beams down on you but is not overbearing. An occasional breeze passes through as you work on your repetitive, meditative task. Rolling up to the farm, I often had to remind myself that I had a project to conduct alongside making an active effort to familiarize myself with the operations and day-to-day behind making the magic of the Urban Farm happen.

The research process began after I submitted my IRB materials, discussed the project with Farmer Shaun, and was awarded the Dean Paolo Cucchi Research Grant. Starting in late October, I sat by the CSA weigh table, waiting to recruit participants. As CSA members came by to measure their produce (a requirement of the pick-up process to keep track of produce yield), I asked if they were interested in being a part of my project. As over 29.3% of Morristown's population is Hispanic, I prioritized working with a fellow Drew student and native Spanish speaker, Jen Arias, to translate all sign-up forms into Spanish, ensuring the study was accessible

to Spanish speakers (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). Emanuel Vasquez, the Farm Stand Advisor, helped me recruit participants who regularly spoke Spanish during CSA pickups. Though three native Spanish speakers signed up during the initial research phase, none of them followed through with the project.

Participants agreed to complete a task as such upon signing the Informed Consent Form and filling out a Pre-Research Demographic Survey: *Photograph the food as it travels from the Grow It Green Farm Stand onto your kitchen table. You can take these photos with your phone camera or any camera most accessible to you. Photos can be taken in any way that you feel is comfortable and relevant to your experience with the foods in your home. Photos can be taken of preparing the food, cooking food, recipes, family members, meal times, leftovers, etc. Other foods that are not from Grow It Green can be included in this process, but try to prioritize taking photos of produce and goods from the Farm Stand. You have a complete choice in the photos you take for this research. You do not have to follow any of the prompts above if they do not apply to your relationship with your food*.

After completing this task, I asked participants to submit their photos to a Google Drive folder and fill out a debriefing form, which specified how I could use the photos for further analysis and provided an opportunity for participants to sign up for an interview with me. Upon completion of this phase, participants were compensated $10 for their time. Those who elected to conduct an interview with me were compensated another $10. 36 people signed up for the project. 21 participants followed through with the photography process, and 12 followed up to interview with me.

To challenge the idea of authorship and personal bias in this study, the main collection of photos for anthropological analyses was produced by the participants themselves. This agency in

the research process invites us into a reflexive insight of, at the discretion of each participating photographer, the private sphere of the home. Including both written perspectives and photos in this project allows more room for subjective interpretation; how you imagine utilizing the same produce from a CSA share might encourage one to consider the value of supporting or participating in a similar program.

The visual record of this project that accompanies the interviews is innovative; the main collection of visual data was captured by participants, demonstrating the afterlife of the produce once it leaves the farm. Just as required with more traditional ethnography, this introduces multiple points of positionality behind the photographs, which should be closely considered and investigated alongside information dissected from interviews. Beyond the interview analyses below, which include some of the participant photographs, I have been creating a web page for the Grow It Green website. This process has allowed me to engage with the participant photographs from the perspective of a documentarian and artist and less of that of an anthropologist. Though less highlighted in the written thesis portion, creating this web page represents one of the root motivations of this year-long project: To create a beneficial project for Grow It Green that will expand their CSA programming into new directions.

II. Finding the Food Voice: Interview and Photo Analysis

Twelve participants elected to follow up in an interview conversation with me that took place from November 2024 to January 2025. The following list of questions was used as spring points for conversation, with new questions occasionally weaving themselves into these informal conversations, most of which lasted between 20 and 30 minutes:

I: Building the Food Voice:

1. What foods did you grow up eating? Where did you get your produce?
2. Was gardening a part of your life? Is it now?
3. Are there any cultural influences on what you eat and the types of meals you make? i.e. family heritage, location in the States, influences from other countries
4. If you are comfortable sharing, what is your relationship to meat?
5. What role do you play in preparing food and cooking food in the house? Shopping? Meal Prep? Washing dishes?
6. When did you start coming to Grow It Green?
    a. Has your relationship with the Urban Farm impacted your relationship with food?
    b. What is the benefit to you of getting your produce from an urban farm?
    c. What is your favorite type of produce to get from the farm?

II: Building the Photo Voice:

1. What kind of foods did you make this week using produce from the farm? Were the foods just for you? For friends?
2. Who took the photos?
3. Was it difficult to photograph your food for a week?
4. Did you feel that documenting your food through photography impacted your meal prep, presentation, end result, etc?
5. Did you ever delete any photographs or take multiples that you did not send to me?
    a. How did you select which photos to upload?

