

As I sit here in wondering how to feel warm, one trick is to think of warm summer meals made with great salads and fresh vegetables. Then I think of the fun of buying at the farmer's markets that spring up to supply those vegetables. But there's an alternative to farmer's markets – buying directly from the farm – and for those of you who might be interested, here's some information. Now is also the time to act if you want to participate.

The formal name for buyer's clubs that work directly with local farms is "Community Supported Agriculture." The CSA movement started in Japan in the 60's under the name "takei", which is translated as "putting the farmer's face on food". The first CSA was founded in Massachusetts in the mid-80's, but the movement is only now really beginning to catch on, with about 1,000 CSA's across the nation.

While some CSA's are formed for political or environmental reasons, the movement is growing because there are benefits to everyone regardless of your political views. These benefits include:

- Procuring very fresh produce. Food in the U.S. travels, on average, 1,300 miles from the source to the market shelf. CSA food is local, fresh, and seasonal.
- Encouraging you to get out of the same buying rut in the produce section. While it can be disconcerting to receive a large celeriac if you've never seen one, it can be great fun to learn how to cook one.
- Stimulating culinary creativity. Dealing with the same squash for several weeks in a row really pushes you to find new ways to cook it.
- Eating more nutritionally. Most of us don't waste food, so you'll find ways to use that endive. For many of us, eating more vegetables or less processed food is a dietary improvement.

One of the misconceptions about CSA's is that they are all organic. This is not necessarily so, although all follow some definition of good farming practices. Some are certified organic, some follow organic methods but are not certified, others will be pesticide free or follow healthful crop rotation practices, etc.

Two kinds of farms participate in a CSA. The first type is a non-profit organization. These are often formed on community property and have a three-fold purpose – to preserve local farmland, to teach, and to supply fresh produce not only to consumers but often to lower income families, bread kitchens, etc. The Food Project is an example of a not-for-profit CSA in Lincoln, MA. The second type is a small farm that forms a CSA to stay economically viable. Brookfield Farm, a Massachusetts family-owned farm, has an informative web site describing this model.

Regardless of the type of farm, all CSA's work by selling shares. The farmer, usually with an advising committee that represents the buyers, determines his/her annual operating expenses as well as which vegetables to plant and on what schedule. The budget is divided into shares. The average share cost here in the Northeast is \$5-\$600. A share is most often calculated as enough produce to provide for the weekly vegetable needs of a family of four.

Buyers purchase their shares before planting, thereby guaranteeing the farmer his expenses and providing working capital. Shareowners either go to the farm to pick up their produce or pick it up at a designated distribution point. You get whatever is harvested, whenever it's harvested, so the shareholder takes on the weather and crop risks.

There are many variations of the basic CSA model. Some shares can be designated as "working shares", i.e. if you commit to 3-4 hours of work/week, share costs are lower. Some farms offer half shares. Some farms offer apprenticeships or pick-your-own days. Many CSA's become social, putting on pot luck dinners or regular meetings. Most CSA's do some teaching, especially about some of the more unusual vegetables. They provide planting/harvest information, consulting chefs, printed recipes, or cooking classes. Other farms expand outside of produce, including dairy products, meat, flowers, fruit, honey, and/or eggs.

For those of you who are interested, here are some sources for both more information about CSA's, which also have a search engine to help you find a local CSA. The primary source for CSA information is at the site for the Robyn Van En Center at Wilson College in Pa. Other useful sites are at the University of Massachusetts, and the USDA

If you'd like to join with others in Winchester taking part as a group in two local CSA's, call Susan Youmans at Environmental Partnerships at 781-729-4021 or email her at EOSystems@aol.com. You will need to call soon as shares are often sold out.

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