

Thinking about signing up for a CSA but want to learn more about the idea before you commit? Read on.

Over the last 20 years, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has become a popular way for consumers to buy local, seasonal food directly from a farmer. Here are the basics: a farmer offers a certain number of “shares” to the public. Typically the share consists of a box of vegetables, but other farm products may be included. Interested consumers purchase a share (aka a “membership” or a “subscription”) and in return receive a box (bag, basket) of seasonal produce each week throughout the farming season.

This arrangement creates several rewards for both the farmer and the consumer. In brief...

Advantages for farmers:

- Get to spend time marketing the food early in the year, before their 16 hour days in the field begin
- Receive payment early in the season, which helps with the farm’s cash flow
- Have an opportunity to get to know the people who eat the food they grow

Advantages for consumers:

- Eat ultra-fresh food, with all the flavor and vitamin benefits
- Get exposed to new vegetables and new ways of cooking
- Usually get to visit the farm at least once a season
- Find that kids typically favor food from “their” farm – even veggies they’ve never been known to eat
- Develop a relationship with the farmer who grows their food and learn more about how food is grown

It’s a simple enough idea, but its impact has been profound. Tens of thousands of families have joined CSAs, and in some areas of the country there is more demand than there are CSA farms to fill it. The government does not track CSAs, so there is no official

count of how many CSAs there are in the U.S.. LocalHarvest has the most comprehensive directory of CSA farms, with over 2,500 listed in our grassroots database. In 2008, 557 CSAs signed up with LocalHarvest, and in the first two months of 2009, an additional 300 CSAs joined the site.

Variations

As you might expect with such a successful model, farmers have begun to introduce variations. One increasingly common one is the “mix and match,” or “market-style” CSA. Here, rather than making up a standard box of vegetables for every member each week, the members load their own boxes with some degree of personal choice. The farmer lays out baskets of the week’s vegetables. Some farmers encourage members to take a prescribed amount of what’s available, leaving behind just what their families do not care for. Some CSA farmers then donate this extra produce to a food bank. In other CSAs, the members have wider choice to fill their box with whatever appeals to them, within certain limitations. (e.g. “Just one basket of strawberries per family, please.”)

CSAs aren’t confined to produce. Some farmers include the option for shareholders to buy shares of eggs, homemade bread, meat, cheese, fruit, flowers or other farm products along with their veggies. Sometimes several farmers will offer their products together, to offer the widest variety to their members. For example, a produce farmer might create a partnership with a neighbor to deliver chickens to the CSA drop off point, so that the CSA members can purchase farm-fresh chickens when they come to get their CSA baskets. Other farmers are creating standalone CSAs for meat, flowers, eggs, and preserved farm products. In some parts of the country, non-farming third parties are setting up CSA-like businesses, where they act as middle men and sell boxes of local (and sometimes non-local) food for their members.

Shared Risk

There is an important concept woven into the CSA model that takes the arrangement beyond the usual commercial transaction.

That is the notion of shared risk. When originally conceived, the CSA was set up differently than it is now. A group of people pooled their money, bought a farm, hired a farmer, and each took a share of whatever the farm produced for the year. If the farm had a tomato bonanza, everyone put some up for winter. If a plague of locusts ate all the greens, people ate cheese sandwiches. Very few such CSAs exist today, and for most farmers, the CSA is just one of the ways their produce is marketed. They may also go to the farmers market, do some wholesale, sell to restaurants, etc. Still, the idea that “we’re in this together” remains. On some farms it is stronger than others, and CSA members may be asked to sign a policy form indicating that they agree to accept without complaint whatever the farm can produce.

Many times, the idea of shared risk is part of what creates a sense of community among members, and between members and the farmers. If a hailstorm takes out all the peppers, everyone is disappointed together, and together cheer on the winter squash and broccoli. Most CSA farmers feel a great sense of responsibility to their members, and when certain crops are scarce, they make sure the CSA gets served first.

Still, it is worth noting that very occasionally things go wrong on a farm – like they do in any kind of business – and the expected is not delivered, and members feel gypped. At LocalHarvest we are in touch with CSA farmers and members from all over the country. Every year we hear get complaints about a few CSA farms (two to six farms a year, over the last nine years) where something happened and the produce was simply unacceptable. It might have been a catastrophic divorce, or an unexpected death in the family. Or the weather was abominable, or the farmer was inexperienced and got in over his/her head.

In our experience, if the situation seems regrettable but reasonable – a bad thing that in good faith could have happened to anyone – most CSA members will rally, *if they already know and trust the farmer*. These people are more likely to take the long view, especially if they have received an abundance of produce in

the past. They are naturally more likely to think, “It’ll be better next year,” than are new members who have nothing to which to compare a dismal experience. The take-home message is this: if the potential for “not getting your money’s worth” makes you feel anxious, then shared risk may not be for you and you should shop at the farmers market.

Sometimes we hear complaints from CSA members in situations where it appears to us that nothing really went wrong, but the member had unreasonable expectations. In the hope of minimizing disappointment and maximizing satisfaction, we’ve prepared the following tips and questions.

Tips for Potential CSA Members

Don't expect all your produce to come from the CSA

Most CSAs do not provide families with enough fruit to meet their usual intake. Many don’t provide any fruit at all, so it is good to ask what to expect in that regard. Depending on the size of your family and how much you cook, you will probably find that you need to supplement the vegetables as well, especially staples like onions, garlic, and carrots.

If you are not used to eating seasonally, do some research.

If you are not accustomed to eating seasonally, you may find that it takes a while to make a transition from eating whatever is at the grocery store (pretty much everything) to whatever is in your CSA basket (what’s in season). It may surprise you to find that tomatoes do not ripen until August in your area. You should expect the season to start off lighter than it finishes. In most areas, the first crops will be salad greens, peas, green onions and the like. By the end of the season, the boxes should be much heavier, with things like winter squash, potatoes, tomatoes, and broccoli. Many farms provide a list of what produce to expect when. It’s worth reading. If they don’t offer you such a list, ask.

Quantity varies – good to ask up front.

When filling the weekly CSA baskets, farmers try and provide a variety of items, in a reasonable quantity. They don't want to be skimpy, and they don't want to overwhelm their members. Too much of even a good thing, and it ends up going to waste, which makes everyone feel bad. Over time, farmers develop a feel for how much is the right amount for their particular community – what's fair, what's reasonable, what will get eaten. Of course, the weather and other mitigating circumstances can get in the way of their ability to provide the ideal amount, as discussed above. One of the most important questions to ask before you sign up is, "About how much produce do you expect to deliver each week, and how does that vary from the beginning of the season to the end?"

If you want to preserve food for winter, ask.

Some farms allow members to get extra quantities of certain vegetables for canning or freezing. If this is something that interests you, talk to the farmer early in the season.

Make sure you understand the policies.

Farms differ in their policies regarding what happens with your box if you don't pick it up (e.g. vacation, something-came-up, I forgot, etc.) Make sure you know how these situations are dealt with, before the season starts.

Questions You Might Ask

Nothing beats a personal conversation with the farmer. Here are some questions you might ask.

- How long have you been farming?
- How long have you been doing a CSA?
- How did last season go?
- I'd like to talk with a couple of your members before I commit. Could you give me contact info for a couple of "references"?

