

Ellen Fowler Hummel

Boxed In

I opened the box, wax flaking off onto my hands from the coating on the cardboard flaps. The kids stood on chairs and peeking over the sides, arms straight on the patio table, leaning in to see what was inside.

“What is that?” my eight-year-old son asked, pointing to a layer of 10-inch green leaves lying on top, folded like tissue paper in a shirt box.

I picked up a leaf and looked at it; it was dark green with a white rib down the middle and red veins branching off to the sides. Peering back into the box we saw vegetables of every color — green, reds, purples and whites, plus a whole lot of black dirt. These deep, rich hues weren’t what we usually saw at any grocery store save for Whole Foods, where the produce stacked in the coolers looks almost painted, colors as rich as any found in a portrait by a Dutch master or a contemporary of Rembrandt.

“I’m not sure,” I said, trying my hardest to make our first box of direct-from-the-farm vegetables into the most fun game of I Spy ever. The problem was that these vegetables were so from the farm that I didn’t recognize most of them.

“Vegetables are so crazy!” I said, holding up a leaf twice the size of my hand. “Just look at this!”

“But what is it?” my 10-year-old daughter asked.

“It’s lettuce of some kind,” I said. “Let’s look in the book and see if we can find it.”

Yes, our box of vegetables came with a primer — **Farmer John’s Cookbook: The Real Dirt on Vegetables**, a 100-page-plus instruction manual written by the owner of the farm where our vegetables were grown. Full of illustrations, recipes and growing cycles, Farmer Brown’s book was clearly written for the baby carrot and Birdseye crowd, in other words the folks who didn’t know their Swiss chard from beet greens, or a kohlrabi from a head of cabbage.

He had our number from the start.

“Yuck,” my 10-year-old daughter said, watching me pick up the bunch of mystery lettuce and shake water off it. She hopped off the chair and went into the house, thankfully right before I found a slug stuck to the underside of one of the leaves.

“Ew, what’s that?” my son asked, straightening up.

“It’s a slug!” I said, flicking it onto the grass with my finger. “That’s good, it means our vegetables are healthy!” Sensing I was about to lose what was left of my audience, I reached under some more lettuce and pulled a greenish-white bulb about the size of a baseball from the bottom of the box. It had shoots coming out the sides, and stalks and leaves that grew up from the bottom and around the bulb toward the top. I held it out in front of me, gesturing for my son to take it.



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“What is it?” he asked.

I looked sideways at the cookbook.

“It’s kohlrabi,” I said, as if I’d known it all along. I snuck another peek at the caption. “You use it for cole slaw, salad, stuff like that. It’s crunchy, like a carrot.”

“Weird,” he said and put it back in the box. “I’m going to watch TV,” he said, and went inside.

So began our two-summers-long experiment in community supported agriculture (CSA), a noble plan to recreate the farm-to-table experience for urbanites like us who want to eat locally grown food and support small farming communities. CSA holders buy a crop share from a local farm, sort of like a community vegetable patch. The farmers grow only as much as is subscribed each year, and then deliver what’s harvested to shareholders on a regular schedule from early spring through late fall.

For thousands of people — regular people like us, as well as restaurant owners, chefs, and a growing number of food banks, homeless shelters and soup kitchens — a CSA share ensures a wide variety of fresh, organic, and consciously grown vegetables.

For our family, however, the CSA meant months of guilty overabundance: overflowing crisper drawers; bags full of extra vegetables that we gave as hostess gifts; skeptical looks from my husband and outright

refusal by my children; even a chocolate cake made from beets that everyone loved until our pee turned red, a harmless side effect of eating too many beets that Farmer Brown mentioned in a footnote to the recipe that I verified after a frantic search on WebMD.

I felt virtuous about our vegetable share at first, not only because I thought I was feeding my family healthy, farm-fresh food, but also because we were supporting small farming and thumbing our noses at industrial food production.

It’s just that no one liked the food. We weren’t unappreciative of either the vegetables or the work by the farmers to get it to our table. But like anything, the growing success depends on the weather, and our first CSA spring it rained and was cold well into June, so there just wasn’t a lot of vegetable variety. It was lettuce, more lettuce, beets and more beets. The variety improved in July, but then we went on vacation in early August and missed the two weeks of tomatoes and corn, the only two vegetables with guaranteed success in our house.

Fall brought squash and garlic and more beets and a few potatoes. And when we thought about visiting the farm, sports schedules and other activities conflicted with the open house dates, though in reality the reason we never went was because the four-hour round trip drive appealed to exactly no one in our house.

