

The ABC's of CSAs

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MELINDA FEUCHT



The media is full of pundits talking about ways in which we can help turn our nation's economic downturn around, but ask a farmer and she'll likely say farm-food just might be a piece of that puzzle. As people are pinching their pennies, trying to reduce spending altogether, the answer may not lie in how much we spend, rather where we spend.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a system of food distribution that allows consumers to keep their food dollars within the state's economy, while supporting local farmers, and giving individuals access to their state's freshest, best tasting food.

CSA is a term for what's more easily understandable as a crop share or farm subscription. It's a program in which the shareholder (you) pays a fixed price to a farm early in the growing season in order to receive a weekly box of farm-food throughout the summer and early fall.

As the farms in Minnesota vary greatly, so do the CSA programs; they do not exclusively involve vegetables. There are CSAs that provide meat, eggs, honey, and cut flower shares, also. With purchasing a CSA share, you also take the risk along with the farmer of there being a small harvest due to adverse weather conditions. This risk sharing is an essential part of building a community around a farm, which is what a CSA is about.

Laura Frerichs, a CSA farmer who co-runs Loon Organics with her partner, Adam Cullip, says it's worth taking the risk with the farmer because of its ability to build community. "I haven't found anything else that is a stronger force for binding people together," she said. Frerichs said participating in a CSA program is an authentic way for consumers to experience what's happening with food at the local level. She said CSAs are good for the farmers because they are able to personally know the individuals consuming their food, and also fun for the consumers because they get to be more adventurous with the new food they find themselves cooking with.

There are many characteristics that make this food distribution system sustainable by benefiting the farmer,



Buying shares in a community supported agriculture farm brings the farm closer to you through fresh, local meats and produce, and benefits the land and farmer.

shareholder, co-op, and land. The farmer benefits because they are not required to take out large loans with commercial banks because of the money they receive upfront from the shareholders. They can then purchase necessary equipment for the growing season. Not having to pay interest to a commercial loan also gives them greater financial security.

The consumer benefits because they become an actual member of the farm's community. Most CSA farms hold events for members throughout the summer, encourage members to help harvest if they wish, or visit the farm on their own time. This provides those who live in larger cities the opportunity to connect with the land through both visiting and eating seasonally, when produce is at its finest.

A typical CSA share can range anywhere from \$200-\$600, but there are many ways to work around the cost: split a share with another individual or family, find a farm that accepts labor as payment, or see if the farm accepts payments in installments. An individual or family can divide the total cost with the number of weeks the program runs to see if it is comparable to what they would normally spend weekly on organic produce.

Even though buying food directly from a farm means you'll be spending less

at your local food co-op, it doesn't equate to less support for your co-op. CSA programs actually benefit these stores as the co-ops are often dropsites for the CSA boxes, bringing additional business by introducing new CSA members to the stores. Some CSA farms also sell wholesale produce to the co-ops, therefore your CSA share payment supports these farms enough to be able to supply additional produce to the co-ops for wholesale.

However, the land is one of the greatest benefactors of this system. Buying produce from a Minnesota farm means that you are not supporting the use of large amounts of fossil fuels used to ship in food from the coasts. Additionally, some CSA farms are certified organic, which means that no chemical sprays or fertilizers are being used on the land. Some farms have organic practices but are not certified because of the additional cost. Buying produce through a CSA share also helps reduce your packaging waste, as all of the produce is put in one box, rather than requiring many plastic bags and boxes at a grocery store.

So you're ready to boost the economy through your broccoli; the next step is finding which farm's CSA program is the best fit for your lifestyle. With the local food movement being off and



running, many CSA programs fill up quite fast. Now is the time to start shopping around.

You'll want to have an idea about how much you want to spend, how many people will be eating from the share, and how far you're willing to travel for your box. CSA shares come in various sizes and it is common for individuals or families to split shares. In addition to the links provided, both the Living Green Expo and food co-op annual CSA fairs are opportunities to "shop around" for your CSA farm in the spring.

