

COOPERATION: THE FINAL FRONTIER *A FARMER'S PERSPECTIVE*

By Monte Skarsgard

You see the words and phrases for it all over the place these days. Food Hubs. Regional Aggregation Points. Local Distribution Centers. The list of clever names has become so extensive that you almost can lull yourself into thinking that these are "new" concepts or ideas. Honestly folks, these are just different names for the tried and true practice of cooperation. And I am not talking about cooperation as a noun like in Co-Ops or some federally recognized business structure. I am talking about it as a verb, to cooperate.

We all remember this idea from as far back as elementary school—work together for a common goal. Embrace and cultivate symbiotic relationships. Understand that we can accomplish more as a team than we can ever hope to accomplish as a sum of individuals. So if cooperation is seemingly so familiar to us, why do we currently see it as the exception rather than the rule within our local food landscape?

I would argue that crossing this hurdle of learning how to cooperate with fellow local food producers is the final challenge for us to truly realize our fullest potential. We need to realize that our fate as farmers, ranchers, and artisan producers are all intertwined with one another. That when the local dairy does well, the local vegetable grower will also benefit from the dairy's success. For too long agriculture has been seen as

a zero-sum game, in that one can only win if someone loses. This, to me, is ridiculous and acts as a shackle that binds our local food movement to an antiquated mindset.

So then what does a cooperative foodscape look like? For our farm here in the high desert of New Mexico, it means that we have to remain very realistic in our strengths as well as our weaknesses. The buzz surrounding the local food movement has created an unattainable goal for farmers that we have to be able to grow everything. To raise everything. Like we need to milk cows, collect eggs, and harvest heirloom tomatoes all on the same farm. Why? As my mom used to say (and still does) "Do what you do well." Usually what we do well, we love doing. And so trying to be the jack-of-all-trades will inevitably leave things to fall through the cracks. I am not advocating for monoculture either. But rather that we look at our farms and ranches with critical and honest eyes.

When we practice this sort of tough-love with our farms, and ourselves an amazing feeling starts to shine through, vulnerability. This feeling that I cannot be everything to everyone. Realizations that someone can grow something better than I can. A sense that my Superman cape has fallen off. Then comes a deep breath and an understanding that all we have to do is do what we do well.



PICTURED: SKARSGARD FARMS HOOP HOUSE.



Once this veil of having to be a local food Hercules has been lifted, we are free to see what we truly are, a community of producers. The pastry gal does not need to make loaves of bread. The egg provider does not need to sell meat. The veggie farm does need to sell apples. But together, all of us become the faces that make up the local food landscape. Or local foodscape.

But where do we go from there? Because it is not enough to just be a bunch of independent producers. We need groups, teams, networks, or whatever you want to call them to come together to enjoy strength in numbers and solidarity. Even in the Animal kingdom there is empowerment in numbers. Our local foodscape is no different. We need to join together to not only survive but to succeed.

For our farm, this has taken shape as a cooperative CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) model where we grow a lot of food on our 40 acres, but also bring in some wonderful diversity from regional growers.

There is not a better example of this type of cooperative partnership than what we have with Excelsior Orchards in Paonia, Colorado. Albuquerque is plagued by late frosts. The May Day frost has nipped us in two out of the last four seasons. So, needless to say, we live in a terrible place for pome and stone fruits. Paonia is one of the best fruit growing regions in the West, but with a population of 1,650 people, there is no market for a 20-acre orchard.

In a traditional CSA, we would tell our members that they are not going to get fruits since we cannot grow them. In a traditional market, Excelsior would be selling all of their fruit to a fruit broker who then would turn around and sell the fruit to grocery stores. In that lose/lose scenario, our members do not get to enjoy amazing fruits and Paul and Elane, who run the orchard, have to sell the fruit at a discount to a string of middlemen. In order to break that cycle, the people in between the agricultural fields and the dinner plate have to be reduced if not eliminated all together. The best way to do that is for growers to work together, sell together, and promote one another.

Now, through our CSA, Excelsior's fruit does not end up as a faceless piece of fruit in the anonymous stacks of a grocery store, but rather a celebrated event that our members look forward to every season. Within this partnership of growers, no story is lost. Our members truly do get to know their farmers and know their food.

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But this cooperative partnership does not have to stop with growers. We work with local bakers, ranchers, dairymen/women, Value-Added providers, and coffee roasters. Additionally, working within a family of providers is completely scalable. It can work with only two businesses working together and it can work with 20 businesses. The only limiting factor is moving past this paradigm that we have to do it all by ourselves.

For our farm, this cooperative CSA model has allowed us to grow and sell our produce on a year-round basis. We provide our members with a wonderful and diverse fresh food offering 52 weeks a year. Being able to maintain this consistency with our members allows us to focus on our fields in the spring rather than running around trying to find CSA members for the season. They are already with us, so it is much easier to do a crop plan for what our needs will be each year. Then we can hit the fields knowing what the demand will be rather than guessing what it might be.

Watching this model unfold over the last 10 years has been a wonderful learning experience for me. I truly feel like we are just seeing the tip of the proverbial iceberg right now as well. The benefits of a cooperative marketplace are endless and it offers the smaller producers a way to compete with the big box stores. Maybe David will not beat Goliath in the end, but he might be able to run a sustainable small farm and enjoy the American Dream. ●

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