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The Dish: The ABCs of Winter CSAs



By [A.H. Avouris](#) No Comments

“I’m going out of town,” my friend told me. I anticipated the proposal I’d been waiting for, and I was not disappointed. “It’s the first delivery of my winter CSA. Can you pick up my share? We can split it.”

The abandoned CSA share: as mythical as a Mexican Coke, or an empty table at Franny’s on a Friday night. You know they’re out there – *they must be out there* – but the difficulty comes in tracking one down.

And a winter CSA? Even more reclusive, though perhaps more frequently abandoned, due to the demands of the holiday schedule. But what is *in* a winter CSA share? Ten pounds of parsnips?

To recap for those without agrarian proclivities: The increasingly-popular CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture, is a method by which members buy into a farm’s harvest before the season begins. In exchange for their funding, they receive a portion of the farm’s produce, eggs, or other products throughout the year. Both farmer and CSA member share a certain amount of risk, as crops are dependent upon a number of variables and members do not choose what exactly they will receive (hence occasional complaints of collard overload). What they end up receiving, though, is often organic or sustainably grown and cheaper than it would be if purchased *à la carte*.

Most CSAs in Brooklyn (and there are over a dozen, depending on neighborhood) run from June through October, and many – like good preschools and Hermés handbags – operate on a waiting-list basis. Since they’re run entirely by volunteers, each member is required to put in a shift at the pickup location at least once per season.

Winter CSAs are more uncommon, and slightly more expensive. [The Greene Harvest](#), to which I trudged with canvas bags last Saturday, offers a winter share to their regular season members only. Their first haul included storage produce like sweet potatoes, rutabaga, and carrots, greenhouse lettuce, and frozen vegetables including cauliflower, haricots verts, and plum tomatoes. Add-on shares of dairy, grass-fed beef, and apples are available, like the vegetables, through early January.



As winter approaches, storage vegetables tend to predominate in local CSA shares, though the variety of offerings (and schedules) is broad. Not all Brooklyn CSAs offer winter shares, and those that do often ask their members to make arrangements directly with the farmers themselves. Some run for only a few months, while others run all winter; some offer a mixture of storage and frozen vegetables, others offer only frozen, and some supplement with processed goods like apple butters, jams, and pickles. What you get depends very much on what's available: in the winter, perhaps even more true than in summer.

Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht, of the [Garden of Eve](#) organic farm in Aquebogue, New York, supplies several CSAs in Brooklyn with her produce. She has been offering a winter CSA for about five years – nothing frozen, just storage vegetables and greenhouse greens, although this year she plans to add wheat as well. Garden of Eve also works with a local processor to provide canned tomatoes, pickled beets, and other goods, enabling the CSA to run from December through May, and thus carrying customers through the year without a major break (their regular season runs from June through November).

“Winter CSAs give customers the option of staying with a farm,” she says. “Belonging to a CSA creates a rhythm that people get used to, and that they enjoy. It can get disrupted in the winter months, but having a winter share gives people the option of eating locally year round.”

Winter shares also allow her to grow more crops, like potatoes and sweet potatoes, that can be stored for the winter months. “Originally we would have extra, but now we can plant to store,” she says. Farmers markets are somewhat less than dependable for sales in January and February, when the weather often keeps the weak-hearted at home.

Despite the extra potatoes, there are clear limitations to the produce available for winter customers and thus fewer shares available. And even if you make it onto the list, there are still the rutabagas to deal with. “Not everyone who enjoys the summer CSA wants a winter CSA”, says Ms. Kaplan-Walbrecht. “It’s a totally different range of vegetables. You have to be someone who wants to eat the kind of vegetables that are available, and who maybe has the space to store them” – a space, in the fridge or elsewhere, which hovers around 50 degrees (i.e., not next to your pre-war steam radiator). Garden of Eve still has winter shares available, although current customers have priority – those interested should [contact the farm directly](#). Pickups have been scheduled for McCarren Park, and will be arranged in Bushwick and Windsor Terrace/Kensington as well.

Aside from Greene Harvest and Garden of Eve, winter CSAs were also made available this year from CSAs in Crown Heights (now full) and those served by Windflower Farms and Winter Sun Farms. Winter Sun has also been offering a winter share for five years, and now serves 1,200 members, with nine pickup locations in Brooklyn.

"Brooklyn is our number one borough!" says Jim Hyland, president of Winter Sun. Their shares, plucked from a number of local, mostly organic farms, include frozen vegetables like tomatoes, blueberries, peppers, sweet corn, raspberries, broccoli, and green beans, as well as fresh pea shoots from the greenhouse and fall greens. For pickup locations in Bed-Stuy, Cobble Hill, Ditmas Park, East and South Williamsburg, Kensington/Windsor Terrace, Park Slope, and Downtown, [contact the farm directly](#). Signups will run through December 1st or until they sell out of shares. Distribution runs December through March, with a possible April extension.

As for the rest of the borough: Well, there's always next spring. See Just Food's [list of local CSAs](#) to have yourself waitlisted (like college, but with fewer essays). Or you could just offer pickup services to your friends ahead of time, in exchange for complimentary cabbage. After all, we can't all weekend in the country.