



# The Oyster

Why should I care?

Hub love

Financial confusion

Cheap thrills

Why should I care?

## Harvest without getting your hands dirty

*Jonathan Schwab and Jim Furbush*



The summer tomato is an earthly delight. It leaks on the plate, it tastes sweet, it demands to be eaten. The anticipation of a ripening tomato, as it turns from pale green to fire red, can drive a connoisseur mad. Throw a slice or two into a BLT and you won't find a more decadent sandwich. Heck, even with just a pinch of salt, your taste buds will flutter in ecstasy.

Now you can eat that tomato and dozens just like it, along with cucumbers, corn, and eclectic vegetables you never imagined, like kohlrabi, all summer long without ever starting a garden. The secret is found in a growing movement: community supported agriculture.

The concept behind Community Supported Agriculture is that consumers invest in local farmers. For a predetermined up front payment, say \$425 a season, consumers receive a "share" of the farmer's harvest from May to October. The cash-strapped farmer gets an infusion of money to keep the crops going; in essence the consumers are a bunch of business partners. For their part, consumers receive a weekly box of locally grown organic veggies during harvest.

Barbara Purby, of [Forbidden Fruit Farm](#) in South Dartmouth has been in the farming business for years, but it wasn't until last year she decided to run her farm as a CSA. The 53-year old farmer said she has swelled her membership to 75 shares this year. People in her community are eager to taste her gooseberries and green beans in April and May, to munch on basil and lemon cucumbers in June, and to take delight in grapes and heirloom tomatoes during the peak season in August.

As the local farmer goes the way of the [Edsel](#), Purby insisted becoming a CSA farm is one of the only ways a small grower can make a living farming. It allows "small, diversified farms to stay viable." Diversified, she explained, means growing a wide variety of crops, each type taking up one small area, rather than having hundreds of acres of corn, as one would see on a drive through Nebraska.

The movement began in 1986 on a farm in western Massachusetts. The ideas were based upon European biodynamic agriculture. The history of the CSA movement is relatively boring. What's important is this: it's a relatively new economic model for local farms based upon the convergence of the stock exchange and sustainable, micro-organic agriculture.

"If it's a horrible tomato season, you're not screwed," said Laura Meister, of [Farm Girl Farm](#) in Egremont, Mass. The deal is great for farmers, but a horrible tomato season means the consumer gets pinched. In CSA, there are no refunds for a light week or even for a missed week, assuming the crops went bad.



*Laura Meister of Farm Girl Farm, Egremont, Mass.*

For some CSA members going to the farm to pick up their share and harvest a few tomatoes, it's the closest they've ever been to farm living. Scott Kathan, 37, a Somerville-based magazine editor, is starting his fourth straight season as member of the Parker Farms in Waltham, owned by Stephen Parker.

"Our original motivations were to support the healthy eating lifestyle," said Kathan, "and also to support local farmers. Farming's a tough way to make a living in this day and age in this country."

Kathan doesn't have the time to tend to a garden of his own, but the produce from Parker Farms reminds him of the large garden, with its abundance of produce, his parents tended during his childhood.

"I think the demand for high quality produce is certainly better than it was five years ago," he said.

Advocates of organic food say that it is healthier and it tastes better than vegetables grown conventionally. The [Northeast Organic Farming Association](#) gives about a thousand reasons on their website, but the gist is that organic food is grown by farmers who are committed to crops and livestock that are free from chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Organic farms don't pollute the water we drink or send pesticides into our kitchens.

Some restaurants buy straight from CSAs to get the freshest produce available. A restaurant in Cambridge has taken that relationship to another level.



Chef Ana Sortun, the owner of [Oleana](#), is married to the farmer that supplies her produce. The Cambridge health spot serves food grown at Siena Farms in

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Sudbury. The 12 acres of farms belong to husband Chris Kurth. The relationship seems to work, as Oleana was named one of the "Best New Restaurants in America" by [Esquire Magazine](#) in 2001.

"In a perfect world, I would have everything organic all the time, but considering the fact that we're in New England, it's hard to do that," Sortun said.

"What's different about us [from most CSAs] is, as a restaurant we're capable of buying and using so many vegetables, it would give him a big chunk of money," she added.

[Waltham Fields Community Farm](#) is in its 11th year. Amanda Cather, who co-owns the farm with her husband, said the farm is not certified organic, but that it uses all organic materials in crop growing. Cather explained that becoming certified requires a complex, expensive and time-consuming process of getting a certifier and having him or her come out and inspect a farmer's records to make sure the farmer is following all U.S. Department of Agriculture's regulations.

Cather said this spring is the third season they will be selling directly to customers because, "usually if you have the privilege of doing direct marketing, you have a relationship" with the investors.

Cather added that she sees a change in the CSA market -- for the better. She said the CSA market is growing, most likely because when people "join they connect with one another. It's about eating, making connections with food and land and people."

To find a Mass CSA farm near you, see:  
<http://www.csacenter.org/>

For the ins and outs of the history of the movement, see:  
<http://www.newfarm.org/features/0104/csa-history/part1.shtml>

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