There are a few things to consider before you decide if a CSA program is right for you. Be prepared to cook; the quantity of produce becomes larger as the season progresses. Invest in a few vegetarian cookbooks or find some useful recipe web sites. This creates a good opportunity for children to get involved in the cooking process, and a great time to have conversations with your kids about local produce.

Anticipate experiencing new tastes as farmers are constantly experimenting with different types of produce, which will inevitably find their way into your box. Ever had mustard greens? Purple

beans? Make sure to be open to trying new things. Consider preserving. If you find yourself unable to keep up on eating through the boxes, freeze, can, or pickle your produce.

In addition to feeding your family good food, one can also help feed the hungry. Harvest for the Hungry is a program in which CSA farms work with the Emergency Foodshelf Network to provide homeless shelters with CSA shares through its members. These farms give their members the option to buy a season-long CSA delivery for a shelter, further extending the community this program aims to support.

Melinda Feucht is a University of Minnesota student and freelance writer living in Minneapolis who loves farms, food writing and cooking. She is passionate about encouraging individuals to eat locally and seasonally.

WEBSITES FOR FINDING A LIST OF CSA FARMS:

www.landstewardshipproject.org/csa.html,
www.mda.state.mn.us/mngrown,
www.localharvest.org.

To support Harvest for the Hungry's CSA program, visit www.emergencyfoodshelf.org.



Find a Farmer, Get Your Share at Food Co-op CSA Fairs

Urban dwellers searching for a bounty of the freshest local produce, flowers, dairy and meat produced with care by local farmers can find it at local food co-op CSA fairs. Shoppers are invited to stop by to meet the farmers, learn about CSA options and select a CSA that is best for themselves and their families. Each grower offers a different package depending on the farm's length of season, goods offered, cost, labor and drop-off locations.

"For the past seven years, the Seward Co-op CSA Fair has brought thousands of community members a step closer to those who grow and produce their food," Sean Doyle, Seward Co-op general manager, said. "Our co-op is committed to supporting a thriving local food economy and local farmers, and offering delicious local food that is healthy, fresh and produced in an environmentally friendly way."

As an increasing number of people nationwide discover the better taste and nutritional benefits of local food, CSAs are fast becoming a popular way for people to directly connect with local farmers. In 1990, the number of CSAs in the United States was estimated at 50; today it is

estimated at more than 1,000.

This year's largest CSA fair will take place at Seward Co-op, 2823 East Franklin Ave., Minneapolis, under a canopy in the store's parking lot, rain or shine. For more information and a list of participating farms, visit www.seward.coop.

EASTSIDE FOOD CO-OP

Saturday, April 11, 11 a.m.–2 p.m.

JUST FOOD

Saturday, March 14, 11 a.m.–2 p.m.

RIVER MARKET

Saturday, March 14, 1–5 p.m.

Includes small farmer panel and featured growers for River Market seasonal produce.

SEWARD CO-OP GROCERY & DELI

Weekend of April 25–26, Grand Opening Celebration and 8th Annual CSA Fair

Saturday, April 25, 11 a.m.–3 p.m.

Sunday, April 26, Noon–5 p.m.

The celebration will include live music, food demos and activities for children.



Crafts that are in a class of their own.

Visit WondermentShop.com to see a full list of our Winter craft classes.



4306 Upton Ave S., Minneapolis 612.929.2707
 949 Grand Avenue, St. Paul 651.291.5099
www.wondermentshop.com

Style for Conscious Living

birch

White Sale

begins

THURSDAY, March 5

CLOTHING

Penn and 50th
 in South Minneapolis
 (2309 West 50th Street)

612-436-0776
birchclothing.com

Tuesday–Friday 11–6
 Saturday 10–5

Green gifts on your wish list?

Visit www.linden Hills.coop/naturalhome to learn more about the

Alternative Gift Registry

or stop by the store.

It's perfect for weddings, showers, anniversaries, birthdays—and it's free!



Organic — Fair Trade — Local — Earth Friendly

Housewares, paint, gifts, linens, natural baby goods



Linden Hills
 Natural Home

2822 West 43rd Street, Minneapolis • Open daily 9 to 7
 612-279-2479 • www.linden Hills.coop/naturalhome