

With Over 500 Shares, Running One of

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BY EMMA COSGROVE MAY 5, 2015

Liz Neumark didn't get into the community-supported agriculture (CSA) game on purpose. She was in love with a 60-acre farm in Columbia County, New York. Neumark's catering company, Great Performances, is Zagat's top-rated catering company, with a socially and environmentally conscious ethos. She started the farm in 2006 in the hopes of supporting the catering company. When her first harvest came in 2007, news of the farm started to spread, a Tribeca Jewish Community Center approached her about setting up a CSA operation.

The program started with 25 members and Neumark says that it has doubled every year since then. As public interest in the crops of Katchkie Farm grew, it became obvious to the supply side, that the CSA would be a customer just as important as the catering company.

Catering is a finicky business. The farm couldn't always give Neumark the exact poundage of vegetables at the exact moment she needed them. Plus, with spring and early fall the prime time for catering in New York, the harvest didn't always cooperate.



"We weren't satisfying the catering companies needs for a reliable, predictable, exact poundage and we weren't satisfying the farm's need, which was for a steady reliable buyer. And by the same token, our CSA demand was growing. We had clients begging us to come into their offices. It seems like it really makes sense," said Neumark.

Now when catering customers plan their menus, they get to decide whether they would like conventional produce from a supplier, or the local organic produce from Katchkie.

"We have deep relationships with customers. Our customers are coming to us because of the way we feel about local produce and seasonality and flavors... It really brings us all together in a very intimate way," said Neumark.



Last year, the Katchkie CSA sold 471 shares (a share is what members of a CSA pickup). That number is up to 500 already this year and sign-up is still open. Where Katchkie has really pulled away from the pack is with their corporate CSA program. More than 25 companies invite their employees to sign-up with Katchkie and pickup at the office and the farm invites participating offices out to the farm to see Farmer Bob's work. In partnership with the Sylvia Center, Katchkie often opens the farm to public as well. On May 16 is their annual Spring Planting Day where all are welcome to both plant seeds and harvest early spring vegetables.

Last year, Katchkie delivered 130,000 pounds of vegetables to both offices and their community pickup locations. But being one of the largest CSAs in New York City takes expert timing and intricate planning too. CSA members look for variety in their bags. Each pickup includes 6-10 different vegetables that need to be at the peak harvest time. This is where farmer Bob Walker and some very smart software come in.

"It's all timed out just as if you were in production making cars. You'd have to order all the parts to get them on the assembly line to get the cars on the showroom floor by a certain date," said Walker. He tills, seeds and harvests based on some very detailed choreography, but that doesn't mean that farming predictable.

When asked what to expect in the share bags this season, both Neumark and Walker say there's no way to tell. Both share a sense of surrender to whatever the next few months' weather will coax out of the soil. Said Neumark, if this cold persists, "then we will have big tomatoes in September, which would be better for business anyway."

The Katchkie CSA is accepting new members now. Their jarred products are available at specialty grocers across Manhattan and they will be selling produce at the Rockefeller Greenmarket on Fridays.