

A LIMITED PALATE: MY FALL CSA

Photo by Carole Topalian

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My husband, Maroun, and I had wanted to try a communitysupported agriculture (CSA) share for a long time. The idea appealed to us as a way to save money on premium organic produce while we helped local farmers. As with any CSA, there would be risk: If the potato crop didn't fare well, we'd end up with fewer home fries; if spinach crops failed, we could forget about spanakopita.

We were willing to try our luck and, as it turned out, we benefited from the fall harvest—not only from its bounty of tubers, roots and leafy greens but from its important cooking lesson: We discovered that our CSA experience led to more creativity in our kitchen. We were able to work with a limited palate. Just as artists sometimes paint with a restricted range of colors in their palettes, we had to utilize a confined selection of vegetables. What the farmers chose to grow, and what the crops would yield in our region's autumn and winter months, helped us determine what to cook. It narrowed our focus in way that ultimately inspired us.

We eventually decided to buy our share from Cedar Circle—a beautiful old farmstead in Thetford with a backdrop of rolling hills.

The CSA Process

Every other Saturday from October to December, Maroun and I drove along the Connecticut River to the farm. The changing leaves marked the passage of time, and so did the vegetables we'd collect. In October when the trees were aflame with color, our share contained Brussels sprouts and Napa cabbage; by December, when the foliage had died, we'd find heartier fare in the form of potatoes and dried beans.

At the farm, we were given a checklist to select vegetables artfully arranged in bins. It was nice to have our shopping so laid out; we barely had to compose a grocery list during those weeks. Our first pickup alone included a cornucopia of endive, Brussels sprouts, Napa cabbage, chard, celery, carrots, onions, potatoes, winter squash and garlic.

Our farm share's success exceeded our expectations, and we were faced with another dilemma of the CSA: Not wanting to waste any of that wonderful food.

A Change in Philosophy

A week before we were due to pick up our produce, Cedar Circle's manager sent an email newsletter to us that included farm happenings and an applicable recipe as well as a list of produce we would collect. This heads-up was useful, and since one recipe, although helpful,

wasn't enough for all that food, the list of expected vegetables gave us time to think about recipes we'd like to try. We found that the system changed our cooking philosophy.

Now, instead of looking at a recipe to figure out what food to buy, we'd first assess the available produce and then consider how we'd use it. It seemed a much more natural way to cook, and the experience put us in tune with seasonal food cycles.

The Recipes: How We Used All That Food

With old favorites like Butternut, Acorn and Delicata squash I knew exactly what to do: I'd make delectable soups or roast them in the oven with a glaze of maple syrup and maybe a little cayenne for a kick. Cabbage was familiar, too: I'd bake gratins, or sauté it with a little curry powder. We found endless uses for staples like potatoes, onions and garlic. And carrots? We had a bumper crop of carrots this winter, but I managed to use them all: carrot salads, carrot soups, even carrot curry.

And although I considered myself a sophisticated eater, the CSA introduced me to foods I had overlooked. Take the daikon radish: Radishes were never a favorite of mine, but the daikon is more delicate than its Western cousin. It was magnificent grated on a salad of chopped fresh spinach and sliced red onions (also from the farm share) and topped with a mustardy vinaigrette.

I had a new appreciation for vitamin-rich winter greens and discovered how satisfying a salad made with kale or chard's sturdy leaves could be. I also rediscovered celery root, a homely but tangy knob I hadn't tasted since I lived in Holland years ago. Maroun and I boiled and mashed it with our Thanksgiving potatoes to give them zest.

We were surprised by how much winter had to offer and to find that our palate wasn't limited at all. We plan to continue our CSA membership, and now that we've had such an abundant winter, we can't wait to see what summer will bring.

Please see EdibleGreenMountains.com for recipes.