Why I Broke My Vow to Never Join a CSA Again

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May 16, 2018

My husband refuses to talk about the CSA of 2009. It left him unable to face kale or cabbage—he still gives beets the side eye. We were CSA novices, and our ignorance was boundless. These are the lessons we took away from the experience:

- Don't join a CSA in the winter if it's your first time out. You'll have root vegetable nightmares for years.
- Don't join a CSA that requires you to drive 90 minutes for pick-up, thereby negating any environmental benefits you might have accrued.
- Don't join a CSA without a personal recommendation from someone you trust and who is unlikely to be getting a kickback.

Since we are people who learn from our mistakes, we decided the best way to handle this was to accept the message the universe was clearly sending us: Don't join a CSA.

We stayed with it until about a month ago, when seeing my friend Laura's pictures of her most recent delivery finally got the better of me. It looked fantastic, so I figured it must be ruinously expensive. Secretly, I'd been investigating CSA options for a while, but the price tag ended the inquiry every time. Not this time—the price was entirely manageable. So, what was the catch?

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You know the Island of Misfit Toys? This was delivery from the Island of Misfit Produce. The company that Laura buys from sells the produce that stores reject produce as too small, too blemished, too whatever. "Rescued" might not sound like a selling point, but it was for me. Food waste is a big challenge for us, especially produce, which seems to enter our house with the sole purpose of withering and rotting.

I've gotten better at spotting when bananas are about to give up and collapse into disgusting goo, but for every bunch I use for banana bread, there's a head of lettuce or a cucumber that turned moldy, or a forgotten knob of ginger that fossilized in the back of the drawer.

It's a waste of money and a waste of sustenance—and it's not just my family's problem. The USDA estimated that, in 2010, 133 billion pounds and $161 billion worth of food went to waste. That's about 30 percent of the food supply, affecting availability for those in need and creating landfill and consequent environmental impact for everyone.

Ugh, right?

I felt noble “saving” unloved produce, but I was still plagued with doubt. Food waste isn’t any better if it’s on me rather than the grocery store, and uneaten carrots are uneaten carrots. What if we didn’t like what they sent? What if my kids refused to eat any of it and I felt obligated to consume an entire box of artichokes and bok choy? What if I don’t even know what the hell to do with artichokes and bok choy?

Pin it

It turned out my fears were, as usual, completely unfounded. Our first delivery was zucchini, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, pears, apples, potatoes, carrots, and broccoli. And despite my expectations of produce only its mother could love—there weren’t even any visible defects. The only difference I’ve noticed is that just like when I buy from the farmer's market, it tends to soften faster—that’s not great for us, but the taste is so much better, there hasn’t been much left over to spoil. Here’s what happened:

- I learned that I have been depriving my children of pears their entire lives. Not really, but you would have thought so. The magical fruit was gone in the blink of an eye and then they tore through most of the apples.
- I shredded two zucchini and froze them for zucchini muffins. Another one went into a pasta sauce with the tomatoes; my husband is on the Atkins Diet, and the fresh produce has been a great way to keep dinner a family-friendly event—pasta sauce without sugar and squash noodles meant that everyone got to eat basically the same menu.
- We also had carrot noodles with peanut sauce and tofu one night; stuffed baked potatoes with broccoli, cheese, and leftover ground turkey for another meal; and an improvised bread salad with leftover chicken, cucumbers, caramelized onion, and

cherry tomatoes.

I'll be honest: I am a competitive person and I will throw down for a challenge. OK, I pretty much can't resist throwing down for a challenge. I was up against a checkered past with CSAs in general and our family's unmagical Rumplestiltskin ability to turn vegetables into trash. I wanted to prove that this could work for us. I was determined.

It was grim determination, though. I certainly didn't foresee any pleasure. And yet, what we're getting is delicious—better than what I'd been buying at the store. The cucumbers last week were so sweet and crisp, we ate them right out of the bag, and a fair number of the cherry tomatoes went directly into my mouth instead of the salad.

So, the fruit disappears first, but we're all eating way more produce, and the waste has been far less. Full disclosure: I've thrown away two carrots and an apple. I was sad to do it, but it's progress. My menu planning has become more diverse, based on what the delivery includes, and the creativity is an unexpected benefit. I might not have tried including broccolini with oranges before, but it's pretty good. My kids have rediscovered a love of cucumbers and asked me when we'll get fennel in the delivery. Fennel? Uh, OK. Fennel. Why not?

I had my doubts: I thought we'd hate it. I thought we'd throw away food. I thought it would all be kale. I thought wrong and I'm so glad I did.

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