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EATS & DRINKS

Every Thursday afternoon, in a small community garden in the South Bronx, long-time local residents and recently transplanted bohemian types gather together to fill their bags with vegetables. They pack them with leeks, French radishes, green tomatoes, acorn squash, Savoy cabbage and a bevy of other autumnal items, all organic and many with dirt still clinging to their roots and leaves. Everyone stops to greet one another, share news of their families and discuss the proposed new Yankee Stadium and what it will do to their neighborhood. Kids run through the garden chasing the resident rabbit, and both Spanish and English echo through the group. They're here to pick up their weekly share of vegetables from their CSA, supplied by Zaid Kurdieh of Norwich Meadows Farm in Norwich, New York.

CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture—an alternative model of food distribution that has started to gain popularity all across the United States. The term is used to describe both the movement and the individual organizations from which one gets his food. In the CSA model, a small group of people work directly with a local farmer to get fresh organic produce throughout the growing season. Members pay an up-front fee in the fall, giving the farmer a guaranteed market and the necessary start-up capital (which he or she usually needs to borrow) to buy seeds and make repairs. In return, the members receive a weekly share of freshly picked, locally grown, organic produce throughout the harvest season at a significantly reduced price compared with a supermarket or even a farmer's market. The CSA model cuts the element of financial risk for the small-scale farmer and makes farm-fresh organic produce accessible to a greater percentage of people by cutting out the costs of marketing and long-distance transportation.

"CSA is a good way to bring fresh, local and usually organic produce into a neighborhood that otherwise wouldn't have access at a reasonable price," says Paula Lukats, the CSA manager at Just Food, an organization that works to equalize access to healthy food in New York City.

The CSA in the South Bronx, sponsored by Friends of Brook Park, Just Food and For a Better Bronx, works to do just that. "Our members are mixed income and multi-ethnic," says the young, bespectacled Molly Culver, the AmeriCorps/VISTA-sponsored coordinator of the CSA. Members of the CSA pay their fees on a sliding scale, she explains, and have the option of paying in installments or using food stamps.

"In the Bronx, all our vegetables are covered in plastic," says member Anita Antonetty as she flips her dreadlocks over her shoulder. "The CSA is great, because every week I get fresh vegetables and it's not expensive."

"I really like the quality of the food, how fresh it is, how good it tastes and its high nutritional content," say Marian Feinberg, a long-time local activist, former health-care professional and CSA member. She shakes her head indignantly. "It's so important to have access to better-quality food. Look at the amount of processed food on the shelves. It all contributes to obesity, diabetes and other illnesses."

She joined a CSA when she was first diagnosed with cancer. "I wanted to eat healthy, I wanted to eat vegetables and I wanted to eat organic. But affordability was a big issue." She motions at the garden and the packing crates filled with vegetables. "We're doing our little bit to help keep our families and communities

healthy. Food, health and community go together, the same way a family comes together around a holiday table."

This "coming together" is what attracts many people to the CSA. People don't just rush in and out as they might at their local supermarket or bodega; they linger, sitting on logs and chairs, discussing neighborhood politics; they chat about their children while picking out their vegetables. "It brings together different segments of the neighborhood," says Vincent Russo, a shy, twentysomething with a punk-style political patch safety-pinned to his hooded sweatshirt. "I've met lots of new people and it's pleasant to have an excuse to spend time outside, talking." In addition to providing a weekly meeting place for its members, the CSA also sponsors potluck dinners, trips to the farm and the occasional yoga class.

Nutritional education and raising environmental awareness are also large components of the CSA. "For me, it's really about helping people renew their relationship to nature and food," says Culver, the coordinator. The CSA and Just Food often sponsor cooking demonstrations to teach members how to cook unfamiliar produce, and the monthly newsletter often includes recipes and instructions for canning, pickling and freezing leftover produce.

"I like how it gives us a closer connection to our food source," says Russo, "and how it brings us closer to our natural environment. I can go to the store and buy anything at any time. But here, I can only get what's seasonal. And so being a member, you become aware of how far things have to travel to get to you out of season and how much energy that requires."

Most people forget that in order to buy a box of strawberries in January, it must first be trucked in from California or flown in from Chile. With fuel costs rising, buying locally grown produce and supporting the creation of small-scale agriculture in areas like the Northeast has become not only an environmental issue, but also an issue of safety and economics. Many experts worry that if an energy crisis occurs, many highly populated areas will suffer from food shortages, since most food in the United States is grown on large commercial farms far from population centers and must be distributed on trucks and airplanes. The CSA model offers an effective counterapproach.

Approximately 37 CSAs operate in New York City. "Groups are pretty autonomous," says Lukats at Just Food, an organization that has had a hand in starting almost every CSA. "They build on a similar model but adapt to the members' needs and preferences." Each group offers slightly different products at slightly different prices. Some offer only vegetables; others offer fruit, meat, dairy or eggs. Some, like the 6th Street Community Center CSA in the East Village, even offer a winter share made up of organic produce grown in warmer climes.

"We like to support the organic industry worldwide during the off-season," says Annette Averette, one of the coordinators of the 6th Street CSA.

Citlalic Jeffers, the bouncy intern at the 6th Street CSA, offers perhaps the most practical reason to join a CSA: "I went to Whole Foods the other day and bought an organic apple, and I couldn't believe the price; I've never felt so robbed in my entire life." She looks around the room at a young mother picking out carrots with her son and a man with a long beard weighing his bag of apples. "You shouldn't have to be a billionaire to eat a good piece of fruit." n

For more information on joining a CSA in NYC, visit justfood.org/csa.

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