



An Introduction to
Choosing and Participating in a CSA
(Community Supported Agriculture)

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Introduction

Let me start by saying that I'm not a professional cook. I didn't grow up cooking. I haven't taken professional culinary arts classes. Everything I've learned, I've learned by reading, listening, and practicing. In short, if I can do this, so can you!

I have been a member of a CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture, for three years now. I wholeheartedly believe in what a CSA stands for. However, I know it's not for everyone. If you're a picky eater, for example, or hate vegetables, you might not appreciate the experience of getting a box full of funny-looking vegetables that you're not sure what to do with. But if you have a sense of adventure, a willingness to try new things, then joining a CSA just might be for you.

Getting Started

Is a CSA right for you?

So, you're thinking about joining a CSA. You have probably heard that it's good for the environment, good for your health, good for local business, and sometimes a good deal. Before you sign on the dotted line, take a moment to think—*really* think—about whether you're ready for this type of commitment.

Every week, you will be getting more vegetables than you have probably ever purchased at one time, many of which you may not even know existed. If you eat a lot of processed foods, this sudden change in diet will make you, um, very regular.

Did I mention the pickups are *every week*? If you spend weeks on end vacationing at the cottage, you will have to forgo your investment or find someone to pick up your vegetables for you. You may find yourself running late for sporting events and company picnics because you have to pick up the vegetables.

See the fine print at the bottom of your contract? The line that says, “The shareholder realizes that natural conditions of weather may influence the availability of some crops in any given year”? That means that a flood may come along and you won’t get any potatoes. Or the Great Northern Blight strikes and you only get three weeks of tomatoes and the canning class is cancelled. Welcome to farming.

I’m not telling you this to scare you off. Being part of a CSA is incredibly rewarding. You will meet new people. You will learn how to cook. You will feel connected to your food in a way you never thought possible. You will have better skin and feel healthier. You will learn what “in season” means and how vegetables are *supposed* to taste. But in order to reap those rewards, you’ll need to put in some serious work.

That’s where this booklet comes in. With a little know-how, we’re going to make that a little easier.

Which CSA should I join?

You’ve decided to take the plunge. In order to make this the best experience possible, you’re going to need to do some homework. Otherwise, you may find yourself like my friend Kate, who paid for an entire season, received one pickup, and then the farmer vanished. Packed up and moved to Mississippi. She saw his equipment on Craigslist. True story.

The absolute best way to find a good CSA is through word of mouth. Start asking around—does anyone you know belong to a CSA? Have they heard of any? A good starting point is www.localharvest.org. Once you have a list of potential farms, you’ll want to consider the following:

1. Is the pickup location convenient?

Remember, you will be picking up the vegetables every week. Also, if you have to drive an hour each way, that kind of defeats the environmentally-friendly reason for joining.

2. What do their current members say about it?

Try to find someone who was a member the year before. Were they happy with their experience? Another clue is how fast their shares sell out, and how long they've been in business.

3. What produce do they offer? At what cost?

Most offer very similar vegetables, at comparable prices. However, some offer special options that let you pay extra for more of a certain type of vegetable (one CSA that I know of offers a "salad doubler" option, for example, or a "canning package.") Others offer fruit, either grown by them or through a partnership with another farm. You'll need to weigh your options.

**A note about "organic."* One of the reasons many people choose to participate in a CSA is because they want organic vegetables. This might be obvious, as most people don't want chemicals in their food—at least the people who are considering joining a CSA in the first place. However, many farmers practice organic farming methods but have not spent the money to become officially certified organic. Yes, there are politics in farming too.

4. Do they require or offer working shares?

Some CSAs require members to work a certain number of hours. That's the deal. Others don't require it, but do offer discounts on a limited basis if you agree to work a certain number of hours; something to consider if you have more time than money.

5. Is there a sense of community?

There will obviously be some mingling as you stand in line for your pickups, but some CSAs intentionally provide opportunities for members to learn from one another; for example, a listserve, website forum, special events on the farm, cooking classes, etc.

Each of the above may or may not be important to you; you'll want to prioritize the factors and rank each accordingly. Don't worry too much about being precise, though—usually you'll feel drawn to one. Once you've weighed the pros and cons, made your choice, and signed on the dotted line, ensuring your place among the members, congratulations! Now the real work begins.

Words of Wisdom:

“Not all CSAs are created equal. While every community farm I have observed seems to have sprung out of a divine spark, some are run extremely well with a bent toward education and community-building. The CSA we picked is a force unto itself – it was something like hitching a ride with a Mack truck that didn't slow down to pick me up. We jumped, and held on for dear life! So many events and recipes and ideas and opportunities... I constantly have to remind myself that there is always next year for the one that got away.”

- Tina Folkertsma, a member of Trillium Haven Farm CSA.

Before the Season Begins

Before the season begins, you'll want to get out a calendar or planner. (See my website, www.thelocalcook.com, to download a free CSA planner.) Write in the pickup days.

