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search HO! **EATING THE FARM****Learning the pleasures and virtues of eating fresh and local.**

BY SUSAN HODARA

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Since June, I haven't bought vegetables in the grocery store. Which doesn't mean I haven't been eating my greens. To the contrary, I have been feasting on an ever-changing, ever-expanding array of produce, surging with freshness, bursting with aroma, some of which I'd never heard of before cooking it.

This year, our family became a shareholder in Roxbury Farm, a biodynamic (organic) Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm located on 225 acres in Kinderhook, New York, about two hours north of where we live. CSA bypasses the retailer by creating a direct relationship between farmer and consumer. Shareholders—in Roxbury's case, over 995 members in Columbia County, the Capital Region, Westchester County, and Manhattan—pay a reasonable fee (approximately \$20 per week) before the planting season, and then enjoy the bounty of the harvest, trucked to 18 local drop-off sites for weekly pickup between June and December.

And bounty it is. There are cooking greens, salad mix, herbs, and, for those who choose, fruit. Early in the season, we got crispy white radishes, bunches of carrots, succulent strawberries, turnips, and sorrel (a little too bitter for my taste). We took handfuls of parsley and oregano, and later dill, cilantro, and basil, which filled our car, and soon our refrigerator, with its redolent scent. Then came yellow summer squash, lavender Asian eggplant, string beans, beets whose hairy skin concealed cherry red flesh that stained whatever it touched, and cabbage, which I used in a recipe for coleslaw that I'd never have otherwise tried. The corn was sweet enough to be eaten raw, the scallions were twice as long their supermarket cousins, and the tomatoes—Juliet, Cascade, heirloom, saladette—became meals in themselves. Starting next month, deliveries will be made every other week, heavier on potatoes, root vegetables, and squash.

We collect our shares in the late afternoon in our site coordinator's garage, where plastic crates are loaded with the week's yield, and a sheet of paper taped on a cabinet tells us how much to take of what. One cucumber, a quart of apricots, a bowlful of chard. "Which one is Tokyo bekana?" someone asks. "Is this the tatsoi?" "What do you do with mei quing choi?" We are a varied mix, some coming from work, some leading children and dogs, others chatting with one another about recent trips and the start of school. Mostly, we are intent on filling our bags, making our way from one vegetable to the next, and anticipating the coming week's meals as we inhale the verdant scent that fills the room.

One sunny August morning, I drove up to Roxbury Farm to see where our meals were born. Fields lined with infinite shades of green unfurled in three directions. Several enormous pigs, heads to the dirt, stood eating in a sty; farther away, a group of Katahdin sheep grazed in unison (a meat share is also offered). I began to walk, and as I approached one of the fields, I saw the vivid reds, greens, and yellows of peppers emerging from behind leafy stalks, and beside those, rows of bushes heavy with ripening tomatoes. Beyond the crest of a slope, farm workers were filling buckets with multicolored winter squash, and I knew I'd be sampling some soon.

I am splitting a membership with my neighbor, Erin, who had been researching CSAs and chose Roxbury because of its nearby drop-off site. We each pick up every other week, and fill in for each other when we're out of town.

When Erin first broached the idea of joining, I hesitated. While she is an avid cook and the mother of two young children, our younger daughter has just started college, leaving our house a newly emptied nest. And though I am an avid vegetable eater, my husband is considerably less so. I worried that I'd be overwhelmed with vegetables that would rot before being consumed.

Nevertheless, I decided to go ahead. It seemed a noble decision, and I was pleased to be able to provide support to independent farming. Furthermore, I liked the idea of knowing that my produce would be organic and fresh, a mirror of the yield of the land. And I was happy to abandon the often overpriced and disappointing vegetable aisles of the supermarket.

Now, as the harvest season wanes, as apples replace peaches and the colors of our deliveries take on tones of russet and rust, there is one driving reason that I know I'll renew my membership for next year. And that is the food. Be it a bowl of cherries, a steaming pot of ratatouille, or a simple green salad, rarely have I relished every bite, knowing that as I prepare, chew, and then swallow, I am indeed eating the fruits of the earth. 🏠

Submissions to Back Porch may be sent to jandrews@housemedianetwork.com.

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