

## Getting their greens

### Program allows families to buy produce straight from local farms

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SORRENTO HILLS – Nobody knew what to do with the verdolaga, so farmer Stephenie Caughlin was fielding calls.

It's a vegetable green, similar to watercress, she told callers who had just received it fresh from her small farm. Use it in a salad or sauté with spices, she said.

"It's high in omega 3 and helps brain development," added Caughlin, who owns Seabreeze Organic Farm on the 2 acres that surround her home south of Del Mar.

Caughlin participates in community-supported agriculture, known as CSA, a farm movement in which families pay annual, quarterly or monthly fees to get a fresh box weekly or biweekly of whatever vegetables and fruit are in season.

Some of the boxes are delivered to homes, while others are dropped off at nearby locations for pickup. Families say the arrangement helps them eat healthy, and farmers say it helps them stay in touch with their community, determine how much to plant and have some upfront capital to do it.

CSAs began in the United States in the late 1980s with just a few farms. Today there are at least 1,500 farms that feed more than 300,000 families each week, according to Local Harvest, a Santa Cruz-based Web site that tracks CSAs and farmers markets.

San Diego County families pay between \$20 and \$40 a week to receive shares from Seabreeze Organic Farm, Tierra Miguel Foundation Farm in Pauma Valley, Be Wise Ranch in the Santa Fe Valley just west of Rancho Bernardo and Little Acres Farm in Valley Center.

Alex Schmidt, 6, of Rancho Peñasquitos waited with his mother, Debra Schmidt, for the weekly delivery from Be Wise Ranch recently. The Schmidt home is a drop-off spot for Rancho Peñasquitos where other families come to pick up their food each week.

Alex peered curiously into his family's box, then struggled to carry its bounty of cucumbers, lemons, oranges, strawberries, kale, beets, lettuce, squash and carrots to the kitchen. The waxed boxes are reused each week.



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Getting his armloads of fresh produce through the door was something of a struggle recently for 6-year-old Alex Schmidt of Rancho Peñasquitos. The Schmidts' home is a drop-off site where other families that pay fees to be part of community-supported agriculture come to pick up their food each week.

"We've been doing it five years," Debra Schmidt said. "The kids like the carrots and the strawberries. It helps me because we try things I would never have thought to buy."

Families can tell farmers what they like, but once a box is packed with a ripe harvest, the contents cannot be exchanged.

Schmidt has been surprised by beet greens, Swiss chard, tomatoes, yellow cucumbers, purple green beans and kale.

"There are all these things I didn't know existed," she said. "We really like the avocados and the watermelon. We still don't really like the kale. Our turtle loves the kale."

Be Wise Ranch is run by the Brammer family. They have grown organic fruits and vegetables in the Santa Fe Valley since 1977, and in 1994 they started doing CSA business.

Owner Bill Brammer said he started to get in touch with the community so people would know where their food comes from, and from a desire tied to the civic responsibility he grew up with in the 1960s.

He also wanted to ensure his future as a farmer. His main wholesale business could disappear if the farmland he leases is developed, so he would turn to CSA business on less land for his main income.

Brammer also grows CSA food because it's fun, he said. he has made friends of customers, and "there's a challenge in doing year-round growing that makes farming more interesting," he said.

Some 600 families that subscribe to Be Wise may get ripe tomatoes and snap peas in spring, sweet berries and fresh basil in summer, a variety of squash in the fall and white turnips and cabbage in winter.

Schmidt makes lots of soups and often just steams the vegetables because they taste so good on their own, she said. Because the vegetables are so fresh – farmers can allow them to ripen to their fullest because they aren't going far – the flavor is intense, Schmidt said. The proof is in her children scrambling to eat fresh carrots, she said.

Garnet Tomich of Rancho Peñasquitos, also a Be Wise customer, said she disguises the vegetables for her children in soup, and the regular deliveries force her to find new recipes.

"It inspires me to cook," Tomich said. "I have a pot of fennel tomato soup in the kitchen now."

She also has learned to sauté bok choy as an elegant side dish and puree red beets into a Valentine's Day soup.

"I would be sorry if we couldn't get the produce," Tomich said. "I trust their operation."

Getting families to connect with farming is what it's all about, said Beth Ann Levendowski, director of the Tierra Miguel Foundation Farm. The educational farm, which opened for business in 2000, was founded on the principle that if people know where their food comes from, they will support local farmers.

This year, Tierra Miguel plans to use its CSA earnings to focus on soil management, infusing it with organic material to increase the levels of nitrogen, minerals and moisture needed to grow better vegetables.

"There's questions to be answered" about whether organic food is better nutritionally, Levendowski said, "and we want to do it at a local level."

To continue its research, the nonprofit farm counts on donations and CSA purchases. It has about 300

families subscribing in San Diego, Orange and Los Angeles counties.

To keep customers interested, boxes of produce often come with newsletters that include recipes, such as rosemary-orange salad and cabbage curry. The newsletters help subscribers feel connected to a movement, Levendowski said.

Families are also invited to visit the farm the first Saturday of the month for Volunteer Day, when they can tour its 87 acres and help out.

The price of CSA food is higher than for produce at the supermarket, comparable to organic produce at a store, Levendowski said.

Seabreeze, for example, charges \$40 for a summer box that might include lettuce, salad, radishes, cooking greens, scallions, summer squash, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, fresh herbs and a bouquet of flowers.

The biggest complaint, though, isn't the cost.

"People say it's too much food," Brammer said.

That's why Be Wise and Tierra Miguel offer every-other-week deliveries for "regular" families.

"For vegetarians it's not enough, though," Brammer said. "They want more."

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