Using thematic coding as an ethnographic research method, I came up with nineteen themes present in these interviews, and then analyzed each interview transcript, prescribing quotes with the following codes:

001- American food
002- Heritage/Immigration
003- Meat
004- Veganism/Vegetarian
005-”Local”/Locavore diet
006- Sustainability
007-Waste/using all the veggie
008- Gardening/Farmers Market
009- Taste/preference
010- Preparation
011- Family
012- Job/Work
013-Health
014-Aesthetics
015-Commensality
016- GIG
017- Money
018- Ethics
019- Experimentation

The following transformative themes group the narratives and food histories gained from 21 participants’ photos and twelve interviews into collapsed categories with multiple codes, pointing to both commonalities and diverging relationships to heritage, sustainability ethics, family values, and experimentation with food. These transformations are interwoven into the following sections:

1.) Reviewing the photos and interviews demonstrated a transformation in research participants' connection to their American identity, immigrant identities, or heritage through their produce.
2.) Participants felt that their interaction with the CSA program fulfilled personal sustainability ethics, especially during major life transitions.
3.) Parents and families used the CSA program as a positive family support tool by providing increased access to fresh, local produce.
4.) The seasonal produce integrated into CSA participants’ diets led to experimentation with recipes and new types of produce.

Connecting Produce, Identity, and Heritage

When asked, “What sort of food did you eat growing up?” many interviewees initially shared, in some version or another, “Classic American food”. Most alluded to processed, canned, and frozen foods that they found synonymous with the American shopping experience. Others cited American “classics”, such as Sloppy Joes and PB&Js. How did we get to this shared understanding of what “American” food is? Furthermore, in a country composed of immigrants from around the world, let alone in a state that is comprised of 23.4% immigrants, what constitutes distinctly “American food” (American Immigration Council 2024)?

Before the 20th century, one might have had trouble describing the multicultural nature of American foodways. However, new distinguishable traits of American food, distanced from a diverse fabric of interwoven culinary traditions from around the world, developed alongside the rise of food science during the turn of the 20th century and the consequential mechanization, homogenization, and efficiency of food production (Wallach 2014, 134). Jennifer Jensen Wallach laments the development of processed foods in American food history in her book, *How America Eats*, explaining, “Far more concerned with being “scientific” than with producing food that was soulful and tasty, the culinary reformers from this era enthusiastically embraced processed foods.” (2014, 134). She adds that although many food processing plants were notably unsanitary in the early 1900s, “Many domestic scientists applauded canned and later frozen foods as “pure” because they were often made with little direct contact from human hands. Domestic scientists applauded processed ingredients because not only were factory-produced goods allegedly cleaner than items that came into more intimate contact with people, but they were also uniform in packaging and in taste, a value that domestic reformers admired. They were also, to many, desirable as a symbol of modernity. They were more directly a product of science and technology

than even the most carefully composed-from-scratch recipe created by a home economist" (2014, 134).

Despite the common association of "American" food with highly processed, unhealthy food, there is still a strong connection between the American food experience and the country's melting pot history. Donna R. Gabaccia explains the impact of immigration in various corners of the United States on producing what we consider to be an "American" cuisine in *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, explaining:

> The migrations sparked by the European empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mixed the foodways of Spanish and Indigenous Americans in today's Southwest and Florida; English, French, Dutch, or German culinary traditions were combined with Indian practices in the Northeast; and African, English, Scotch-Irish, French, and Native American eating habits influenced the cuisine of the Southeast. During the long nineteenth century, successive waves of Irish, British, German, Scandinavians, Slavs, Italians, Jews, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans changed the face, and the eating patterns, of American farmlands and cities" (Gabbacia 1998, 6).

Most of the New Jersey residents I worked with seemed to resonate with many of the identities included above, as also evidenced by the pictures of sauerkrauts, stews, and stir-fries that participants submitted photos of. "Having started to experiment with fermenting greens and veggies into sauerkrauts or kimchis, I feel closer to my heritage as a third-generation German immigrant," Dakota shared.

Figure 1: Dakota's sauerkraut.

