



THE NEW SHARE CROPPERS

Daybreak Growers Alliance puts a different spin on the CSA model, bringing farms together in collaboration, instead of competition.

BY AMY PARADYSZ // PHOTOS BY KELSEY KOBIK

Adrienne Lee uses a team of draft horses to plow and fertilize her fields at New Beat Farm in Knox. But to deliver the results of the growing season? She's all about online platforms, algorithms and teaming up with farmers who might have been considered competitors in a different time.

Lee founded Daybreak Growers Alliance, a collaboration between 25 farms in Waldo and Kennebec counties designed to give customers more of what they want—and to help farms plan their future crops. It's like a big community supported agriculture (CSA) farm share, packed with choices from many farmers. It's led by three women, Christa Bahner, owner-operator of Bahner Farm in Belmont, and Colleen Hanlon-Smith, who used to manage the Unity Food Hub but recently became an owner of a peach farm in Albion, the Locust Grove.

"We're trying to marry the traditional CSA model with customers' needs for convenience and flexibility," says Hanlon-Smith.

Daybreak Growers Alliance stepped into a void in their region. For two years, the Unity Food Hub in Unity had run a small food aggregation and distribution program, but in 2018, it decided to shift its focus

Left: Farmers, friends and now partners in a super-sized CSA, in the fields at New Beat Farm. From left, Adrienne Lee, Christa Bahner and Colleen Hanlon-Smith.

Top right, clockwise: Bahner, Lee, Hanlon-Smith; The co-founders and New Beat Farm employees gather in the packing shed to prep farm shares.

to other programs. That left about a half-dozen farms that had been primary sellers through the hub wanting another collaborative option. “They didn’t know what that would look like except they wanted it to be farmer-driven,” Lee says.

Lee had already been running a small collaborative CSA program with operations based at New Beat Farm and was encouraged when she was able to break even after the first year. She and her husband Ken Lawsom run a busy operation of their own, producing dozens of varieties of vegetables and flowers, tending a flock of sheep and running a commercial cider press. If they were going to work their farm while growing a multi-farm collaborative, they couldn’t do it alone. That’s why early this year, Lee legally incorporated Daybreak Growers Alliance with Bahner and Hanlon-Smith.

“It’s an inspiring group of women,” Lee says. “Farming is not only a job for us, it’s a lifestyle and it’s almost our form of activism, of providing a service to the community.”

Her farm gets the second half of its name from the sound the horse hooves make on the ground as they work the land. It’s a *new beat* because while its equipment might look old-fashioned, New Beat is very much focused on the future. As Lee points out, tractors don’t naturally fertilize while they are plowing the way horses do. She and Lawsom are building a sustainable agricultural ecosystem.

As are her colleagues, each in their own ways. Bahner Farm, which is certified organic, had an existing CSA program. Most of its customers moved over to Daybreak’s new farm share. “That was our buy-in,” says Bahner, who is a vegetable producer. “Instead of fighting to get our piece of our pie, we’re just making a bigger pie.”

In some ways, the model for Daybreak—delivery of curated local food to individual customers—is something that Hanlon-Smith experimented with during the summers of 2005 and 2006 when she was a Bates College student. She called it Peak Season. Residents of Peaks Island would place orders from about 40 farms, and Hanlon-Smith would take the products—bread, fruits and veggies—over on

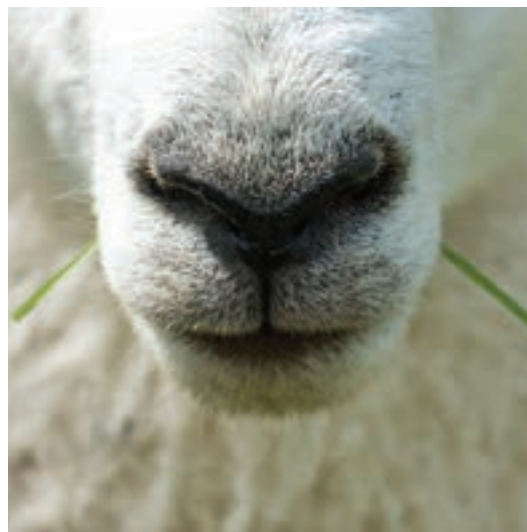


the ferries. Eventually Rosemont Market and Whole Foods started delivering to Peaks, and Hanlon-Smith went on to be the first executive director of the Maine Federation of Farmers’ Markets.

“My first real connection to the land was to say, ‘Maine has more and more farmers, and how do we grow this connection to the market?’” Hanlon-Smith says. “I’ve been on a mission to find the best Maine-grown food since those college years, being an eater and working with a lot of those farmers.”

The sisterhood of Daybreak is selecting some

of the best foods that Maine is producing from some of the best farmers, she says. Particularly in the town where she lives, Freedom. “For being a rural, largely poor small town, there’s a lot of energy around food and farming in Freedom, as well as in Waldo County and Maine in general.” The alliance is already working with these small, diversified farms to crop plan, she says. “Before they buy their seeds, we’re anticipating what our demand will be. Most of the farms are pretty diversified. When we crop plan, we hone in on those items that they should grow in greater quantity where the quality is good, the



Top row, left to right: What's in the box varies from week to week; Christa Bahner prepping farm shares; A tiny basil seedling. Bottom row, left to right: Colleen Hanlon-Smith packing farm shares; one of New Beat's lambs on pasture; Adrienne Lee checks stacks of share boxes.

margin is good and they can scale production.”

Daybreak has 250 shareholders who subscribe in eight-week periods for a “share”—a popular option being the “Local 25,” a large grocery bag of certified organic vegetables for \$25.

“What we’ve done is customize an online platform—not just a vegetables share and a meat share but fruit, yogurt, eggs and cheese,” says Hanlon-Smith. “The customer can decide how often they want to receive a share and can put a share on hold or swap out or add to it.”

The online platform, Harvie, gives the customer a chance to rate all the different crops with emojis on a scale of 1 (“not for me”) to 5 (“love it”). “If you really like something and it’s available in this week’s box, you’ll get it,” Lee says.

Harvie also keeps track of the 17 delivery locations—and counting—in and around Portland, Midcoast and Central Maine. Where there are 10 or more subscribers near the current delivery route, a new delivery site pops up. Pickup locations in Portland range from Bunker Brewing to a law office to the back of someone’s garage on Brighton Avenue.

The customer gets an email a few days before delivery, listing what’s in

their share, and they can swap things in or out—or just trust the process. At the delivery site, the customer moves their share from the green lidded plastic box labeled with their name to their reusable bags.

Behind the scenes, Lee balances customer demand and the number of farms and what they’re producing. “We don’t add new farms unless we have a gap, not always a different crop but seasonality—like a farm might have early season greens but not have them later on,” she says.

Bahner has a seven-day-a-week farm stand open from May to October, and she does the farmers market circuit all summer. But in the colder months when she grows winter greens—spinach, arugula, baby kale and baby lettuce mix—she wants to reserve weekends for time with her two children. “I can concentrate on growing, and Daybreak markets and distributes the products,” Bahner says. “This is a great way for us to get into markets all over the state without having a vehicle on the road.”

Amy Paradysz is a freelance writer from Scarborough. She signed up for a share and selected happy-face emojis for just about everything farmed in Maine except jalapeños.