

Growing vegetables during a pandemic

For many vegetable producers, the COVID-19 pandemic has turned business as usual on its head. In a rapidly changing environment, farmers have moved quickly, harnessing their creativity and adapting their business models while prioritizing health and safety. These case studies highlight a few of the major changes, challenges, and successes two farmers have experienced with regards to their employees, health and safety, and sales and marketing. Additionally, these farmers reflect on their roles as food producers during this uncertain time and their thoughts on how this new environment may impact their operations over the long term.

CASE STUDY

PrairieErth Farm

Katie Bishop

Interviewed on June 4, 2020 and on July 28, 2020 by Sarah Janes Ugoretz, Doctoral Candidate at UW-Madison (sjanes@wisc.edu)

FARM BASICS

Year farm established: 1979

Number of seasons of vegetable production: 12

Location: Atlanta, Illinois

Acres in production: 35 acres in vegetable production

Growing practices: certified organic

Primary sales channels pre-pandemic: wholesale, farmers markets, CSA

CSA membership in 2019: 165

CSA membership in 2020: 321, with a waiting list near 100

Hired employees in 2019: 14, not including Katie and her husband Hans

Hired employees in 2020: 18, not including Katie and Hans (started the season with 18, but are now down to 14 with 2 quitting early on and 2 quitting during the season)

EMPLOYEES

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- The pandemic created new management-related challenges, especially early on.
- Employees are encouraged to minimize exposure while away from work and are required to review and follow on-farm COVID-19 guidelines.
- A written COVID plan is in place, including contingency plans to maintain operations.
- Efforts are in place to minimize stress for employees, including more breaks, slightly shorter days, and greater diversity in tasks and workflow.
- H-2A workers face additional layers of stress during the pandemic.
- Employee retention remains an issue, especially as the season intensifies.

EARLY CHALLENGES. As the pandemic unfolded, one of the first major challenges Katie and her husband Hans encountered was figuring out how to navigate and respond to crew members' concerns. One of their employees needed to stay home for a period of time to provide

childcare. This was fairly straightforward, and the employee was compensated through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. However, two other employees—a husband and wife—just didn't feel safe working in this new environment. As Katie says, "They were afraid to come to work, which we understood, but we couldn't ask the rest of our staff to come to work and then pay these two while they stayed home." But since these two staff members played very important roles—one as the delivery driver and the other as a team lead and translator for the farm's Spanish-speaking employees—Katie and Hans showed their appreciation by offering occasional food and financial compensation to help with rent and other bills. But as May arrived, neither had committed to a return date and Katie had reached the point of needing to bring on additional employees. Shortly thereafter, the delivery driver decided to resign his position, but the other employee remained hesitant. Eventually, she asked to return to work, but in a part-time capacity. Though they didn't have a need for a part-timer, Katie said, "We valued her, so we were willing to take her back in any capacity." During this discussion, Katie explained that when it came to scheduling, full-timers would be offered priority hours. At this point, the employee became upset and quit. "We felt like we were being more than flexible and even generous at times," Katie reflects. "This really caused some turmoil and bad feelings. We were waiting on her to come back for months only to have her quit."

On top of this mounting stress, these departures brought another issue to the fore. At some point, PrairiErth Farm's payroll had reached the point of requiring them to pay into unemployment insurance, but Katie says she and Hans weren't aware of the guidelines and therefore hadn't begun this process. Though these two employees' claims would likely have been denied since their reason for staying home was not permitted under the CARES Act, Katie was still very troubled by this realization. "It's important for us to know the ins and outs of running a business and being an employer, and we failed here."

CREW GUIDANCE. From the beginning, Katie has been very direct with her employees about what it would mean if someone were to become sick with the virus. "This would be detrimental to our business and there is a good chance we would have to shut down for the year." But as COVID cases are still minimal in their county, things on the farm have begun to feel a little more relaxed. Though the messaging and the stakes remain the same, "everyone has just become more complacent now that the initial shock is gone. This is just reality now." With the arrival of high temperatures and a dry spell, mask wearing has decreased. "Primarily, I'm letting it go," Katie says. "Employees still wear them when they're in the trucks together, but we're done transplanting so no one is really working that close together."