Others mentioned a departure from the cultural foods they grew up eating or provided insight into how they balance their past food history with their present habits. Aditya shared:

> It's interesting. So my wife is also Indian. I would say we don't eat that much Indian Food anymore. My mom lives with us—She would happily cook for us, but we like more variety in our food than five to seven days a week of Indian food…Generally, for the last several years, we've just kind of eaten healthier broadly, so definitely a vegetable-forward diet. Regardless of what we cook, we try and kind of incorporate it as much as we can.

Figure 2: Braised collard greens with garlic and chili peppers.

Wazila shared, "I do cook a lot of Indian food. I balance that, I think I probably do half and half of American/other cuisine and Indian food. The nice thing is that I can mix up things together too; I'll do a twist on traditional dishes and throw an Indian spices or a rice or so…I tend to like my food spicier just because of the palette i grew up with, so I will throw in spice on most dishes.

There was an interplay between the convenience and multicultural aspects of American food in each of their food histories. As Gabaccia asserts, two aspects stand America apart from other countries in our relationship to food: “Our tastes for standardized mass-produced processed dishes and for a diverse variety of multi-ethnic specialties” (Gabbacia 1998, 226). One such specialty can be viewed below in Aditya’s photograph of his wife chopping up GIG produce to augment some instant ramen:

Figure 3: Aditya: “Yeah. So this is like the good mix between very processed food combined with farm fresh food.”

Interviewee Dakota provided perhaps the most precise answer of what the “Americana food” they grew up eating meant to them: Peanut butter and jellies, deli sandwiches, grilled chicken dishes, pulled pork sandwiches, and Sloppy Joes. It’s a start to make this phenomenon of American food culture more tangible, but to dig deeper, many of these classics include white

bread and other human-made convenience items from a can or the shelf. Kathleen shared more on the convenience aspect of the food she grew up eating, which echoed the choir of the 100% of adults over 30 years old I interviewed who remembered eating more processed foods than they do now. “I grew up eating a lot of processed, canned, frozen food... It was always a green bean in a can.” Sandy explained how the American food she ate growing up was characterized by the frugality of her mother:

> Let's see. Growing up, I feel like I ate a fairly standard American diet. Other than that, my mom was very frugal, so she only bought the junk food when she had a coupon for it. But we got all the junk. It's just, it was limited by her cheapness.

Many interviewees expressed disdain for their past experiences with processed foods, but only some recognized the prohibitive costs and available time that their families had to provide alternative, healthier options. Kasey explained:

> OK, so growing up, I'm one of four. So definitely, feeding a larger family does come at a cost. I don't remember much vegetables growing up in my childhood. It was definitely boxed meals, frozen foods, kind of things that were just quick and easy to pop in.

Returning to Belasco’s Food Triangle, “‘Convenience’ encompasses variables such as price, availability, and ease of preparation, which are all related to the requirements of energy, time, labor, and skill,” Belasco asserts (2012, 9). Naturally, some meals are more convenient to cook than others. And, in the scheme of things, going to the Farm Stand to pick up produce separate from other products at the grocery store takes extra effort. With this effort, comes time, alongside increased cost compared to store-bought produce. This aspect of the food triangle is incredibly relevant to this project, as choosing to participate in a CSA may result in decreased convenience, and thus may impact who does and does not participate in the program.

For these participants, the CSA program is a marker of a transformed food experience from pre-packaged convenience foods to fresh, local produce. And yet, although many participants recall growing up with more processed foods than they eat now, many also cited

their grandparents or parents as gardening during the summer. Though many interviewees had exposure to both fresh and processed foods, I perceive a shift in what participants consider to be more sustainably-minded eating, especially those who identified as they are parents of a new generation.

Making the Shift Toward Sustainable Eating

Convenience ties in with the negotiations demanded by Belasco's third point on his food triangle: Responsibility. What a "responsible" food choice looks like is subjective, but this apex on the triangle requires a consideration of how our choices affect the present and the future (Belasco 2012, 10). Grow It Green CSA participants shared similar responsibilities and sentiments toward sustainability ethics and mass food production. Many opt for farm-grown produce to mitigate climate change. Some find fresh produce to be healthier than store-bought. Others believe in supporting the local economy. The choice to support Grow It Green through the CSA program represents an awareness of the consequences of one's food choices on not just their own bodies, but the local environment and food system as a whole. As Benjamin and Virkler assert, "A diet that comes from industrial agriculture influences global warming because the food we eat is inextricably linked to the consumption of fossil fuels and the production of greenhouse gases" (2016, 15).

