

# Community-Supported Agriculture Brings the Farm to You

Louise Julig

Imagine getting a present for your family every week – one that's bright, colorful and full of surprises. It makes you feel good and, even better, is good for you. Hundreds of families in San Diego County are doing just that through membership in one of three community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs: Be Wise Ranch, Seabreeze Organic Farm and the Tierra Miguel Foundation.

CSA brings local farmers and the community together by directly supplying members with weekly or biweekly "shares" of a harvest of organic, seasonal, locally grown produce. Vegetables, fruits and herbs picked that morning are delivered in boxes directly to customers or to a local drop site for pickup.

Consumers and farmers benefit from the arrangement: Members get a steady supply of the freshest seasonal produce, and local small farmers have a steady customer base to mitigate the risks associated with farming. Additionally, by buying direct from the farm, consumers and farmers save money by cutting out the middleman.

Buying locally grown food is a trend that is growing in popularity. *Fast Company* magazine reports that eating locally is "one of the top trends and emerging ideas that will affect the way we work and live."

For families that want to eat locally grown food

but don't have the time or inclination to drive to farm stands and farmers' markets, a CSA membership is an ideal match.

This was a prime incentive for Rebecca Levin, an Encinitas mother of three and Seabreeze member for five years. "I used to go to the farmers' markets and buy organic produce, because I think it's better and it supports the small farmers, but then I just couldn't get to them when I had kids," she says.

"It was hard to get out with them (the kids) and the markets were just at bad times for me. When I found out about the delivery service, I thought that sounded like a really good idea. Any-

thing that means I don't have to drive."

Heidi Welsh, also an Encinitas mom, has been a member of the Be Wise Ranch CSA for five years, and splits her share with a friend. Asked what motivated her to join, she says, "I kept reading more and more about the benefits of organics, not only for farming – that it's more sustainable and better



for the environment – but also about the food value of organic produce.

“And the freshness of it coming straight from the farm, whether it’s organic or not, makes it better tasting. I find that it’s far superior to what you can get, even organic, in the supermarket.” Welsh particularly praises the freshness and flavor of the strawberries, oranges, greens, corn and tomatoes she gets from the farm.

It’s not surprising that produce picked the day you get it tastes fresher. According to Charlene Orszag of Tierra Miguel’s CSA, “Most food travels an average of 1,500 miles over seven to 10 days before it gets to a store. When it’s one day from the field, it tastes better and it is more nutritious because of the enhancement of the soil that’s done with organic farming.”

In addition to the nutritional benefits, CSAs offer members a connection to the land – a connection that had been missing. “To many people, it’s a spiritual difference – the CSA gives people a direct connection to the land where they can re-link themselves to where their food comes from,” Orszag says.

Stephenie Caughlin of Seabreeze adds, “We want the consumer to understand the tie between what they are eating and the person who bends down and picks it.”

Farmers, in turn, appreciate the support they get from members, who help keep small farms alive. “Doing this helps keep active farming in the county instead of turning the land over to development,” Orszag says. “And keeping local access to food also just makes sense.”

Caughlin agrees: “If there’s ever a breakdown in the system, having local



### **Be Wise Ranch**

www.bewiseranch.com; 858-756-3088

Weekly or biweekly delivery

Two box sizes. Trial membership.

Delivery to drop spot.

Service Area: Central and downtown

San Diego, La Mesa, coastal areas

north to Vista, I-15 corridor to Escondido, Fallbrook

Farm Stand: Yes, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday (corner of Camino del Norte and Lone Quail Road in Rancho Bernardo)

Recipes: In quarterly newsletter and on request.

Farm Visits: Tour annually for members and friends

### **Seabreeze Organic Farm**

www.seabreezed.com; 858-481-0209

Weekly delivery; One box size, with option for extra fruit. Includes fresh flowers with each delivery. Trial membership.

Delivery to your door.

Service Area: Central San Diego, North Island, coastal areas from Ocean Beach to Carlsbad, I-15 corridor to Rancho Peñasquitos

Farm Stand: No, but does offer choose-your-own online ordering

Recipes: In delivery, online and cookbook included with trial membership

Farm Visits: for members by appointment.

farms or community gardens is important for our national security.”

So if you decide that a CSA program is right for your family, what can you expect when you join? Each farm is different, but there are many similarities in CSA programs.

You will typically sign an agreement to pay in advance for a minimum of one quarter's worth of produce, delivered in weekly or biweekly installments to your door or dropped off at a location in your area.

Deliveries usually consist mostly of vegetables, with some seasonal fruits and herbs to round them out. Costs vary but are generally comparable to what you'd pay in stores for the same amount of organic produce.

Expect a wider variety of produce than you typically see in stores. Purple green beans, rainbow chard, heirloom tomatoes, Chioggia beets and many types of greens are likely to show up. Part of the fun is wondering what you'll get and experimenting with new ways of cooking.

Levin agrees that her family had made adjustments to their eating habits. “It forces me to cook vegetables that I probably wouldn't cook otherwise, because they're in my fridge,” she says.

Welsh agrees: “Just having it there, you know you're going to eat it – I'm not someone that throws things away easily. I've learned to cook greens in a lot of ways I wouldn't have thought of, and that has made it more palatable to my family.”

Most farms supply recipes with the delivery, or make them available by request or on their Web sites. They want you to be happy with what you get, so be sure to ask for help if you don't know how to prepare something. Some farms also offer opportunities to visit, and Tierra Miguel even has a volunteer day once a month for people who want to get their hands dirty.

Community-supported agriculture offers an opportunity to get back to seasonal eating, getting the best of what's available right now from local farms. Consider joining a CSA to bring a bit of the farm home to your family. ❖

*Louise Julig is a free-lance writer based in Encinitas who looks forward to opening her surprise box of veggies every other Tuesday.*