

Community Supported Agricultural Program

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CSAs - Eating Locally

While we all know eating a balanced diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, actually getting the recommended five to nine daily servings can be a challenge. One way to increase the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables is to participate in a Community Supported Agricultural Program (CSA).

A CSA is a farm that sells shares to a participant. To become a member, one pays an upfront fee to the farmer in early spring for a full- or half-sized share. This entitles the buyer or supporter to a portion of the farm's produce. While most CSAs still concentrate primarily on vegetables, others are augmenting the offerings to include fruit, flowers, dairy products, meat or even baked goods. Most CSAs provide a list of the vegetables (and other products) that will be grown with some even providing an estimate as to the anticipated quantities of product. If the farm enjoys a bumper crop, the supporters share equally in the bounty. Likewise, if the growing conditions are not favorable, the supporters share fewer crops.

CSA Benefits

A CSA provides numerous benefits. Taste is the first and most obvious benefit! As a city girl all my life and now a recent CSA supporter, I am amazed at the difference in taste! The lettuce leaves are crisper and thicker. The colors are more vibrant and most importantly the taste is all around better. Not surprisingly, when vegetables and fruits are picked ripe and transportation

times minimized, the food is fresh and tastes better.

CSA Summer Produce

Green onions	Kohlrabi
Leaf lettuce	Romaine lettuce
Shell peas	Snap peas
Radishes	Spinach
Beets	Broccoli
Green cabbage	Red cabbage
Yellow squash	Zucchini
Banana peppers	Bell peppers
Cherry tomatoes	Cucumbers
Eggplant	Green beans
Hot peppers	Tomatoes
Okra	Onions
White potatoes	Sweet potatoes

A second benefit is the variety of the produce. When shopping at the grocery, I follow a predetermined traffic pattern. I grab my tried and trusted old friends, a bag of carrots, two pounds of apples, a large bunch of semi-ripe bananas, red leaf lettuce and maybe an avocado if I am feeling daring. The CSA has encouraged me to eat vegetables I typically bypass and introduced me to a few new ones such as kohlrabi, okra and Chinese cabbage. To illustrate this point, I listed all the vegetables my family will enjoy throughout the course of the spring and summer. My CSA, [New Century](#) based out of Circleville, Ohio is the producer of this delightful veggie cornucopia. The produce selection of course will vary based on the geographic location.



My CSA strives to be chemical free meaning it does not use chemical pesticides or fungicides except in case of emergency such as excessive insect damage or disease. It is not organic, but much closer to it than our regular grocery store purchases. As a mother with two small children, I worry about the transfer of the chemicals to the body. While the verdict remains out on the possible benefits of organic foods, I simply feel better knowing the produce we are consuming has little or no chemicals on it.

Tim and Christy Cook, the owners and farmers of New Century, encourage all of the CSA members to visit the farm and see how the crops are progressing. We took advantage of their kind offer and toured the farm. The children were surprised to learn yellow squash grows on vines and is not prepackaged with plastic wrap. I enjoyed learning about the farm and its history. Tim and Christy provide 26 different vegetables during a thirteen to fifteen week

harvest period. Their 27 acres of land serves approximately 650 families. Tim and Christy, like most other CSA farmers, are extremely dedicated to their supporters. Tim shared with me, “I want all of our families to receive a quality product and to be overly satisfied. We do everything within our power to make the CSA a positive experience.” The Cooks provide weekly newsletters with farm updates, crop development and even recipes. I enjoy the sense of community and well being the CSA creates.

CSAs are becoming more consumer-friendly. In the past, a supporter would go to a central drop location. The member had a few hours on a Saturday morning for example, to pick up the produce for the week. Committing to a specific weekly pick-up time can be confining and inconvenient. Some CSAs have solved this problem by providing a delivery service. If the supporter will not be home at the delivery time, a cooler with ice is left outside. The vegetables are brought to the home and placed in the cooler. While not available in all areas, the convenience of a weekly delivery is a wonderful luxury!

Finally, the price of most CSAs is very reasonable. As a family, we estimated the cost of buying produce at the grocery store. We used non-organic pricing and thus it was not a fair comparison as our CSA produce is chemical free. Even with this difference, the CSA turned out to be very price competitive. The price comparison assumes it will be an average harvest. If conditions are favorable, the price will beat the grocery store. We decided to split a full-share with another family. As a result, the two families have received an abundance of produce for approximately \$20 per week each. Realistically, our family will spend more on produce than we would in an average summer, but it is because we are eating more vegetables than we normally do which is every mother’s goal!

Locating a CSA

The USDA 2007 Agricultural Census states there are 12,549 CSAs. Industry experts believe this figure is overly optimistic and estimate there somewhere between 1,000 and 2,500 CSAs currently. Regardless of the exact number, finding a CSA in your area may require some searching.

Finding a Local CSA

Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association Listing

Local Harvest www.localharvest.org

Rodale Institute – Farm Locator www.rodaleinstitute.org/farm_locator

Wilson College, Robyn Van Emmerik, CSA Farm Database www.wilson.edu/csa/farmdatabase.asp?id=1567

National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service - Search State and Regional Farm Directories

Thanks to the Internet, several on-line databases are available to aid the search process, but no one source provides a comprehensive listing. I stumbled onto our CSA from a friend's referral. In talking with our CSA farmer, most of his business comes from personal referrals. Thus, ask around! Do not forget to talk with your vendors at the farmer's market. Many CSAs use various channels to get their product to the consumer and thus, any left over produce is sold at the local farmers market.

Try a CSA

CSA membership has been a great experience for our family! One recent dinner consisted of a chef salad with several types of lettuce, spinach, cucumber and squash. In addition, we enjoyed fresh corn on the cob, steamed green beans and broccoli. For dessert, I made zucchini bread with a double portion of zucchini and half a cup less of sugar than normal. I cannot promise that joining a CSA will magically transform discriminating eaters into vegetable cravers; however, our family has made progress. My picky eater still scoffs at most vegetables, but after several attempts at yellow summer squash, which she calls a banana, she will now eat it! Progress is progress even if it is slow!

Christine Lemon is a mom of two preschoolers. She is a MBA graduate from the Ohio State University. Professionally, she is involved in business marketing and market research. Her passions include trying to instill healthy habits in her family and long distance running.

- References:
1. USDA, Department of Agriculture, 2007. <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml>
 2. University of Massachusetts Amherst Vegetable Program http://www.umassvegetable.org/food_farming_systems/csa/
 3. Local Harvest, Community Supported Agriculture <http://www.localharvest.org/csa/>

Title Picture: Tim Cook, New Century CSA

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