Bill Walker of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture stated, "Local food sourcing is the only trend that ever was and always will be" (Weston 2015, 11). What spurs someone to participate in a CSA? Is it a trend? Of the 36 participants who provided initial data for this project, the average participant had been participating in the program for 2.48 years. Most often, though, participants who signed up for the project shared that this was their first season. Though most of the participants were newer to the program, many shared a background in gardening,

with 75% of the twelve participants I interviewed mentioning a connection to gardening when they were growing up or tending to one now. This proximity to fresh produce as children developed into a priority for providing organic produce for their families.

Most referenced their relationship with the CSA program at Grow It Green as responsible for a shift in their relationship with food, sustainability, ethics, and life choices. A notable commonality between these sustainable eaters was a mindfulness to compost, reduce food and plastic waste, and use every part of the produce. “I can’t stand now when I’m going to the grocery store and I’m buying lettuce in this gigantic plastic container. I just love that I walk out {of the Urban Farm} with a recycled bag and nothing has a package on it,” Kathleen shared. “We never let stuff go to waste. So, whether we are gonna use it or not that week, if we don't use it, sometimes we will pickle stuff, or we'll freeze it so we can use it in the future,” Greg explained. “It feels less damaging than going to the grocery store. You know, nothing's coming in plastic or Styrofoam or anything like that. Which often, that's hard for us to avoid at the grocery store… The idea that we can do our food shopping in a way that contributes, however small, to the community feels novel,” Jesse offered. This shared concern with the environmental footprint of their eating habits did not surprise me, but it was interesting to see how each household worked with their leftovers. Kasey made vegetable broth, while Greg blended his extra greens into a green smoothie. Katie chalked up, “I think a lot of people when they are at Farmers Markets have the best intentions, but when they don't have a recipe for it, it just sits on the counter and doesn't get used, because its not your typical of what you're normally used to.”

Figure 4: Jesse's compost bin.

Figure 5: Kathleen's reusable bag to preserve her lettuce.

Figure 6. Greg's kale smoothie.

Furthermore, more often than not, increased involvement with Grow It Green followed a major life change. As Kathleen shared: "I've been out of work… I needed the time to learn what a different diet looked like, and how to make something for them [her kids] versus something for me. I do think there's that luxury of time that people need, and then also money. It is unfortunately more expensive to eat like [this], which is why I like these farm share programs; because you can get that fresh produce for a cheaper amount." Similarly, Katie started her CSA journey and relationship with the farm over two years ago amidst a major career change. "I really enjoyed gardening growing up, and I was like, *I kind of need this right now… You need to "hands in soil!"— make some friends who are doing this stuff…* In some ways, I think my time at Grow It Green really gave me the space I needed to make a big change." Now, Katie serves on the board of Grow It Green, combining her love for the farm and past leadership and business management skills.

Others turned to Grow It Green to provide their children and families with access to fresh, local food. Of the twelve people I interviewed, 83.3% of them are married, and 66.6% of them have children. Through the personal food histories, rich descriptions, and comedic stories,

family was mentioned in every single interview, and often cited as the reason the interviewee bought into a CSA share last year. Mary explained, “I feel like I've had this continuous pull to want to be more sustainable, right? —Child made it harder, I definitely feel like I took a huge step back in some of those things, but I think the idea of it [the CSA share] being more sustainable and local and knowing where it's coming from—definitely after having a baby—I started to have a lot of pesticide fear and this fear of what's healthy and what's not healthy.” Similarly, because of her relationship to GIG’s CSA program, Kathleen acknowledges that she is now more aware of “[The] impact that my choices in the grocery store have on the world at large but also on my own health and my children’s health and what I’m feeding them”.

It was interesting to hear that although many families introduced the CSA program into their children’s lives from birth, parents still felt a pressure to “hide veggies” in their children’s food. Though there has been a shift in food education away from shameful language surrounding vegetables, Mary and Aditya both explained this similar need to hide the veggies from both their kids and themselves so that they will eat them. Mary shared that though she has avoided the notion of hiding vegetables, her son has started to become finicky. As such, she works to “hide” vegetables in scrambled eggs, or pasta sauce with zucchini in it. Similarly, Aditya uses scrambled eggs to throw in veggies not just for his children, but for his partner as well, explaining that he felt the need to hide the collard greens that his wife was sick of getting from the CSA share.

