

CHOWHOUND

FOR THOSE WHO LIVE TO EAT

SWISSCHARRED -- this is for you re: Tierra Miguel, LOVE and Organic Express Delivery services, a comparative meandering (long)

I've been subscribing to Tierra Miguel (www.tierramiguelfoundation.org)'s CSA for almost a decade. Or maybe it really is one.... I am a *huge* fan.

A CSA is fundamentally different from an organization like LOVE or organic express. Unless I'm mistaken (and please correct me if I am), they're more akin to a personal shopping service for organic veggies where you place an order and these people fill it for you. The veggies can come from any presumably certified organic farm, but they will be different farms, and you are unlikely to know any of them. It's really not an "eating local" concept. It's not bad, just quite different from a CSA model. Heck, anything that supports organic growing is good, IMO. But there is good and there is better.

CSA, that is Community Supported Agriculture, is really part of a whole-earth, ecological husbandry-philosophy. The idea is to encourage local growing and purchasing of food (which doesn't happen well, BTW, with Tierra Miguel which is located in the Pauma Valley east of Oceanside) where the consumer becomes a partner of sorts with the farmer. In exchange for "seed money" -- that is money to buy seeds with, the consumer "purchases" a share of the farm, or rather a share of the farm's harvest. And at the same time a share of the risk of crop failure (minimal around here although when there were fires near the farm I think we missed a box or two -- which they made up later I should add). It's really a model that started on the east coast where the growing season is finite. Here, in SoCal with a 365-day growing season they've had to adapt the model quite a bit.

Tierra Miguel (TM) adds a fillip to this whole setup by farming biodynamically. This is a whole structure and spiritual philosophy of Rudolf Steiner's of Waldorf fame. I don't personally know too much about it but I know it involves planting in cycles linked to various natural phenomenon. It's all pretty out-there for me. However, I have to say that empirically, whatever they're doing, is working. Their veggies, IMO, are just absolutely delicious. They are the best I've had.

How good are the veggies? Well, I like to think of it this way: when I cook elsewhere buying the best organic and locally-grown vegetables I can find, my cooking still suffers. Here, using TM veggies, I think I am a terrific cook; I love my cooking. Elsewhere, somehow, magically, I am a *significantly* less good cook. ...not. All that "good cheffing" on my part is really just manipulation of really, really good ingredients. Which is to say, my cooking really stays the same and yet it tastes different when I'm away from LA. I take this as proof of the good quality of the ingredients I use in LA -- Tierra Miguel's vegetables.

As I say, it's been in the order of ten years now that I've cooked from a box of TM's weekly harvest and I'm still not bored. Their vegetables are delicious. And interesting. When I first was evaluating whether I wanted to subscribe to TM, I took their veggies with me to the Farmer's Market to compare price and type received. But with their veggies in hand I realized something about the Farmer's Markets that I had absolutely never picked up on before: the produce that's for sale at these places is really very limited in diversity. What's sold there is really +/- the same sorts of stuff that's available at Vons or Ralphs. not literally of course, but by-and-large yes. There's very little in the way of interesting or heirloom seeds (apart from some predictable tomatoes) or greens. I just hadn't realized this before. Not until I tried to match my CSA box did I realize how limited were the offerings there: I couldn't match the box (apples to oranges so to speak!); the produce in my box just wasn't there at the market. And what was was so

comparatively inferior in quality that it wasn't a very fair comparison either.

Now -- Tierra Miguel's offerings are really not for everyone; this I've seen over the years. To me receiving the box is like having a puzzle to work out every week: how will I cook up this particular spectrum of veggies? If this isn't a challenge you feel like addressing, the exercise will become tiresome very quickly. If, for example, you'd like to go out to eat with some regularity, as perforce I imagine many on this board do (!), the box can quickly become oppressive: you can't go out to eat because you have veggies to cook up!

Handling the constant volume is indeed a challenge. Anything that keeps coming regularly even if it's not a huge volume per se, grows to be one for the relentless pace. Over the years I've come to think of the contents as if I were growing them myself in the sense that my rule is, if I can't eat the veggies right away I have a "responsibility" to them to put them up or in some way process the veggies for longer-term storage (usually I freeze or dry them). This works well and you get into a rhythm with it.

Another way TM's veggies aren't for everyone and you might rather a delivery service like LOVE or org express is in that you can't control what you receive with TM, while you can with the other two services. Thus if you despise some particular vegetable, you may well get it anyway if that's what came ripe on the farm that week. Conversely if you want to cook a certain particular recipe that calls for a specific quantity of something, you can pretty well be certain that it is unlikely to arrive in your TM box. However you could *order* it from LOVE or org express. I liken it to shopping at RossDressForLess -- if you go there looking for something in particular, you're likely to leave disappointed, but when you're open to taking what just happens to be there, you often depart with some exciting finds. Anticipating something in your box is likely to leave you frustrated. If you can just decide to cook whatever it is that arrives you'll find yourself far happier. Again, this model isn't for everyone.