I was especially conflicted because I grew up spending weeks each summer in my grandmother's farm town in central Illinois. In fact, signing up for the CSA in the first place was a knee-jerk reaction to watching *Food Inc.*, a movie about industrial farming that had me up in arms about food companies in general. After seeing the film and researching some of the issues it raised, I was determined to live off the land like we did when I was a child, and our family's canned food came directly from my grandmother's garden. I vowed that my kids would know that experience as well.

You know that saying, you can't go home again? We couldn't even make it into the kitchen.

My memories of my grandmother centered in many ways on time we spent in her kitchen. When my brother and I were little, our days with her started early, especially in the summer because it was cooler then, with fried eggs and bacon, toast and coffee. Then we'd all three get in the car and drive to see Eileen the chicken lady, who lived on the farm where my grandmother bought her fresh eggs.

One time Eileen's son carried a live chicken in his hand, opened the trunk of the car and threw it in for us to take home. It squawked and banged around inside the trunk until, when we got home, my grandmother opened the trunk lid just barely wide enough to stick her hand inside to grab the frenzied bird and carried it to the porch. She grabbed a three-foot pole with a wire loop at the end, then walked to the back yard, behind the grape arbor, and pulled the chicken's head off. We didn't know this until the headless bird bolted around the arbor and ran straight toward us before it fell over, dead. My grandmother picked it up, brought it inside, plucked it then cut it up to fry.

During late afternoons, we'd often sit out back under the apple tree with her while she snapped the ends off green beans, or peeled a huge bowl of apples. She'd sit, holding the apple in her left hand, a perfect fit inside her curled, arthritic fingers, and starting at the stem, peel the greenish-red skin off in one continuous spiral until she reached the bottom, then drop the tendril on the ground next to the chair. Then she'd slice it in half, cut out the core, then slice each apple into eight perfect sections that fell machine-like into the bowl until she had enough for pie.

We'd watch, transfixed by the tendrils, lulled by the hum of highway traffic out front, the buzz of cicadas, maybe the sound of a train whistle far away in the distance. When she was done we'd go inside and she'd let us pour sugar and cinnamon over the apples, mix them up, and she'd roll out a piecrust she'd taken out of the deep freeze that morning. Together, we'd build the pie and flute the edges and make our dessert for dinner.

The days we spent with her passed quietly like that, and we ate what she served us from her garden, as the tomatoes and beans and peaches and apples dictated. In June, she'd have us crawl into the bedroom closet to pull out boxes of empty Ball jars, then we'd all drive to a U-pick field to fill as many quarts and flats of strawberries as we could.

The next two days, in her kitchen, we'd boil jars, then boil strawberries and sugar, the steam fogging her glasses, deflating the tease of her hair-do, the tiny hairs at her ears dripping wet and curling. When they cooled, we put the jars of jam back into the closet, where they stayed until we ran out at home, or she needed them for Christmas gifts.



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These were the memories that flooded my mind that cold day in January when I signed up for our CSA share. What I realized with that first delivery in June, however, was that no matter what vegetables I served my skeptical family, or how they were grown, these romantic notions about food didn't fit so easily into our busy, modern life. I could can tomatoes all I wanted (and to be honest, I didn't really want to), but that wouldn't bring back my nostalgia for that hot kitchen, or the memory of my grandmother's hands as she gripped the ladle to fill the jars. Those memories belonged to me and to that time, not now. I couldn't give my children that exact experience, no matter how much I wanted to. But I realized I would give them others.

I felt guilty about our failed CSA experiment, but we agreed to give up our share and donate the money instead to the Chicago Food Depository.

Today, we still eat some of the vegetables we discovered through the CSA — broccoli and butternut squash are favorites — and we go to farmers' markets when we can. I sometimes use my grandmother's canning jars to hold flowers, and now I buy our chicken and eggs from a local poultry farm that has a store just 10 minutes from our house. I still use Farmer Brown's cookbook, though now our chocolate cake comes from a box rather than beets.

We can recreate a farmhouse aesthetic for decorating purposes — one look at Pinterest will tell anyone that the trend is hot — and keep chickens and buy CSA shares for all the right reasons. But real farm life is far from easy — it's hard, difficult work. And as we found out, it's not for everyone.

Pesto made from garlic scapes sounds delicious, and I'm sure it is. But first, could you tell me which vegetable that is in the box?