Figure 7: Mary "hiding" tomatoes in her son's scrambled eggs.

Figure 8: Zucchini "hidden" in Mary's pasta sauce for her family.

Figure 9: During our interview, Aditya explained his efforts to hide certain vegetables from his CSA share in the foods he was eating. "Yeah, my wife would be mad whenever I pick those up (the collard greens) She's like, 'Ugh. We have to make those again!' … It's a good way to like hide hide greens in your life… Like, the collard greens sauteed with an omelette around it… That's where we tried to hide the greens into the food we would just normally eat.

It was also interesting to see how when asking about food voices, almost everyone mentioned something about their relationship with meat without being prompted to do so.

Question: *"What foods did you grow up eating?"*

Answer: "Your classic steak and potatoes," says Katie.

"I grew up German, that's why there was a lot of meat and potatoes," explained Kathleen.

"I grew up very 'meat and potatoes based'— my parents are German," shared Laurie.

It could have been because of the context of this project (working with individuals who are typically avid vegetable enthusiasts), but each participant, in their own respect, shared a certain discomfort within their past or present relationship to meat. This showed up on a sliding scale, with some participants sharing that they have followed a strict vegan diet for over a decade, while others explained how they have been open to or have prioritized integrating more plant-based foods into their diets lately.

This trend among participants of moving into more plant-based diets are important to note beyond health initiatives and personal ethical pursuits. Benjamin and Virkler suggest that "rethinking the center of the plate" may encourage CSA participation and increase the viability of such programs (Benjamin and Virkler 2016, 110). That is, looking beyond the conventional "protein, starch, veggie on the side" model when cooking may increase interest in buying into farm stands. This looks different for a variety of people based on how much they want to challenge the food norms that have been ingrained in them since childhood. For Dakota, a dedicated vegan for over eight years, it means pushing themselves away from mimicking popular meat-based dishes. They explained, "Having started getting a lot of produce fresh this year with the CSA, I leaned much more into cooking with whole foods rather than trying to replicate comfort foods that I was used to."

Kathleen struggled to break the cycle of meat consumption that she was used to, but discomforted by. "I didn't understand how to get my protein from things that weren't meat," she explained. However, during a career transition, she dedicated more time to exploring plant-based alternatives, citing health and sustainability reasons. For many participants, meat was less in the picture these days but coexisted with them in their households. Take Jesse, who has been a vegetarian for over twenty-five years, though his wife is not. Or, Mary, who wants to explore a more plant-based diet, but feels cursed with a one-and-a-half-year-old who loves red meat. These interviews are a testament to an increased awareness among this population of where their meat comes from and that transitioning towards a plant-based diet does not have to be drastic or completely meat-free to be impactful.

Figure 10: From Dakota's food journal they sent me: "Last months CSA sauerkraut (still getting better with age, but almost gone) mixed with a diced CSA spicy pepper, grocery hummus, and nutritional yeast
pan charred vegan sausage over a layer of pan crisped vegan cheese, a pan charred green tomato, toasted seed and grain grocery bread, sauerkraut on, ketchup on, avo mayo on the other slice, sausage with cheese layer on, charred green tomatoes on top, cover with top toast and slice diagonal for greatest eating surface area (there's more bites from a diagonal cut- and this sandwich slapped so hard esp. after a long run I'm glad it took more bites to eat)"

Figure 11: "The biggest influence on what I eat is that I'm vegan. I try to eat whole-food plant-based as much as possible, so the more whole vegetables and unprocessed things, you know, the happier I am," Jesse explained.

Figure 12: Sandy's vegetarian salad.

Figure 13: Maria's vegetarian meals.

These insights about a vegetable-forward diet connect to the transformations present across this section, displaying how Grow It Green's CSA provides an opportunity for customers to explore sustainability ethics through new avenues that they felt they did not have ample access to before.

