

The Business of Food: CSAs for Singles

Health! Self-esteem! Romance! All just a carrot away!

By Ritzy Ryciak

Even if you eat out five days a week, you've probably at least heard about CSAs. Community-supported agriculture is a rapidly growing movement to directly connect local food producers with urban consumers through weekly shipments of what's freshest and best of the season. There are already more than 70 farms in Washington state shipping to subscribers, who pay either a lump sum or in installments through the season, thereby securing the farmers a guaranteed market and a fair price and assuring a supply of first-rate produce for buyers.

There's just one problem with CSAs, and it's a big one. Most such programs are designed for that statistically average family of four, and among urban households, that number's just not statistically average any more. We may be tempted when listening to friends who are members of a CSA rave about their weekly baskets overflowing with seasonal, organic, and local food that absolutely tastes better. But for a lot of us, a weekly overflowing basket is just too much food. How can singles successfully join the CSA movement?

"A lot of people ask me that question," affirms Matt Ewer, general manager of the Full Circle Farm, a 140-acre certified organic farm in Carnation. One solution's obvious: "Many single people will come in, share a box, and cut their cost." But sharing can be tricky, giving rise to misunderstandings and bickering. Full Circle offers another option: three different basket sizes— small, medium, and large— and a way for customers to skip a basket at any time.

Full Circle Farm, which operates year-round, offers a flexible membership program. Members can sign up for a week or a year, and everything can be done online. "Belonging to Full Circle's CSA is very easy and affordable because you pay by the box," explains Elizabeth Blessing, a single, 27-year-old nutrition educator and Full Circle Farm CSA member. "I tried to join another CSA once, and I just couldn't pay that bulk sum at the beginning of the season." A full-season subscription can run as high as \$600 for a weekly family-of-four box. Full Circle's flexi-boxes, by contrast, run \$25 to \$45 per week, with every-other-week packages available as well.

"Basically, through technology, we have been able to make our program more accessible," says Ewer, referring to the Full Circle Web site that allows members to vary the size of their basket and its contents on a weekly basis. "Our program is based on customer flexibility."

Gerrie LaQuey, a 52-year-old single nurse and Pike Place Market Basket CSA member for four years, tackles the CSA quantity dilemma by canning, freezing, and drying her seasonal produce. The Pike Place Market Basket CSA program runs from June to October, but LaQuey eats the local produce year-round. "Be creative," says LaQuey. "The produce is too good not to join. Don't be daunted by the size—it may be a good opportunity to meet a neighbor or learn a new skill."

For some, sheer quantity turns out to be a nonproblem. Many first-time CSA singles report that they inevitably eat more fresh vegetables and end up feeling healthier. A.J. Lowe, a single UW employee and a Full Circle Farm CSA member for a year, noticed a dramatic increase in energy and has had no problems eating through her weekly basket. "I use every bit of the food up," she exclaims. "I have even started cooking with the radish greens and the leaves on top of carrots. I just love them!"

Though sharing has its hazards, many see it as a bonus. "One of the great things about this way of eating is that we are trying to encourage community," offers Michele Catalano, program manager of the Pike Place Market Basket CSA. "A lot of people share with other singles or other couples, and it's a great way to not isolate yourself at the grocery store. I always look at CSAs as a way to bring people together."

Tyler Kalberg, a single, 25-year-old Tacoma resident, joined Pike Place Market Basket CSA to support local farmers and expand his fruit and vegetable palette. "I also really don't like to go grocery shopping," admits Kalberg, who is sharing his basket with a friend from work and her husband.



Good, good for you, and pretty to boot.
Karen Steichen

Single or not, it is hard to find an unhappy CSA member. With improved technology, basket sharing, and more than 20 CSA options to choose from in the Seattle area, joining the CSA movement is feasible and rewarding for those of us who live and nibble alone. "I think that a single person benefits from CSAs in the same way that families do," offers Ewer. "CSAs take the middleman out. You get a better price from your food and a fresher product. The food also has a meaning behind it, which is to support local farms in your own community."

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For a complete directory of Washington CSA programs, visit www.seattletilth.org/activities/2004CSADirectory.htm.

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