However, with crew members beginning to expand their social groups, Katie has instituted a new policy—anyone who has traveled out of the community or who spends time with a larger group of family or friends must wear a mask on the farm for two weeks. "I struggle with this idea of telling people what they can do. And a lot of farmers say I'm being too nice, that they would absolutely tell their employees they couldn't go places. But all that would do is screw up our morale and relationships." So instead, Katie is trying to keep things in perspective. "I've told them, 'You know, you're going to be the reason your coworkers lose their jobs if you bring this on my farm. I can't tell you what to do, but you have to make the best decision you can and think about everyone else. If you're telling me you can go away and you trust that you can come back and keep these people safe, then that's fine. But if you're unsure, then we need to talk about it.'"

HEALTH AND SAFETY TRAINING. PrairiErth already had health and hygiene training in place due to the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) requirements and the farm's Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification. "The day they start, they're going through the basics of not coming to work when they're sick, when to wash their hands, how to wash their hands." On top of this, though, Katie and Hans developed a written set of COVID-19 guidelines for employees to follow. They're required to review this document on their own, but Katie incorporates follow-up discussion to reinforce the content. "We talk about what symptoms look like, how to communicate that, and that this would be paid time off. So we're trying to encourage them to take that time off if they're not feeling well." Katie also works visuals into the conversation. For example, early on, rather than just telling employees to stay 6 feet apart, she would say, "This truck bed is 6 feet. If you can't stay a truck bed away from people, then you need to put your mask on." She also reviews things that may be easily overlooked, like how to put a mask on and take it off properly. With 3 crew members who speak Spanish as their first language, this document is also available in Spanish.

COVID PLAN. PrairiErth Farm has a written COVID-19 plan, and Katie has outlined alternate work arrangements in the event that crew members test positive for the virus or need to quarantine. In addition to Katie and Hans, there are seven employees who live on or near the farm. As long as everyone remains healthy, Katie would look to this group to keep the farm running. "I would ask them to self-quarantine here, but we could continue to operate the farm together. We would stop the CSA and wholesale deliveries and wouldn't sell product, but we could at least continue to plant and weed and water."

However, an experience early on demonstrated that despite having formal policies and plans in place, responding in real time can be confusing and stressful. One of Katie's employees was experiencing gastrointestinal symptoms and, out of an abundance of caution, a doctor encouraged this person to get tested. At that point, Katie and Hans revisited the guidelines and decided to take no further action beyond having the employee stay home until the test results—which were negative—came back. Though they were following their protocol, Katie emphasizes how anxious she was throughout this experience. "When that happened, we weren't sure what to do. It wasn't super clear, and I didn't want to make the wrong decision when no one thought it was COVID—they were just being cautious."

As she looks ahead to the fall, Katie thinks of the major contribution storage crops make to the farm's overall revenue. "We need a lot of staff to pull those out of the field, and we can't afford to leave them in there." If someone were to get sick during this time, the consequences could be dire. "We probably need to start planning for that now, cause I'm not sure exactly what that would look like. But it would be really bad."

MANAGING EMPLOYEE STRESS. In response to the new challenges and opportunities brought on by the pandemic, PrairiErth Farm added 4 full-time workers this year. However, at this point in the season, their crew is down from 18 to 14 employees and about half of these people are working in agriculture for the first time. "This alone brings its own set of challenges," Katie says, but then when you consider all of the other compounding factors—from the weather and the workload to the emotional and financial toll of the pandemic—"everyone's capacity for

stress is extremely low.” In response, Katie is trying to keep work as manageable as possible. “We’re taking more breaks, trying to keep the days a little shorter, and we’ve cut back on a lot of wholesale.” Mechanical cultivation has cut down on some of the hand weeding, and crew members are switching jobs more frequently. “If they’re getting too tired in the field, we move them to the packshed to sanitize totes so they can just zone out and cool down.” Katie recognizes that these efforts cost the farm money, but she sees them as necessary investments at this point.

Another way Katie is trying to minimize stress for crew members is by providing them with a blank copy of the employee review as soon as they’re brought on. In the past, employees knew they’d be completing a review a month or two into the season, but they didn’t necessarily know what the process would look like or what the evaluation criteria would be. Now, Katie says, “We’re taking this more seriously. It’s a structured time for them to talk, and not knowing what’s expected of them adds this immediate layer of stress.”

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES FOR H-2A WORKERS. Katie and Hans have three employees with H-2A visas. “Early on, we were getting a lot of conflicting information about whether they could come or not. No one knew.” Eventually, they were able to welcome these employees to their farm, but not before they completed a two-week quarantine in a mobile home Katie and Hans had rented nearby. “I just can’t imagine how scary it must have been for them to come—politically, not just culturally—and then have to deal with this pandemic. Can you imagine? These guys are so brave.” While this experience may be behind them, Katie says these employees face another ongoing challenge—not being able to see their kids and family members who live in nearby states. The farm’s strict no-visitor policy is crucial for maintaining health and safety, but it has been especially hard for these employees. Katie has offered to help them set up Skype since in-person visits on the farm aren’t possible right now.