An Impetus for Experimentation

Nearly all interviewees discussed how their participation with Grow It Green's CSA program pushed them to try new produce, and consequently, experiment with new recipes and ways of cooking in the home. Grow It Green's CSA is unique, as participants have the opportunity to pick any produce they want for the week, unlike other programs in which a customer receives a fixed selection of produce for the season—Some of which a participant may have never seen or cooked with, and therefore might throw in the trash at the end of the week. There was a pattern within the participant pool in that those with a Quarter share stuck to similar staples, such as lettuce, garlic, tomatoes, and cucumbers. On the other hand, those with Half or Full shares tended to experiment more, mixing staples with new choices each week. If other CSA models wish to provide an opportunity for the transformative impact of their programming to veer into experimentation with food, free choice in weekly pickups might be the way to do it. Returning to Belasco's food triangle, it may be less convenient for a new CSA customer to add a stop to the Urban Farm to their weekly errand list, but Grow It Green's CSA program provides convenience that other programs may not by providing free choice in each CSA share; one can toggle between staples they are familiar with and trying new foods depending on their availability to experiment that week.

Alongside a relationship with Grow It Green's CSA program came revelations and the development of new eating habits for many of the interviewees. Wazila shared a realization she and her family had through connecting to the life of her produce in a new way:

> I feel silly saying it, but it was just something I never thought about. Because I buy bell peppers all the time, and I buy the green and then I buy the colored [ones]. So I picked up bell peppers one time from Grow It Green, and I let them sit out on my counter, and my kids are looking at me, and they're like, "Oh Mom, they're turning into the colored bell peppers!". It never occurred to me that I was buying the raw version when I was buying green, and I felt like an idiot. Just another thing I learned.

Participants were eager to have free choice in what they were picking up, which allowed them more room to pick produce that worked for them as individuals or specifically for their families. Alongside staples that almost every participant picked, many told me that, like Kathleen, they "would always through in something just for fun that he had that was unique". Similarly, Maria shared, "I definitely tried things that I hadn't had before. I mean, his stuff is so fresh. It does really make a difference," alluding to the opportunity to try local produce that had become estranged from customers in the grocery store.

For others, it was more so the commitment to the CSA investment before the season began that led to experimentation. Aditya explained, "I think having the CSA is a good forcing function for us. We eat more vegetables because you're getting it weekly. Whether you want it or not, you've already paid for it. And so it's good from a commitment point of view." Participants also explained a difficulty in pleasing all family members with their weekly choices, causing some forced, albeit likely beneficial experimentation with produce for some eaters in the household. Yet, even if not all parties in the family were happy with everything from a particular week's share, each participant got crafty. Laurie shared, "For some reason, whenever my husband would go, he would decide to come back with all these hot peppers and my

fifteen-year-old really likes spices, so this dish has a lot of those hot peppers in it because the beans and the corn can take the heat of the peppers— it all just sort of percolates and marinades together. So that's how I would use up a lot of the peppers that I wouldn't use in other dishes. Similarly, Aditya shared, "Yeah, my wife would be mad whenever I pick those up {the collard greens}. She's like, 'Ugh! We have to make those again.' But, yeah, they're good. You can put them in things! It's a good way to hide greens in your life," Aditya explained. Wazila laughed as she shared this family story:

> "...First weekend we went, we picked out the bok choy with my younger one. We made a salad. He literally told me it was the best thing he had eaten… Then I made the same thing, maybe three or four weeks later, he had not come with me, and then he was like, 'What is this? I don't like it anymore'. It was really funny to see the difference."

The theme of experimentation with food often appeared in tandem with commentary about the photography process during the second half of the interviews regarding the *photo voice*. While some participants experimented with photos that produced a perfect spread of composition, mindful of color, lighting, and perspective, other pictures were much more casual, with steam from a pot of veggies blurring the lens or a finger slipping into the frame. I was surprised to observe who felt pressured to maintain a certain composure in their photographs; others could not be bothered by the aesthetics. Even those participants who were more mindful of an "Instagrammable" or "Phone Eats First" aesthetic were working with their phone or tablet cameras, which I encouraged. I wanted the photos to be a candid snapshot of whatever "farm-to-table" meant to each person. Discussing the power of food photography in this context coveys a compelling argument for the importance of documentation and sharing the impact of Grow It Green's CSA program across social media.

A concept that has seen a rise in the last decade alongside the popularity of social media, "phone eats first" refers to the idea that nowadays, many eaters choose to snap a photo of their food on their phone cameras before eating it. A 2017 article from Huffpost cites a study that claims that 69% (a number that I can only imagine has grown since 2017) of millennials take a photo of their food before eating it (Amatulli 2017). Another article from the Crescent Magazine argues, "The convenience of the mobile phone's camera has triggered a generational shift from praying to photographing before meals, solidifying photography's role in the modern dining experience" (Cohen 2020).

