



The Family Feast - Stufflebeam Family Farm - Page 2

The Stufflebeam family operates one of the largest CSA farms in Texas and thanks to their tireless efforts to promote the garden-to-table movement, they're known as their members' "personal" farmers

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When the Barnards were considering moving to Brenham, Mandi sought out a CSA membership because she wanted to provide the freshest, most nutrient-dense organic food for her family of four.

"It's important to me to feed my family as healthy as possible," says Mandi. "I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to find organic food here. [Finding the Stufflebeams] in Brenham was like a green light for me to move here."

Angela also sought out the Stufflebeams because she wanted organic, field-ripened produce.

"Eating healthy is important, and eating locally is one of the best and most convenient ways to achieve that," says Angela. "I like knowing where my food is coming from and who's growing it. It's nice to have a personal relationship with a farmer. It's almost like having a personal farmer."

photo by Jennifer Nice

According to Brad (shown above with his wife Jenny and daughters Carina, bottom left, and Brooke), Home Sweet Farm is a growing and learning environment, not a setting, and the Stufflebeams wouldn't have it any other way.

About the Author: Jennifer Nice is a writer and editor in the agriculture and equine industry. Based in San Francisco, she divides her time between the city and Napa Valley, where she enjoys her two favorite pastimes: wine and horses.

To his customers, he's "Farmer Brad," the face behind the food. The CSA model actually originated in Japan, explains Brad, and "the Japanese word for CSA translates to 'food with a face.'"

The Stufflebeams currently farm 12 of their 22 acres. By dividing the cultivated land into four quadrants, they easily fill a 32-week growing season.

"Our season starts in late March and runs 22 weeks, including our spring and summer crops," says Brad. "We take a break during the heat of August and September, and then, depending on the weather, start up in October and deliver for another 10 weeks in the fall. In one [quadrant] we have a new season's crop coming in, in another the previous season's crop is going out and the other two always have a cover crop in rotation. We put a lot of emphasis on building up organic material. We do a lot of green manures and cover crops to replenish the soil."

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Growing the Community

Growing the crops is just part of the Stufflebeams' business. Another important element is getting their members' allocations to them. They set up several drop sites in Houston, then organized driving groups from the various communities to go to the drop site.

"We create the community by promoting our CSA and the services we offer," says Brad. "Our members don't really know each other, other than they see each other when they pick up their food. Through our CSA, they developed a sense of community amongst themselves."

Last year, the Jewish Community Center in Houston contacted the Stufflebeams about serving their members and the result has been an excellent model for a CSA.

"They have a coordinator who works for the community center and advertises the CSA to their membership," Brad



explains. “She collects all the membership fees and gives us one check. I make the delivery to the center and she coordinates with the members to pick up their deliveries. She’s helping me manage almost half of our CSA membership. As a result, those members are more actively involved in their community. It’s been great all the way around.”

Despite all the logistics that needed to be worked out, what the Stufflebeams are doing is not new.

Prior to mass transit and centralized distribution systems, people got their food from within their community. Brad laughs when he recalls what a new visitor to Home Sweet Farm said to him recently. The out-of-towner asked Brad if it was OK to eat his spinach.

“The reason spinach was in the news and was such a big deal is because three or four counties in California were supplying 80 percent of the spinach for the entire country,” says Brad. The visitor didn’t know any different. “Local food is food security. The sustainable agriculture movement is not a top-down movement,” says Brad. “This is happening at the grassroots level and I am proud that we, the small farmer, are part of the solution to the problem.”

In addition to operating the CSA program, the Stufflebeams hold monthly market days at the farm, and Brad uses the farm as an educational model to help promote community sustainable agriculture and to help new farmers get a start.

“Being a CSA farm requires the skills of a seasoned grower,” says Brad. “It’s not for the novice.”

The Stufflebeams are also expanding by bringing produce to several specialty restaurants, including renowned chef Monica Pope’s t’afia restaurant in Houston. At t’afia, every menu item features a Texas artisanal food product, which she calls a “community table”; the Stufflebeams are one of about 10 local farmers from whom Pope obtains food.

“Our mantra is ‘eat where your food lives,’ which means to eat where your food is grown and in-season, and eat food that is alive,” says Pope, who was a 2007 James Beard Award nominee for best chef in the Southwest and who has been dubbed the Alice Waters of the Third Coast. “Alice Waters set the standard for American restaurants and chefs to connect with farmers, fishermen and artisans in their respective regions,” says Pope.

While most of the Stufflebeams’ CSA members are interested in common vegetables, the specialty restaurants are interested in unique crops such as dandelion greens and herbs.

“We get all the wonderful stuff that grows well here, like a huge assortment of greens, collards, kale, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, turnips, sweet potatoes, green onions, leeks, beets, okra and herbs,” says Pope.

The varieties the Stufflebeams cultivate are astounding—the 35 varieties of heirloom tomatoes are just a sampling. “Our members get things they can’t get at the grocery store,” says Brad. “We try to add some excitement to the food to get children interested in eating vegetables.”

Top

Hard Life, Good Life

When people visit Home Sweet Farm, they’re surprised by how humble it is. The house is a converted barn and, despite Brad’s background in landscape design, you won’t find any fancy flowerbeds or adornments. Home Sweet Farm is a growing and learning environment, not a setting, and the Stufflebeams wouldn’t have it any other way.

“We home school our children, and we wanted a place that was vibrant and a great learning experience,” says Jenny.

Jenny often hears people voice their assumptions that farming is a hard life. “A lot of people think we’re weird because they think we can’t make a living growing vegetables,” says Jenny. “They don’t understand what we’re doing.”

Because Brenham is fast becoming a hotbed for the sustainable agriculture movement, other young couples are doing it, too. Here, Jenny gets to watch firsthand as the farming community comes back to life around her.

“More and more young people are contacting us because they want to start farms, and many local landowners who aren’t cultivating want to see their land being used for organic farming.”

For the Stufflebeams, the beauty of their work is that it changes throughout the season.

“Every day is different. It’s fun,” says Brad. “We do this as a family, but the only way we can do this as a family is if we



keep it enjoyable. I don't want to do what past generations have done and run my kids off the farm because the work is so hard and it's miserable. My children do what they want and we let them pursue what they're interested in, but at the same time teach them to understand the value of the dollar."

Unlike too many families in America, every night the Stufflebeams sit down to dinner together and enjoy the fruits of their labor. And so do families like the Barnards. When the Barnards run low on food, her children don't say, "Let's go to the store," they say, "Let's go to the farm!"

Mandi loves the fact that her children know where their food comes from.

"The food that's picked and eaten in the same day is the best for you in terms of nutrients, but being a 'locavore' is more than that," she says. "I know the people who produce my food. I have a relationship with them and I trust them. The fact that my greens didn't have to ride in a big, oil-burning truck for hundreds of miles means something to me. Also, I feel better about sometimes paying a little more because I know that the people who help me feed my family are able to feed their families as well."

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