By Kristie Snyder , , GreenLeaf Editor



Crooked Carrot Community Supported Kitchen is no ordinary business, a fact that's reflected even in its name. When two of its co-founders, Johanna Brown and Silas Conroy, were developing the concept for a "community supported kitchen," something new to Ithaca, they also happened to be working at Stick and Stone Farm "washing thousands of pounds of carrots," Silas explained. They sorted out their favorite misfits, "and by the end we had an amazing collection of crooked carrots. That was the context in which we made the choice of name. As our business has grown, we've become fond of the perseverance metaphor embodied in the crooked carrot — a living thing meeting an obstacle and finding a way to keep growing."

When you set foot in Crooked Carrot's kitchen, currently located at Stick and Stone Farm in Ulysses, you'll immediately notice that the place smells amazing. Fresh flowers decorate the small, efficiently organized space, and quart-sized mason jars of spices line the shelves. Napa cabbages the size and shape of sleeping babies recline on a work table, ready to be transformed, via the magic of lacto-fermentation, into tasty kim chi. In a corner, 300 pounds each of sauerkraut and dilled green beans ferment in barrels.

The four owners of Crooked Carrot began their venture in 2011, and built their business somewhat in reverse. "It was always part of the vision to have our own farm, but we created the market first," said Silas. "There was already an abundant fresh food market in the area," added Johanna, "and we didn't want to directly compete." Thus, the venture began as a "Community

Supported Kitchen," or CSK. Members of the Full Plate Farm Collective CSA could purchase Crooked Carrot shares as well, receiving weekly installments of prepared food meant to complement the CSA offerings — dressings, sauces, etc. — along with seasonal soups and other dishes, and lacto-fermented pickles. The raw ingredients were sourced from a variety of organic farms within 30 miles of Ithaca — Stick and Stone, Remembrance, and The Good Life Farms among them. Over time, the share has evolved to offer more ready-to-eat foods — and the pickles remain. A sample week's offering from October included a vegan or chicken Mole Taco Filling, Smoked Pepper Squash soup, Cilantro Black Beans, Tomatillo Salsa, and various pickled items. This past June, Crooked Carrot began wholesaling its pickled products to local suppliers, including GreenStar. You can also find Crooked Carrot's cooking at local festivals such as Chili Fest, and they offer catering services as well.

Among the four owners (Silas, Dohanna, her husband, Jesse Brown, and Jenny Caldwell), Silas is the only one with professional cooking experience, but the others brought experience in farming, and Jenny and Silas are both grads of Groundswell's Farm Business Planning class. What the four share is a commitment to good local food. "We want to offer people food options that are made by a small business, locally sourced with the best non-GMO, organic ingredients. We feel like there aren't a lot of options for that right now," Silas said.

With the market for their CSK shares, pickles, and catering solidified, it was time to start the farm. They now lease two acres in West Danby, land shared with Hemlock Grove Farm's organic apple orchard, on which they grow carrots, napa and green cabbage, garlic, onions, tomatillos, hot peppers, and winter squash. "Next year we'll go a little bigger, but not much. We'll add cucumbers for the launch of cucumber pickles next year," said Jenny. "We grew 12,000 pounds of produce to turn into pickles this year — well, Jenny grew most of it!" said Silas. "We're really proud of that." All of their products are grown and prepared according to organic standards, and next year the business will earn its organic certification via NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association).

Currently at GreenStar, you can find bottled baek (white) kim chi, Garlic Scapers (pickled garlic scapes – highly recommended by Grocery Assistant Manager Lucienne Binkerd-Dale), and escabeche in the Grocery refrigerated section. The kim chi can be found in bulk, in the Delicatessen's Mediterranean bar. "It's been so popular, we're looking to free up space for some more of their products," said Delicatessen Manager Erik Lucas. "We're hoping to add the apple sauerkraut and Dilly Beast (dilled green beans) into rotation." The escabeche can also be found on the antipasti platter available for special order from the deli. "I love their commitment to good food," added Erik. "They're planting fields of crops to make these items, and so they have great control over the products. The quality of the fermentation is excellent. I love the kim chi and the Scapers... and I'm anxiously awaiting my sample of apple kraut!"

Beyond GreenStar, Regional Access recently began distributing the pickle products, now found in local stores including Good to Go in Trumansburg, and restaurants including Northstar restaurant and Ithaca Bakery. "We're hoping to secure our own farmland and build a kitchen on that land," says Silas. "But the Northeast would be as far as we go for distribution. We're committed to always sourcing within 30 miles of Ithaca."