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Buying the farm, bit by bit



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Starfish chef Kyle Deming and his wife Lorraine make pork sausages for Kawartha Ecological Growers.

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Some GTA residents who buy a share in a farm this year will no longer have to sit back and take their kale, or any other vegetable they dislike, for that matter.

More and more Community Shared Agriculture or CSA farms are allowing their customers to "shop" for some or all of the food in their weekly allotment.

And some of those farmers are branching out into processed foods.

Those who buy a share in Kawartha Ecological Growers this year, for example, can "buy" sausages made by Starfish chef Kyle Deming and possibly some preserves made by Victor restaurant chef David Chrystian.

"We're calling it the naked pig," says KEG's Mark Trealout. "It's straight, good-quality pork with a little bit of salt and pepper and onion."

KEG shareholders will pay \$25 a week for a regular share and \$35 a week for a large share (\$475 and \$805 for the season). This year they'll get the equivalent of \$15 worth of food and the rest they can use to go "shopping." Everything will be assigned a dollar value, and the preserves and sausages will be part of the extras they can "buy."

"At the end of the week we're going to have as much choice as we can possibly make for CSA," says Trealout. A new meat share run by farmer Harry Stoddart from the Stoddart Family Farm near Lindsay also comes on line this year, with free-range chicken and duck eggs, grass-fed beef and gourmet organic meat such as rabbit and guinea fowl. Even cheese is getting in on the action, with Monforte Dairy selling shares.

The CSA model is designed to deepen the connection between people and their food. The customer "invests" in a farm by giving money up front (buying a share), which the farmer uses to buy seeds and compost to get the crops going, rather than paying for it all himself and not seeing any return until harvest begins in June. The risk is shared: If the farmer has a bad year and the crops fail, you don't get as much food. If it's a bumper year, you share the bounty.

Stoddart says buying a share shows the farmer you support him and it means the farmer doesn't have to grow on spec. At his farm, he invests in rare breeds such as the Berkshire pig, Romney lamb and the White Park cow.

"These are animals that are unique and worth preserving," he says. "They're raised ethically. This is meat the consumer can feel good about consuming."

For the most part, CSA still means a basket full of vegetables.

But this year Ruth Klahsen is selling shares in Monforte Dairy to help raise \$1 million to build a dairy and a cheese-making school in Stratford. Investors are ponying up anywhere from \$200 to \$1,000. A \$500 share will eventually yield \$750 worth of cheese.

Some CSAs are multi-farm, such as Plan B Organic Farms in Millgrove, Ont., outside Hamilton, and Kawartha Ecological Growers. Plan B, for example, has 25 acres that owners Melanie Golba, Alvaro and Rodrigo Venturelli farm, but it buys fruit and vegetables from a network of local farms to fill boxes for its subscribers, who numbered about 800 last year.

Some CSAs are as small as The Cutting Veg, which works two acres at FarmStart in Brampton to produce food for the brand-new Tikkun Adamah CSA in Thornhill.

The Cutting Veg farmer Daniel Hoffmann will also use a points system to allow customers to choose part of their weekly share.

"There is still commitment on the part of the members," he says. "They're still committing to the seeds. This is meeting people where they're at. The truth is, we all have preferences."

Hoffmann envisions a market with tables full of produce where shareholders don't just drop by, pick up their vegetables and leave, but stop by the Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Thornhill every Thursday and "schmooze."

Everdale Farm in Hillsburgh, Ont., pioneered the points system about seven years ago, according to farm manager Gavin Dandy. They now have a spreadsheet that tracks demand for any given vegetable.

"So if you don't like kale, you don't ever have to take it," he says. "And there are people who want it every week."

It will sell about 300 shares in its multi-farm Harvest Share program, 100 to Toronto residents who pick up at Narayever synagogue on Brunswick Ave. north of Harbord St. in the Annex.

Points are assigned to each vegetable. Customers choose what they want from an average of 30 crops each week. The number of points they have to "spend" depends on the size of their share.