

Our Town downtown

The Sharecroppers: Community Supported Agriculture will bring neighbors and farmers together this summer

April 23, 2007

Kevin Walter and his sister-in-law, Adriane Giebel, are shareholders in a growing enterprise. But the broker they're registered with doesn't do business on Wall Street and they will not see a return on investment until June, when the season for New York's CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture) groups begins.

As shareholders in the Stanton Street Settlement CSA, Kevin and Adriane will head every week after June, for about the next six months, to M'Finda Kalunga Community Garden in Sara Delano Roosevelt Park, to pick up fresh produce, fruit and flowers, made available according to season, and delivered there by the farmer who planted this harvest just for them.

(A rent increase forced the Stanton Street Settlement to move recently. The Kalunga garden is a new drop-off location.)

Kevin and Adriane's vegetable yield may include ordinary items like carrots or lettuce, less immediate ones, like parsnip or kale, or things they may be completely unfamiliar with, like Swiss chard or daikon. But even if they are intimidated by odd sounding (or looking) bounties of this season's harvest, they will be able to learn how to put them to good use through workshops, demonstrations and recipe swapping among the various members of the group, which formed in 2005, and which Kevin says has "sort of doubled in size," about every year so far.

Even though the selections for a given week will arrive before they get to the park along with instructions for distributing them, Stanton Street members will get to meet their farmer, Ted Blomgren, in New York City, and be able to get their hands dirty at his farm, Windflower Farm in Valley Falls, New York, at least once every season.

Like members of the other 49 CSA's in New York City neighborhoods, Kevin, who is one of Stanton Street's "core members," or organizers, and Adriane, are able to buy very affordable, unusually fresh produce, by paying a lump sum their farmer works out with Just Food, the nonprofit (or "broker"), before the season starts. They also get a chance to meet their neighbors, "in a way oftentimes one doesn't in New York," Adriane says.

The opportunity to support local farms, which Just Food defines as those within a 250 mile radius of New York City, is another selling point for CSA groups.

By joining CSA groups, members get to learn about seasonality too – "that they're not going to get tomatoes during their first distribution in June, because tomatoes don't grow in June in the Northeast," Paula Lukats, who manages the Just Foods CSA program, says. But in "August and September, the tomatoes are going to be amazing. And they're actually going to taste like something. And they're not going to be those pinkish, red, hard, rock things that you get in the grocery store."

Lukats says the CSA's do not want to compete with places like Trader Joe's and Whole Foods and other

organic markets in the area. "They appreciate them being there at all," and also because they have items not available at the CSA's.

Adriane still goes to the greenmarket and to the grocery for things like milk, spices, oils and flour. And she loves going to the greenmarket for the same reasons she supports CSA's, but says the CSA's are cheaper.

For farmers, working with CSA's takes a lot of the risk out of growing. "It's a wonderful way to start the season off with a bank full of cash," Elizabeth Keen says in a telephone interview. Keen runs Indian Line Farm in Massachusetts, one of the country's first ever CSA farms (the other being the Temple-Wilton Community Farm in New Hampshire). "That's always an issue with farmers ... They need spring start-up loans in many cases. And we don't need that because the CSA's are fronting us, you know, our seed money."

CSA members tend to be health conscious and concerned about the environmental impact that food production can have.

And groups typically create special fee structures so that lower-income members can join. Stanton Street has a subsidized plan, priced on a sliding scale, an installment plan and also accepts food stamps.

Just Food currently works with 18 farmers for "the primary vegetable share" each CSA group receives, Lukats says.

Three of the farms the organization works with grow exclusively for CSA's. Each group works with one farmer, and each farmer works with up to six groups.

There are 20-30 other providers for meat, eggs and dairy.

All but one are organic or certified organic, which basically means that the farmer doesn't use chemical pesticides or fertilizers, that they didn't use chemicals to fertilize the soil before planting, and they didn't spray pesticides on crops after they were planted.

Getting certified as an organic farm involves a fee, paperwork and an on-site inspection process. Lukats says the farm that is not organic, Cranberry Hall Farm in South Jersey, which supplies food to the Staten Island CSA group, is making the transition to organic. For now, it will be "using integrative pest management," or in other words, using chemicals only when it has to. When the CSA farms don't get certified it either means that they can't afford to, or feel the certification process is too lengthy and involved, Lukats says. And it makes sense for farms that grow exclusively for CSA groups to skip the process because they don't have to advertise as organic.

But some of the uncertified farms even "go above and beyond," the official organic growing standards, she says.

The first CSA group in New York formed in 1991, when a group of New Yorkers concerned about the lack of access to good, nutritious food in New York City and the loss of family farms in New York State, began working with Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook, New York. Just Food, which runs other food programs, saw this as a model, and began organizing Community Supported Agriculture in New York City by holding a conference for local farmers and city residents in 1995. The result was six new New York City groups in 1996.