EMPLOYEE TRANSITION. Hiring more employees early on was due in part to demand, but Katie says it was also meant to “spread the work out so no one was feeling like they were carrying such a heavy load.” Now, the farm is down on labor during what is arguably the most stressful part of the season. But equally concerning to Katie is that many of her new hires came to the farm after losing their restaurant jobs. “They weren’t necessarily interested in farm work, they just needed a job.” And as the season intensifies and the work gets harder, Katie feels like the commitment just isn’t there for some of these crew members. “They now know that they’re not returning to their normal jobs anytime soon. It’s like we were a transitional job, and now they’re wondering, ‘Well what am I going to do next?’”

HEALTH AND SAFETY / SANITATION PRACTICES AND POLICIES

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Employees are encouraged to wear masks when within 6 feet of one another, but work is naturally more spread out at this point in the season.
- Lunches and breaks have been staggered to help with distancing.
- Individual crew members are responsible for specific daily sanitation tasks.
- Packing CSA shares into plastic bags instead of wax boxes has been a positive change.

MASKS AND DISTANCING. Early on, Katie required employees to wear masks when they were within six feet of one another. While many tasks already involved a certain amount of physical distancing, others—like riding on the transplanter—made mask-wearing necessary. The farm’s crew leader, greenhouse manager, and farm manager remained extra vigilant, and Katie would often hear them yelling out “Masks!” or “Spread out!” Over time, though this policy has become more relaxed, crew members still tend to put their masks on when they’re riding in a vehicle together, and lunches and breaks are still being staggered to help with distancing. As mentioned previously, a new two-week mask policy is now in place for any crew member who travels outside of the community or spends time with a large group of people.

SANITATION. Early on, Katie shared the [University of Minnesota Extension’s COVID-19 Response Plan Template for Fruit and Vegetable Farms](#) with her employees, asking that they continue to think about whether the farm should consider implementing any additional policies or practices. Sanitation tasks were divvied up amongst the crew so that each person was responsible for specific jobs, and several items were cleaned multiple times a day, including the time clock, door handles, the employee kitchen, the bathrooms, and the trucks. A stricter handwashing policy was also put in place. The message to crew members at this earlier stage was straightforward, Katie says. “If you don’t follow this policy, we can fire you. That’s how seriously I want you to take this.” While many of these practices are still broadly in place, Katie mentions that certain things—like the truck door handles—probably aren’t being cleaned as frequently. “The hand sanitizer is still in the trucks and by the time clocks and I do see the crew use it, but the strictness of the rules has eased up a bit.”

DELIVERY AND PICK-UP POLICIES. In the past, crew members would pack CSA shares into reusable wax boxes. With health and safety a top priority, Katie has adjusted this practice so that now employees are packing into heavy duty, plastic bags ([see them here](#)). They’re more affordable than the wax boxes, hold an adhesive label, and are gusseted. Being clear, they provide a really pleasing visual, but they also take up less space during delivery. Crew members pack the bags into black bulb crates, and depending on the size of each week’s share, three or four bags will fit. And, because the bulb crates are stackable, the crew can fit twice as many shares in about the same space as a cardboard box. As the farm begins to pack tomatoes and heavier items like sweet corn and melons, Katie thinks they’ll need to move up to the larger bag size ([see them here](#)), though she’s still expecting to retain some space savings. Overall, this change has been so positive it will likely become permanent. And while some members have expressed concern over the use of plastic, Katie points out that the wax boxes aren’t recyclable either and has encouraged members to find ways to reuse the bags.

With the growth of PrairiErth Farm’s CSA program, more members are visiting the farm to pick up their boxes than in years past. This has been an exciting change, but it has also meant that Katie has had to be very clear in communicating the pickup policy. To minimize risk and overlap, members are assigned to one of the two pickup days to retrieve their shares, and they have between 9:00am and 7:00pm to do so. Rather than head into the packshed, members now go into a separate shed where two refrigerators are keeping their shares cool and where hand sanitizer is prominently displayed for their use upon arrival. Overall, Katie thinks this system has been working well. But what she’s really excited about is the opportunity it has created for broader engagement from the surrounding area. “Now, more people in the community can pre-

order and I can just put their orders in the fridge for them.” Not only does this bring more members out to the farm, but Katie hopes it will lead to higher retention in the years ahead.