Then, for each month, write in what you are planning to get from your CSA. Most will provide you with a tentative list. For example, this is what my CSA, Trillium Haven Farm, offers:

June	July	August
Lettuce Mixed Greens Spinach Radishes Chinese Cabbage U-Pick: Shelling Peas, Snap Peas	Lettuce Mixed Greens Radicchio Swiss Chard Broccoli Kohlrabi Carrots Beets Radishes Eggplant Sweet Peppers Cucumbers Zucchini Summer Squash Scallions Early Tomatoes Basil U-Pick: Green Beans, Yellow Beans	Lettuce Mixed Greens Kale Swiss Chard Broccoli Beets Heirloom Tomatoes Plum Tomatoes Eggplant Sweet Peppers Hot Peppers Cucumbers Scallions Musk Melon Watermelon Basil U-Pick: Cherry Tomatoes, Sorrel, Parsley, Thyme, Oregano, Rosemary, Dill, Chervil
September		October
Lettuce Mixed Greens Kale Swiss Chard Broccoli Beets Tomatoes Eggplant Peppers Radishes Celery Leeks Basil Red Onions Red Potatoes Summer Squash Zucchini		Lettuce Mixed Greens Kale Swiss Chard Spinach Radishes Beets Cauliflower Broccoli Kohlrabi Celeriac Leeks Parsnips Turnips Potatoes Yellow Onions Collards Pumpkins Peppers Brussels Sprouts Rutabaga

Keep in mind, the list you get from your CSA is only an estimate. The season might be late or early or there could be a disaster that wipes out one of the vegetables. But that will give you a general idea of what to expect.

Next, you'll want to find a list of what's in season in your area. Many farmers' market websites or your local extension office will have this available. What I like to do is take the list and go through with a highlighter and indicate what I'll be getting from my CSA.

Then, I take a look at the list and see what I won't be getting from my CSA. For example, I notice that asparagus and rhubarb aren't on the CSA list. From my farmer's market website, I notice that they are normally available in May. Therefore, if I want rhubarb or asparagus, I'll need to find an alternate source. This can be from the farmer's market, local growers, or I can try to grow it myself. While you're researching those options, also ask yourself where you'll get "extras" for canning or freezing, if you plan to do that. Or perhaps you could consider learning how to extend the season by planting early or late using hoop houses, mini greenhouses, etc.

Now would also be a good time to research recipes and canning methods. Consider starting a file and organize them by vegetable or season. The one book that almost everyone recommends is *From Asparagus to Zucchini: A Guide to Cooking Farm-Fresh, Seasonal Produce* (2004, Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition). It will become your handbook, as each vegetable is listed alphabetically and includes a line drawing, storage and cooking tips, and several recipes.

The other two books that I highly recommend are the *Ball Book of Preserving* (2004, Alltrista Consumer Products) and *The Busy Person's Guide to Preserving Food: Easy Step-by-Step Instructions for Freezing, Drying, and Canning* (1995, Janet Chadwick, Storey Publishing).

You'll be referring to these books almost weekly once the vegetables start coming. It's good to have an idea of what's in

them *before* you find yourself standing in the kitchen with a huge pile of veggies.

After you've determined some sort of plan for how you'd like to use your vegetables, you'll want to consider how you're going to get rid of your extras. Some CSAs have a box at their pickup site where you can put things you know you won't use and it's taken to a local charity. Otherwise, you may want to find a friend or two who like vegetables and wouldn't mind taking extras off your hands.

Speaking of extras, it's inevitable that you'll forget about something in the back of the refrigerator. Or fully intend to eat everything, but life gets in the way and you find yourself with vegetables that are past their prime. Never fear, don't feel guilty. Just compost! It's a good idea to think about composting *before* the season begins. Here's a great article on how to get started: <http://www.motherearthnews.com/Organic-Gardening/How-To-Start-A-Compost-Pile.aspx>

One more thing to do before the season begins is to purchase or make reusable bags. Picking up your produce in grocery store plastic bags is generally frowned upon. Search the internet and you'll find lots of easy patterns. One of my favorite ideas is to take an old t shirt, cut off the sleeves, and sew the bottom closed. Voila! A reusable bag!

Words of Wisdom:

“One of the things I have found over the years is that you never know what there is going to be an abundance of. The first year it's easy to think you will get equal amounts of “normal” vegetables each week in a predictable manner. However, that is not the case! If you embrace the unpredictability it can actually make it more fun; if you don't it can be overwhelming and stressful. What a blessing this year to have an abundance of lettuce and carrots! Other years it's been tomatoes, squash, etc...Each year we create unique memories of that season. We actually remember what we ate and can reminisce about it! We have a much broader appreciation of food & farming then we

did when we started. If everything happened according to 'plan', we wouldn't have all of these great memories."

- Rachel Zylstra, a member of Trillium Haven Farm CSA.

Are You Convinced?

I do hope you choose to join this growing CSA movement. Visit my website, www.thelocalcook.com, for in-season recipes and to see how I'm making the most of MY CSA share. I'll also be publishing another ebook, *The Local Cook's Guide to Making the Most of Your CSA Share*, later this spring. You won't want to miss it!