All the New York CSA groups have a vegetable share and most do a fruit share. One, in the East Village (Sixth Street CSA), works with a fishery in Alaska and has a fish share. Lukats says that since fruit is very hard to grow organically in the Northeast, it is usually purchased from

a neighboring farmer by a CSA group's regular farmer (so that the vegetables don't get sprayed with the pesticides, for example, intended for the non-organic fruits).
The other downtown CSA's are in Chelsea, the West Village and Washington Square.

The CSA movement goes back to the 1960s and has roots in Europe and Japan, but it didn't reach the United States until 1986. According to Keen, which was exactly the first CSA – Indian Line Farm or Temple-Wilton Community Farm – is a bit of a contentious bone for certain members of the CSA community. A 2004 study on CSA's available on the USDA's Web site however, calls the formation of both farms in 1986 "simultaneous but independent."

Indian Line Farm was originally turned into a CSA by Robyn Van En, a woman who learned about the concept from community organizer Jan VanderTuin, according to Keen. VanderTuin had observed CSA communities while traveling in Europe.

Van En died suddenly of an asthma attack in 1997, and shortly afterward, Keen and her husband Alexander Thorp took over Indian Line.

There are "perhaps 1,700" CSA farms in North America today, according to Indian Line's Web site.

The model that dominates conventional agriculture is focused on the "monocroppings" system, in which huge, single-crop farms produce on a large scale, and very often, ship their crops from far away.

This method "is efficient in some ways, but really limits ... a lot of the kind of ecological and environmentally sound practices that a farmer can use," Lukats says.

The transportation of food is another issue CSA advocates are concerned about, since it can affect the quality of produce and it has ecological implications. "Our farms can grow varieties that aren't chosen for their shipping value."

Of course, some things will always have to be shipped to the Northeast, pineapple for example, "but there are so many things that we do grow here, that still get shipped in, and it just doesn't seem to make much sense," she says.

Ted Blomgren, who began growing for New York City CSA's about seven years ago, compared the CSA system to conventional farming, in a telephone interview. "It does run counter to the really big scale farms, whether they're local ones or they're California farms because you know, that's all about anonymity. You don't know who they are. You don't know anything about how they farm." There are some big organic farms in California though, and those farms supply his shareholders in the winter, he says. "And I'd sure prefer to see them become big organic farms rather than big conventional farms out there."

Unlike farmers who grow for groceries or even green markets and tend to specialize in five to ten crops they're good at cultivating and which are profitable for them, CSA farmers grow a wide variety of crops over the course of a season. Blomgren says he grows over 150 different crops, and his wife Jan, who runs Windflower with him, grows the flowers that get shipped to CSA's and to a few farmers markets and florists near his farm.

He doesn't think that big conventional farms will always dominate, because of the increasing amount of attention the world is paying to global warming. He expects that as new economic policies go into effect to address global warming, fuel costs will go way up. And because it will cost more to transport food, doing so from 3,000 miles away will become much more expensive.

And alternative energy sources, especially ethanol, will drive up the cost of animal feed, since ethanol can be derived from corn. "And so if the cost of feed for livestock goes up, the cost of food generally is going to go up," Blomgren says.

Kevin says, "The quality of the stuff is incomparable," in a telephone interview. "And it sounds hokey, but when there's that much nice food, you actually look forward to preparing it." When the week's share is delivered to the drop-off site, he and his girlfriend think about menus. People get very comfortable with the system and are not always prepared for it to end, he says. "[They] really experience withdrawal at the end of the season. To see the stricken looks on the faces of the members when they're coming down to their last week, cause they get so into a rhythm with it ... it's hard to adjust when the share stops." Environmental friendliness, supporting local farmers and saving money are all things that Adriane appreciates about belonging to the Stanton Street CSA. She lives on First Street between A and First Ave, with her husband, and says in a telephone interview that the excellent quality of the produce notwithstanding, there's been so much of it that they've been almost overwhelmed.

She also likes that it's put her in touch with other people who enjoy preparing their own food since "New York isn't necessarily a city of cooks." She cooked a lot before joining, but says this has given her more ideas and she cooks even more now since there's just so much more food around. "In fact, the supply of produce has been so abundant that I find that I have to refrain from going out because otherwise I'll have produce rotting in the fridge ... If I had a couple of kids, it would probably be easier to get through it all, but as it is, I almost never buy any vegetables anywhere else, and I often am giving vegetables away to friends." Does her husband share her fondness for cooking? "No. We haven't gotten to that point yet."

-- Matt Elzweig
melzweig@manhattanmedia.com