COMMUNICATION

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Messaging centers on the farm’s ability to provide a healthy, consistent source of food.
- A focus group of members participated in drafting the farm’s revised pickup policies.
- Visuals emphasize the importance of maintaining health and safety on and off the farm.
- Messaging must carefully express the rules and guidelines without triggering a political reaction.

COMMUNICATION. Katie sees this as a critical moment for farmers like her. “This is where local food is going to shine. This is why we need this resilient local food system.” From the start, PrairiErth Farm’s message has been simple: “We’ve got this taken care of. You don’t have to be afraid to source food from us. You don’t have to worry about food running out. And you don’t have to worry about going to the stores. We’re here to step up and be part of your community.” She believes this messaging has not only driven the explosive growth in their CSA, but has also sparked greater interest from their local community. “All of a sudden, people who haven’t necessarily cared that we’re here want to come to the farm and get their vegetables from us.”

As for communicating new policies and practices to customers and CSA members, “In the beginning, it was easy because everyone was afraid and onboard.” But as time has passed, Katie says that “things have become political, and I feel like I have to be really careful about the messaging I’m sending out. I don’t want to alienate customers.” She has addressed this concern in a few creative ways. Early on, a call went out inviting any interested CSA members to participate in a focus group charged with making the pickup process safer. About 15 members responded and ultimately came up with a set of fairly strict guidelines. Katie believes taking a democratic approach helped with buy-in from the larger membership. “Announcing the plan was less me saying, ‘This is what we’re going to do.’ Instead, it was the conclusion the group had come to—not just my idea.”

Katie has also incorporated a personal angle in communicating the new guidelines. “I shared pictures of some of the people in our lives that are high-risk. This is our grandma, this is my dad, this is my best friend who is a nurse. This is personal for us, so by cooperating with the guidelines, you’re helping us keep these people safe.” Meanwhile, to show members the steps the farm is taking to ensure their safety, Katie and Hans have been documenting daily farm tasks with photos. They’re being strategic about what they share, however. For instance, employees don’t wear gloves when they pack the CSA, and although they’re starting with clean hands, some members might fixate on that point. With these considerations in mind, Katie tries to share photos that document safety without introducing new stress into the conversation.

SALES CHANNELS

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Growth in the CSA program has been strong, but the “community” aspect has required creativity during the pandemic.
- “Transactional” CSA members may be difficult to retain.
- Decreased sales, higher labor demands, and the absence of a mask requirement have created farmers market challenges.

CSA. With so much initial uncertainty about grocery, restaurant, and farmers market sales, expanding their CSA was one way for PrairiErth to make up some of that lost revenue. They grew their program from 165 members to 321 and maintain a waiting list close to 100. Despite this growth, Katie and Hans decided to keep the size of their operation mostly unchanged. “We’re not going to suddenly grow more to meet this demand, because we don’t know how long it’s going to last.” However, the expansion of the CSA program did require several internal adjustments. The crew still packs orders one day per week, but Katie pushed the schedule back to allow more time for harvesting, washing, and packing. Though this has been a major shift, the most significant change has been eliminating the market-style share and instead pre-packing every bag on the farm. This adds about two hours to each week’s workload, but as Katie sees it, there is a trade-off. “It takes more time to pack the bags, but the pickup is so efficient that I need fewer people working it.” In fact, over time, this process has gotten so smooth that Katie now feels comfortable stepping back and letting crew members handle the off-farm pickups. “We have two people running shares to members’ cars and one person making sure the right name is getting checked off the list and keeping things organized.”

Though operations are running smoothly, Katie says that at this point, the major disappointment is that members haven’t been able to come out to the farm. “That’s a really important component of CSA. One of our top goals is to retain as many members as possible, and it’s hard to do that when I can’t physically shake their hand and talk to them.” So instead, she’s focusing on social media, working with the farm’s CSA Community Manager to send out hand-written thank you post cards, and putting together a few virtual farm tours. While she had floated the idea of offering staggered member tours on Sundays, Katie remained skeptical that she’d have the time to make this work. When crew members shared their discomfort with the idea and the amount of risk it might introduce, she let it go completely.

In addition to the limitations that farmers are now facing when it comes to the “community” aspect of the CSA model, Katie also worries about those would-be members on the farm’s very long waiting list. She had hoped that by June they’d have their new systems dial in and be able to welcome some of these members into the fold. But at that point, “Things still felt really overwhelming so we weren’t ready. And now with the staffing issues we have, we’re just not going to take on any more.” Instead, Katie is hoping that she can interest these potential members in the farm’s winter CSA share.

