

THE FARMER IS THE MAN

Community Supported Agriculture Grows Up in Houston

Words and Photograph by Shannon Stoney

We're All BasketCases! Unless, of course, we're not. But I vote yes...to being BasketCases with love for ourselves, for our friends, for the world. Lots of contradictions...or maybe none.
— David Cater

I GREW UP IN THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES, WHEN THERE WERE TWO KINDS OF CHEESE, VELVEETA AND CHEEZ Whiz, and two kinds of olives, the green ones with red things in them and the black ones that you put on your fingers at Thanksgiving. So when I go to the new Whole Foods on Waugh or the Lake Flato-designed HEB in Montrose, the variety of cheeses and olives, and the diversity of their provenance, seems like something out of the febrile fantasies of a bunch of starving orphans in a Dickens novel. I think to myself, “Peak Oil may have been last week or last year, but this has to be Peak Food.”

A different kind of cornucopia, dazzling in its variety and novelty, is available now to the 50 or so Houston households who subscribe to David Cater’s weekly delivery of locally grown produce. We gather in the dusk at the Black Hole coffee house on Graustark and wait for Cater’s truck to pull up its trailer full of greens, squash, okra, peppers of all colors and shapes, and surely some vegetable we’ve never seen before. David is a tall man in his early forties eager to share cooking tips and even growing advice with his customers. The weekly pickup has generated a kind of community that the shiny new Whole Foods, with its wine bar and high prices, could never hope to create.

The variety of food that is available in Houston on any given day in ordinary supermarkets is already amazing and probably unprecedented in human history: we can buy exotic fruit from all over the world. But this local food is impressive in a different way. We sample raw winged beans and crunch fat okras and peppers in the parking lot, while discussing how we cooked them last week. He throws in hibiscus leaves for brewing tea and little red peppers that look exactly like habañeros but are only slightly hot (local chefs have come to love the way they perk up the color on their plates without scorching your palate).

As omnivores and as 21st-century consumers, we can eat almost anything. But as Michael Pollan pointed out in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, this poses a problem: if you can eat anything, what should you eat? His answer? Eat food, mostly plants, not too much. By “food” he means something your grandparents would recognize as food, not the overprocessed pablum on offer in the center aisles of the supermarkets.

A more recent refinement on the answer to the question, “What should we have for supper tonight?” is, “Something grown within 50 miles of here!” Local food aficionados point to the high environmental cost of trucking and flying exotic fruit from all over the world to Houston when Texas itself grows some of the best, tastiest citrus in the world. And indeed the satsumas from Cater’s Utility Research Garden have a sweetness that grocery store fruit cannot match. But another motivation behind Community Supported Agriculture (CSA for short) is the idea of community itself: that individuals can work with a farmer to provide needed capital at the beginning of the growing season by paying the farmer up front for a season’s worth of food, sharing some of the risk, and then benefit from not just the harvest, but also the community that grows around the farm.

Cater has hosted several gatherings at his Utility Research Garden, where he lives with his workers in a yurt. When you visit there, you find out why all of the produce seems to have a green light inside it, shining and beckoning you to eat it. It’s partly the place—the *terroir*, as the French say. When Cater went looking for a farm, he had a copy of the state soil survey in hand. He wanted alluvial loam, warm winter temperatures near the Gulf, and adequate rainfall. The 24 acres he found near Jones Creek, Texas, satisfied all those requirements (when there’s not much rain, there’s a well for irrigation). The original idea was to grow bamboo for the nursery business, and Cater has clumps of about a hundred different kinds of bamboo for sale. The hard freeze of 2010 hurt his bamboo plants, however, and his emphasis has shifted to growing vegetables for neighbors, including Houstonians.

He devours books on organic agriculture, soil health, and healthy communities. Like most of the organic farmers I know, he loves to talk about soil microbial life and how delicate it is, how easily it is disrupted by conventional agriculture. Huge compost piles take up almost as much space on the farm as crops do. Four water buffalo add their manure to the compost piles every day.

Cater grew up both in urban Houston and in rural Waller County, spending summers on his grandfather’s conventional farm there. He became a farmer later in life because it seemed like a simple and powerful way to make a good, ethical life. It’s a “simple exchange,” he says. You start with your own soil and homemade compost, add some seeds and water and labor, and two months later hand a bundle of kale to a friend—kale that tastes better than any she’s ever cooked before. It’s the least alienated labor one can imagine.

Yet Cater has no illusions about the capacity of 40 or so local farmers to feed the whole city of Houston. And he, too, has to use oil and gas to run his tractor and get his produce to market. His work, however, is not just about running a viable business now. It’s also about researching and recovering the knowledge that future residents of the Gulf Coast will need to live here in the post-petroleum, post-supermarket era. We live on the cusp of a momentous change. Fortunately, some farsighted farmers have a foot in both the old petroleum-based food industry and in the local human- and animal-powered horticulture of the future. I’m betting on the water buffalo. **c**

Learn more about the David Cater’s CSA at utilityresearchgarden.com.