During the interview process, Foodstagrammer Greg Dalakian, who shares a joint Instagram foodie account with his wife, @excessiveeaters, provided insight into what "Phone Eats First" looks like for him and his wife. Though Greg's pictures were well-composed, I enjoyed hearing that his relationship to photographing his CSA produce was more relaxed than his role as one-half of the excessive eaters account: "I'm used to going in the motion… It's more normal for us to photograph the food, but usually, we photograph the final product most of the time instead of the prep or the steps."

Others took a more candid approach to capturing their produce and meals. Laurie explained, "So both my boys swim, and I say that because dinner is usually a rush at the end of the day, even though it's planned. So I was just doing a quick snap with a tablet of each picture on the table as it was coming out. And I know one or two were blurry as I was having them do it as it was steaming over, but the one I remember doing was the beef one with the garlic on top. Everyone was involved. It was just a quick deal."

Figure 14: Laurie took a quick snap of this steak roast and garlic from the farm as the steam fogged up the lens.

Figure 15: Russell's colorful dish using kale and peppers from the farm.

Figure 16: Marta exploring different angles of her vegetable stew.

III. Beyond the Urban Farm: Concluding Thoughts

"When you know the people who are growing your food, you know where it's coming from, and you have a relationship with that environment in a deeper way, it just kind of connects things from the ground up and it's really hard not to feel grateful for it— and perhaps more nourished by it at the same time," Katie explained. Grow It Green's CSA participants described enjoyment with the crispier lettuce, deeper flavors in their vegetables, and more nutritional, local produce options they got from their CSA shares. More importantly, though, they shed light on the tangible benefits of this increased connection to local food systems beyond taste alone, sharing powerful transformations within their personal identities, relationship to heritage, sustainability ethics, family values, and experimentation with food in the home.

This study has many limitations, which should be considered when evaluating the argument for expanding CSA programs based on this pool of participants. Firstly, most participants who signed up and followed through with the research were newcomers to the CSA program. Though it was interesting to hear how their relationship with the program has positively impacted their relationship with food, it would have been useful to work with longer-standing participants, especially in the scope of identifying Grow It Green's CSA as an emancipatory model. Additionally, similar to Martin's 2021 study working with CSA participants and community-sourced photographs, the conclusions I drew from the participants I worked with may not be applicable to the entire population of Grow It Green CSA participants, especially because participants self-volunteered to be a part of the research process, so they may have been especially likely to speak positively about the impact of Grow It Green on their identities.

Furthermore, by the time the research reached the interview phase, 50% of the participant pool who elected to share were making over $100,000 as their household income, and no SNAP Program participants remained in the interview group. This is nonrepresentative of the diversity of the population that Grow It Green serves and aims to reach, and should be considered especially when applying the importance of CSA models similar to Grow It Green's nationwide. Nearly twice as many (13.5% in 2023) Americans nationwide on average are food insecure compared to the food insecurity rate of Morris County (7.8%) (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2024). Additionally, more rural areas experience food insecurity at higher rates (15.4% as opposed to 13.2% in urban areas in 2023) and often experience issues in the food system differently (Rural Health Information Hub 2024). Where a more urban area might experience issues with food affordability, a rural area instead faces difficulty accessing transportation to fresh produce further away (Cornell College of Agriculture and Life Sciences 2024). Even so, the cutoff between what constitutes a 'rural' or 'urban' area is not exact, so dividing statistics into these categories might exclude peri-urban and suburban populations. As such, this project is a mere step in the right direction to addressing the problems of food insecurity in our food systems. More research should be conducted to define "farm-to-table" movements in other contexts across the United States in an effort to address systemic injustices that perpetuate food insecurity.

This project is not the final word on the potential of CSA programs, nor is it a comprehensive portrait of all who engage with Grow It Green. It's a snapshot of one season of growing, in one place in Northern New Jersey, with a certain demographic of consumers. As such, it invites continued research across geographies, demographics, and models of food distribution in the United States. This research also emphasizes the value of participatory

qualitative data collection—when people are invited to document their own perspectives, they are not just research subjects, but collaborators in shaping what farm-to-table can mean; whether it's more inclusive CSA models, visual food storytelling, or simply a family dinner trying out a new type of hot pepper, this work hopes to be a small part of what cultivates the growth of similar CSA programming across the nation.

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