While Katie has tried to figure out how to keep these would-be members engaged, she has faced some challenges with current members. “It’s funny how many people signed up for the CSA with this sense of urgency and now they don’t care. We even had one person ask for their money back.” Katie was anticipating this, though. “There is this idea that the CSA is a transaction between money and food.” She thinks the stress and fear people were experiencing in the early

days of the pandemic led them to seek out that transactional experience. For these members, being part of a farm was probably an afterthought, if anything. When she thinks about investing in and retaining members who are new to the CSA this year, Katie doesn't consider these customers her top priority.

FARMERS MARKETS. Before the Bloomington Farmers Market began allowing walk-up sales, PrairiErth Farm had been participating in its curbside pickup program. Unfortunately, Local Line, the software system the market selected for online orders, was fairly problematic. “There were no minimums in place, so someone could order one watermelon radish for \$1 and I'd have to print out the invoice, put it in a bag, and staple it all together. At that point, I haven't made any money.” As the market prepared to reopen to foot traffic, Katie was highly optimistic about the new setup. The farm would have control over ordering and minimums, crew members would have more interaction with customers since they'd be answering questions and packing orders, and sales would likely be higher since certain items would be sold in pre-packaged quantities rather than individually.

Since the revamped market has launched, however, Katie has adjusted her expectations. At this point, the farm's records show they're down about 100 customers per market, and the stand's sales are down about 30 percent. However, this figure includes value-added goods Katie would typically sell in the past but has purposely not pushed herself to make this year. Accounting only for vegetable sales puts this number closer to 12 percent, which Katie feels good about. The labor required to comply with the health and safety policies, however, is a major point of concern. “Normally, all of these items—green beans, tomatoes, potatoes—they were never pre-packaged but now they have to be and we just don't have time to do that on the farm. So now, at the market we're trying to restock, quickly quart up the potatoes, all of that. The labor involved has grown considerably.” With sales down, adding more employees to assist isn't a viable option. But at the same time, Katie worries about the customer experience—at her stand, but also more broadly. “There's no live music, no prepared food, no artists—all of the non-farmer things have been removed. It's not an experience anymore for many of them.”

However, the most glaring point of contention is the market's mask policy. While vendors must wear a mask, customers are strongly encouraged—but not required—to do so. As a result, many choose to shop without a mask. “I feel like we're putting ourselves at risk by being out there. We're wearing a mask for six hours, and it's hot and uncomfortable. And then you have people four feet in front of you not wearing a mask. It is emotionally taxing to have people not care about you like that.” To add to the frustration, Katie says that because of this policy, many of her regular and long-term customers have decided to stay away from the market. “So not only are these people putting me at risk, but they're also limiting my sales because so many people don't feel comfortable coming to the market.” While Katie says she could require customers to wear masks at her stand, she feels like that would put her in a really difficult situation. “My regular customers still aren't coming, and now I've just alienated the ones that refuse to wear one.”

MONEY MANAGEMENT

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- A huge influx of cash underscored the importance of careful financial management.
- Diversification in sales and marketing provides a powerful layer of protection.

“The main thing that has been really predominant throughout this whole experience is finances.” Even while farmers market sales and restaurant orders dropped off, PrairiErth Farm quickly found itself in a favorable position. As the farm sold through its entire inventory, demand was so strong that Katie was able to take the highest price from buyers. April sales were up 178 percent from the year before, and CSA deposits continued to flood in. The farm received a Paycheck Protection Program loan that will be forgiven and another Small Business Association loan with the first \$10,000 forgiven. “We had this huge influx of cash, and it felt so great.” Katie and Hans made a handful of strategic purchases early on—a larger truck to accommodate the expanded CSA program, a high-pressure wash line to increase efficiency, and a new CSA Community Manager position to streamline member communication and free up some of Katie’s time.

“We were thinking our sales were going to continue to be fantastic, but money ebbs and flows,” and Katie says that things have more or less leveled off by now. “People have calmed down a little in terms of their food purchases, and we missed six or seven markets—that’s a substantial amount of income we lost.” Remaining disciplined with their finances has served them well up to this point, though. The key has been keeping the excitement in check and “not spending more than you absolutely have to, but making the right investments so that you’re efficient.” Katie is also adamant that the farm’s diversification has provided an additional layer of protection during this time. “If we didn’t have the CSA, or the farmers market, or the wholesale in this situation—if one of them was missing—we would be in a lot of trouble. It is our diversity in marketing that has allowed us to stay viable.”