Other things about TM that may or may not appeal: the change of seasons is slow. over the course of a year your box will decidedly change but week to week the shift may be slow-enough to feel monotonous to some. s'OK with me; I like it. Not all do.

My kids look at their classmates' lunches wistfully, wanting any manner of fruits and vegetables out of season, some, even, organic. They don't find them in their own lunchbox very often because I like the notion of going with the rhythm of the season -- and also I hate the ordeal of going to retail stores, even the CoOp! But that doesn't mean you *can't* supplement your box. Also, you can subscribe now to an every-other-week box from TM, which some like for the variety they feel their diet can accommodate that way, going every other week to the market or whatever.


IMO the cost of TM's box makes it a real steal, but that's only partly an outright consideration. As mentioned above, directly comparing its cost is really difficult because it contains any manner of vegetables that simply aren't available from the Farmer's Market, and then what you find there is usually very much less fresh and tasty than TM's. But for me, personally, the real savings comes in *keeping me away from the Farmer's Market*!!! When I enter a Farmer's Market it's rare for me to leave without 3-5 fewer \$20 bills in my pocket. I just can't help myself; it all is so tempting -- and really expensive. A lot of the stuff sold at those markets is just way more expensive than it can be found, often by the same sellers, at retail establishments! The whole proposition of shopping at a Farmer's Market is in fact quite luxurious - in time and money. So, for me, I measure the cost of TM more broadly than just in terms of what I shell out; I factor in what I *don't* shell out too.

Politically, in terms of the health of the planet, purchasing from a single farm/er and also through a CSA makes a lot of sense to me. Ooof --- this is such a big subject. There's a lot written about it out there, but briefly, the point is to minimize global resource-cost by eating "closer to home". To this end I wish TM weren't so far from us, but the economics of megalopolises pretty much dictate this. Conversely, the consumer-oriented setup of a service like LOVE/org express exchanges the convenience of ordering and picking-and-choosing for husbanding nonrenewable energy -- it's healthier for the planet not to go carting all that stuff from all over the place just so you can choose broccoli over chard. There's way more but this post is long enough. But I have been meaning to post about it ages ago when someone asked me ... I've felt guilty about not writing on this subject for some long while now! I hope SWISSCHARRED finds this post.

Another thing about TM; there is such community and philosophical and spiritual and political and ecological depth to the place. They are a non-profit organization and are so richly vested in what they do and their community. They are located close to many native American reservations and a lot of "nutritional poverty", which they address with donated food and information and training and on and on and on. They are a truly circular self-sustaining informational organization and year-on-year growing "organism" -- now I sound pretty wacky; sorry. Here's an example: one day I was talking with the Farmer for the organization and he said "I hope you don't mind but I took some of your lupin seeds" -- certainly I didn't but they were from seeds I had fairly carefully collected and hauled cross-country as I love the flowers so I wondered why. It turns out that lupins fix nitrogen apparently orders of magnitude better than just about any other method except synthetic perhaps. He pulled up a plant and showed me all the nodules on its root system. I thought that was so *interesting*!! He was experimenting with planting some fields in lupin as a natural rejuvenation of the soil. I find this absolutely incredibly cool, to know where your food is coming from, the people who are thinking about it and the process in terms of a large cycle of how it sustains the next generation of plants.

This is just a completely different model of food-use from LOVE/org express. It is, frankly, truly revolutionary in a back-to-the-future sort of way.


My apologies for waxing positively cultish here. I don't usually do this, but as I said, I am a true, deep fan and really I should perhaps speak up about this more often. Thanks for reading this far....And please, I could go on for hours more if anyone wants. Let me know your email and I'll be happy to bore you further!

 [aliris](#) Feb 25, 2009 01:46AM

4 Replies so Far


Thank you for putting into words what I have often felt and tried to explain.

My years of subscribing weekly to TMF have been one of the greatest joys of my life -- mostly for the challenge and exploration of the veggies. Also for the surprise each week. And for feeling really really good about where some of my money goes.

 [theotherone](#) Feb 25, 2009 07:56AM


Unfortunately your website link is bad because when you enclose with parens you have to leave a space on each end to avoid getting the URL caught up in the parens; like this

(<http://www.tierramiguelfarm.org/>)

 [Servorg](#) Feb 25, 2009 08:17AM

re: [Servorg](#)

Oops -- thank you very much. I'm guessing the above works now. Much appreciated.

 [aliris](#) Feb 25, 2009 08:25AM

Linked -- who knew? How does this link-thing work? Seems to be in its database though. Please

check out the website for more info on the CSA, not sure whether they have links to info about biodynamic-ness. There are newsletters there too that list what's in the week's box, recipes, info about the farm, etc.

[Tierra Miguel Foundation](#)

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aliris Feb 25, 2009 08:36AM

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