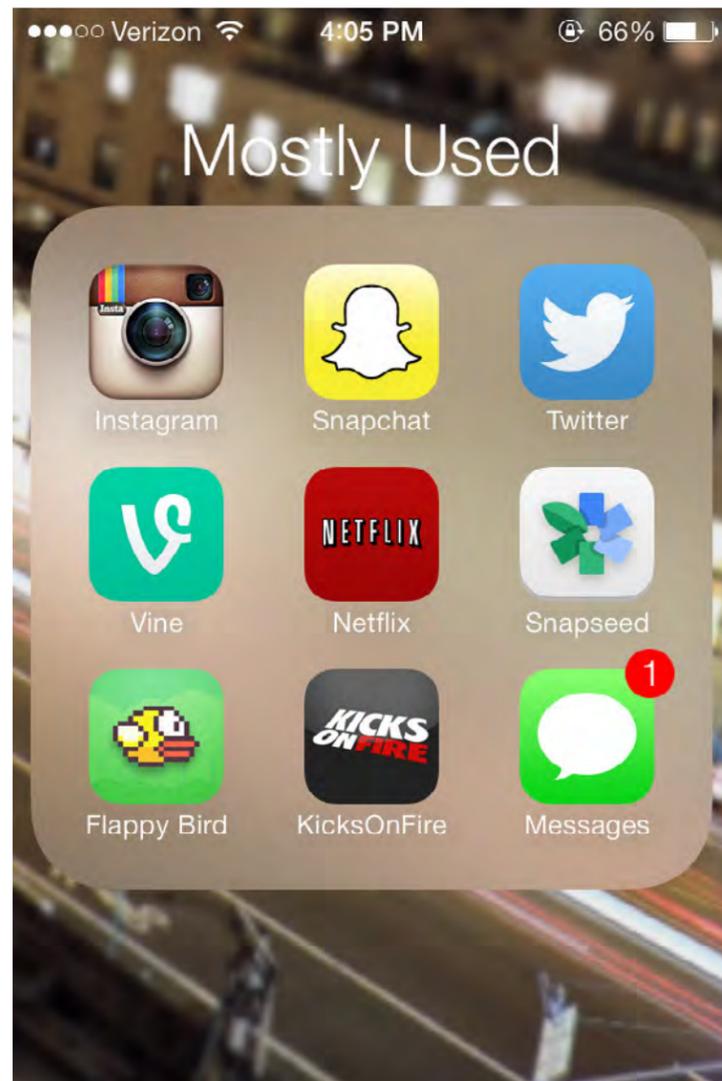
Tools of the Trade

Visit any thrift shop, antique store, Ace Hardware or a Farm and Fleet and it's not hard to see that folks love their tools. In the spirit of Industry, we asked several professionals, young and old alike, to describe the tools of their trade. Here's what they said.

Tools of the Trade:

iPhone Apps

The life of a teenager requires a lot more tools than one may think. Here are actual screenshots of the basic mobile apps from the phones of a 14-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl. These are the basic tools they say they need to function on a daily basis. Your teenager's needs may vary.



Teens: Boy

Snapseed: photo filtering app to make Instagram pics look cool.

Vine: video app that lets you take short, six-second movies of you slam-dunking on a seven-foot rim, and then send it to all your friends.

Instagram: Incredibly popular photo sharing app.

Twitter: social networking app to share your thoughts in 140 characters or less.

Netflix: Lets you watch episodes of Prison Break (and other shows) anytime you want.

SportsCenter: for updates on your favorite professional, college and fantasy teams.

Snapchat: Lets you send pictures and video to your friends that disappear six seconds after they watch them. (Or do they?)

Flappy Bird: Feel your heart rate soar as you try to guide a stupid little bird through a vertical maze. The most annoying video game ever.

Kicks on Fire: the No. 1 online magazine for sneaker news, updates and release dates. A must for the newest generation of sneakerheads.

Messages: text message notification. There's always at least one pending.

Teens: Girl

Facebook: Update your status or check on what your friends are up to.

Twitter: Follow your favorite celebrities! Get live updates during The Bachelor!

Instagram: Incredibly popular photo sharing app.

You Tube: Watch any video about anything, whenever you want. SNL skits, music videos, sheep that scream like humans to Taylor Swift songs. Make your friends watch it too.

SportsCenter: for professional and college sports updates. No fantasy league interest.

Snapchat: Make duck faces and send them to your friends. All. The. Time.

Vine: Send six-second videos to your friends. They love them.

Messages: none pending here, but that will change momentarily.

Screen Shot: You and your BFF making faces. Mandatory.

