

Enrolling in Community Supported Agriculture program brings farm-fresh bounty to Chicago home



For this city dweller, joining a CSA is the best way to bring farm's bounty to his home

May 13, 2009 [Chicago Sun-Times](#)

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Local chefebrity Stephanie Izard once told me in an interview that the act of eating is one of the most intimate things we do. It mystified her why so few people bother to learn where the food they put into their bodies comes from.

I wish I could say that my decision to enroll in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program stemmed from that conversation, out of my desire to reduce my carbon footprint or from some higher, noble intention to preserve heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables at risk of extinction.

Participation in the Community Supported Agriculture program is one way city dwellers can bring the farm's bounty to their homes.



(Jessica Sedgwick/Sun-Times Photo Illustration)

Unfortunately, it was my laziness more than anything else (sorry, Stephanie!).

For someone who writes occasionally about food, I am surprisingly unadventurous in my produce choices. The same 15 or so types of fruits and vegetables make an appearance in my shopping cart week after week.

I'm in a rut and I know it. A CSA, which requires members to pay upfront early in the growing season for a seasonal share in a farm and weekly drop-offs of a variety of produce, offered the chance to shake things up.

The Web site www.localharvest.org is a good starting point for those interested in exploring CSAs.

An estimated 5,000 families in the Chicago area participated in CSAs last year. Jim Slama, president of FamilyFarmed.org, a group that advocates for local food systems, says he expects that number to go up again this harvest season.

"CSAs and the local food movement are both exploding," he says. "People want to be able to know and trust their farmer and thus know and trust their food."

I ended up selecting Harvest Moon Farms, 230 miles from Chicago in Viroqua, Wis. It offers a selection of fruits and vegetables, and one of its four drop-off points is Uncommon Ground, 1401 W. Devon, which is closer to my Rogers Park home than the nearest supermarket.

Harvest Moon is owned and operated by Jennifer and Bob Borchardt. Both are relatively new to agriculture; Jennifer Borchardt jokes that the farm is a result of a midlife crisis.

"After 18 years in higher education text book sales, I got burned out and wanted to turn to something more rewarding," she says.

It's their second year operating a CSA and while shares are still available through May, Borchardt notes they have already exceeded last year's numbers.

A full share of 20 weeks of produce is \$695 and should offer plenty for a family of four. Half shares -- what I opted for -- are \$450.

"It sounds expensive until you average it out over the course of 20 weeks and realize that it comes out to be about \$5 a day for certified organic fruits and vegetables," she says. "Most people spend that at Starbucks."

The Borchardts grow 45 different crops on their 20 acres of land. In the three short years they have been farming, they have become known for hardneck garlic, a hard-to-find variety that is as tasty as it is temperamental to grow.

They also offer 20 varieties of tomatoes, seven types of lettuce and five types of cucumbers, just to name a few.

Many of the varieties being grown at Harvest Moon are from heirloom seeds, many of which are listed with the US Ark of Taste, an offshoot of the grassroots Slow Food movement.

The Ark program keeps a list of various foods on the brink of extinction . The list will give most a moment's pause, but the epicure just might lose sleep over it.

"Commercial produce was designed for trucking," Slama says. "Heirlooms are for eating. Nature designed them to be good tasting."

This year, the Borchardts also formed the Harvest Moon Farms Producers Guild comprised of six area farms, some of them Amish and unable to transport their foods to Chicago.

The farms are sharing in the resources generated by the CSA. Weather permitting, this should mean both a larger quantity and variety of food in the weekly share boxes.

Like many CSA farmers, the Borchardts are more than willing to help you along your culinary journey, too.

Don't know what to do with a purple haze carrot -- hands down the funkiest carrot I've ever encountered, it's purple on the outside, orange on the inside -- Aunt Molly's Ground cherries (an heirloom variety of cherry from Pennsylvania by way of Poland), or a Beaver Dam pepper?

Borchardt sends a selection of recipes, paired to what's in the produce box, via e-mail each week. After all, what good is fresh produce if you don't know what to do with it?

Harvest Moon's first food drop is scheduled for June 12. We'll be testing some of their recipes in the Food section all summer long and will include some dishes of our own as well.

For information on Harvest Moon Farms, go to www.harvestmoonorganics.com.