Being strategic with their money management has also allowed the farm to make some big decisions as the season has unfolded. “With our staffing situation, we have pulled back from six very large wholesale customers. Because they’re so big, they require a lot of labor and we just don’t have it right now.” This has helped Katie manage her own stress as well as that of the crew, and while she remains nervous about being able to reestablish these accounts, the farm’s large storage crop is reassuring. “The only thing we have going for us is that we’re the oddballs in that we have so much to offer in the winter when other farms don’t.”

FARMER MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Finding ways to create or maintain balance between work and life has become even more difficult during the pandemic.
- Having an identity outside of being a farmer is more challenging when it is harder to leave the farm.

Over the winter, Katie made a self-care plan. Yoga, visits to the gym, lunch with friends, dinner in town with Hans—things that took her off the farm and brought some much needed balance to her life. The virus put an abrupt end to these activities, however. “The self-care thing? Really, it’s basic survival now. Like I’m making sure I have plenty of sleep and that I’m drinking plenty

of water.” The pandemic has ushered in a new level of stress Katie couldn’t have imagined before. “In the past, it just felt like a normal part of farming—it was manageable. But now it’s just not. Speed bumps have turned into these huge mountains because we have no capacity to handle things anymore. So we’ve been able to narrow in and say ‘I don’t want to feel like this anymore. What can we do to change it?’.” This realization has already resulted in some action, like dropping a few of the farm’s larger wholesale accounts and opting out of October farmers markets. But Katie knows that creating a more sustainable work-life balance and stress load is a long-term process.

At the same time, she’s mindful that “normal life” isn’t likely to return any time soon. Farmer gatherings that she and Hans would look forward to each year are already being moved to virtual platforms, and their close-knit network of fellow farmers isn’t within reach like it once was. “There’s this realization that the only way we’re going to get through this really difficult time is if we take care of each other. No one else can take care of us right now because they’re taking care of themselves.”

While her gaze may have broadened for the time being, Katie hasn’t lost sight of her own personal goals. “I need to be someone that’s not just a farmer. And I’ve lost my identity outside of farming because I can’t leave this place very often, so that’s been pretty depressing for me.” Acknowledging these feelings of disappointment and frustration, Katie is trying to keep things in perspective. “I just have to find new ways to get off the farm. If I have to drive to the park and go for a walk around the neighborhood, then that’s what I need to do. I need to let go of that disappointment that I can’t do what I had been doing right now.”

LOOKING BACK AND THINKING AHEAD

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- The pandemic has ushered in a new era of experimentation and change.
- Investments in process, efficiency, and stress minimization may work to retain both CSA members and farm employees.

For all of its challenges, Katie says the pandemic has served as a catalyst for experimentation and change at the farm level. After 11 years, things had started to feel somewhat stagnant. “Honestly, I was a little bored. It was always the same.” That quickly changed, however, as opportunities to shake things up and reinvent parts of the operation continued to emerge. As Katie explains it, the pandemic and its added stressors forced her and Hans to look closely at each marketing stream and ask questions like, “Is this something we want to continue to do? Is this something we want to grow? Does it make sense to do that?” And while this process felt scary and intimidating at first, not only have the end results been encouraging, but Katie says that on more than one occasion she and Hans have stepped back and asked, “Why haven’t we been doing this all along?”

Looking ahead, Katie sees many of these new practices playing a role as she works to retain as many CSA members as possible. In the past, it often felt like the labor requirements outweighed the program’s financial returns. But Katie says she recognizes that she’s looking at “an

incredible, potentially once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to keep this many people engaged.” She is hopeful that the investments they’ve made into making the farm more efficient—like the high-pressure wash line, a new van, and the CSA Community Manager position—will not only benefit their members, but will make it easier for the farm to maintain a much larger CSA.

Katie isn’t only thinking about keeping her CSA members, though. Although some of her new employees—many of whom lost their jobs in the service industry—have started to look for other opportunities, Katie still hopes to retain as many as possible. “Restaurant and kitchen staff are some of the best farm staff because they know what work ethic is and they know what it is to be uncomfortable and to hustle.” Turnover has long been a challenge, but Katie is hopeful that taking a more proactive approach to managing stress and creating a work experience that is as positive as possible will serve as incentive. “I want them to know that we care about them. They’re fantastic.”