



The Family Feast - Stufflebeam Family Farm

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.

By Jennifer Nice

When Brad Stufflebeam sits down for dinner every night, he's surrounded by his family.

Seated at the modest farmhouse table is Jenny, his partner and wife of 14 years, and their daughters, Carina, 10, and Brooke, 8.

The table is laden with food that represents some of Brad's extended family—his fellow local farmers.

This particular evening, the Stufflebeams' dinner is comprised of grass-fed bison, artisan cheese and fresh butter from their neighbors up the road.

Photo by Jennifer Nice

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. Bringing Market to Farm
While farmers' markets are popular and fun for consumers and can be worthwhile for farmers, they can also be a risky endeavor.

Customers know they must arrive early if they want the best selection.

For farmers, it means getting up before dawn, driving long distances, setting up before the market opens and then driving home again after a long, exhausting day with no guarantee of profit.

The Stufflebeams started selling at farmers' markets, but stopped for these reasons. Then Brad came up with an idea that would bring the market to the farm, rather than bringing the farm to the market.

Furthermore, his idea would guarantee availability of goods to the customers and sales to the farmers, thus eliminating the uncertainty for both.

They started "Monthly Market Day" at their farm by utilizing their network of fellow local farmers.

Customers pay a one-time fee of \$38 to participate, a nominal fee Brad charges simply to raise their commitment level. (The Stufflebeams' CSA program members are automatically enrolled in Monthly Market Day.)

"Their membership allows them to pre-order food from nine different farms," explains Brad. "When they drive out here, sometimes 60 miles from Houston, they know the food they want will be here."

Monthly Market Days are held on the third Sunday of each month during the growing season. Customers pre-order from the Home Sweet Farm website, where they can select local, artisan cow and goat cheeses, yogurt and sour cream; grass-fed beef, lamb and bison; pastured poultry; bread; eggs and honey, as well as a large variety of organic produce.

Brad compiles the orders from each customer, then gives each farmer one order.

"It's easy for the farmers because they only have to deal with the one order I give them and they come to Monthly Market Day knowing that their product is already sold."

The Stufflebeams charge the farmers a fee for organizing the market and they usually accept payment in the form of goods.

Monthly Market Days are open to the public.



“We don’t turn anyone away, but the guaranteed availability is for our members,” says Brad.

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TopThe homemade bread is just hours out of the oven. A neighboring farmer's wife brought it by when she came to collect fresh eggs from the Stufflebeam girls.

The Stufflebeams' Home Sweet Farm, in Brenham, Texas, is a family farm, but it's also a community supported agriculture (CSA) farm and its 100 members comprise the rest of what the Stufflebeams' consider their extended family.

This family farm is the center of a unique cooperative; it's the result of the Stufflebeams' tireless effort to provide for these families.

Their efforts represent the local food movement that's gaining momentum across the nation. It's spurred by people's desire to be connected to their food source; farmers like the Stufflebeams are that source.

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Call Him “Farmer Brad”

Brad Stufflebeam grew up in a Dallas, Texas, suburb. He describes himself as a suburban kid obsessed with sustainable agriculture.

Always self-taught, always striving to learn by doing, Brad immersed himself in books and dirt, wanting to learn everything he could about what would become his life and livelihood.

He got his professional start as a landscape designer, and focused on dry-climate landscaping, native plants and wildlife habitat, and antique roses.

“The choices I've made and the things I've done have always been toward this objective,” says Brad. “When I got into horticulture, I knew we would have a small, family farm someday.”

The Stufflebeams then started a nursery business in McKinney, Texas. It was one of the first 100 percent organic nurseries in Texas.

One of the nursery's popular draws was Brad's demonstration garden, in which he grew herbs and vegetables using entirely organic methods.

This garden was a small-scale representation of what the Stufflebeams hoped to have someday—an organic farm that would provide food for their community.

Luck struck the Stufflebeams twice when an offer to buy their nursery came in at the same time Brad was offered the job of operations director for World Hunger Relief, Inc. (WHRI)

It was an opportunity that would take them south to Elm Mott, Texas, and give Brad tremendous experience, putting him and Jenny closer to their objective.

“I was with WHRI for two and a half years,” says Brad.

“During that time, I ran the CSA and a Grade-A raw goat dairy, and I raised lamb, rabbit and organic pecans. This gave me good insight into community development, as well as world hunger and economic problems.”

Armed with the experience they needed, Brad and Jenny began looking at property on which they could start their own CSA farm. They ultimately chose a 22-acre parcel in Brenham, in south-central Texas.

“Going south would give us a longer growing season and higher-than-average rainfall,” Brad says. “Plus, the proximity to Houston, Austin and San Antonio would be a good market for us. From a historical perspective, this is a great part of Texas to be in. A lot of the state's history was made here.”

The Stufflebeams closed escrow on their family farm in December 2004. Three months later, they were selling their



organic produce at local farmers' markets. They worked as hard and as quickly as they could to cultivate enough crops to be able to start their CSA and provide their members with an adequate allocation.

It didn't take long, but initially the going was rough.

"The first two years we had a record-breaking drought and then the next year we had record-breaking floods," recalls Brad. What saved them was the fact that they had planted a wide variety of crops for their CSA members.

"During the drought, some crops failed, but the dry-weather, heat-loving crops like peppers, tomatoes and okra did great," Brad says. "The next year, we had 36 consecutive days of rain. We lost our tomato crop and our melons, but that was only a small percentage of what we grew. Our greatest insurance is the variety we grow. There are always going to be some crops that fail, but by growing many different things, [our members] get their produce."

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Personal Farmers

In extreme situations such as this, the fact that Home Sweet Farm is a CSA farm means that its members share the risk of growing the food. Being a CSA farm gives the farmer security in the form of a fixed income to carry him through the highs and lows of good and poor seasons.

The members are incredibly supportive of the Stufflebeams because they feel a sense of ownership in the farm.

Now in its third year, the Stufflebeams' CSA program is currently at its cap of 100 members, having doubled in membership each year since its inception.

"We are one of the largest CSA farms in the state and we have a waiting list," says Brad. "We decided to cap our membership for now so that we could grow our infrastructure. We don't want to get so big that we can't give our members personal attention."

For members like Mandi Barnard of Brenham, Texas, and Angela Austin, of Chappell Hill, Texas, that personal attention is why they joined the Stufflebeams' CSA.

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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.