

How to Buy a Share

What a CSA, a farm share, and a meat share are, how they work, and what to ask before you pay.

FREE GUIDE

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Before you start

Buying a share means paying a farm ahead of time for a portion of what it grows or raises. You get food, the farm gets money when it needs it, and you know exactly who grew your dinner. It's one of the best ways to buy local. It can also be confusing the first time, because it works differently from a grocery store.

This guide explains the two kinds of shares you're most likely to see, vegetable (CSA) shares and meat shares, and gives you the questions to ask before you pay. It doesn't list farms. The Hudson Valley Almanac does, and I'll show you how to find them.

Check the details with the farm. Every farm runs its shares a little differently, and prices and dates change every year. Where I give a number, it's a rule of thumb from a published source, and your farm's numbers may differ. Ask the farm.

In this guide

- **Part 1:** Vegetable and farm shares (CSAs)
- **Part 2:** Meat shares: whole, half, and quarter
- **Part 3:** Finding a farm, and when to sign up

Part 1: Vegetable and farm shares

Also called a CSA, short for Community Supported Agriculture.

How a CSA works

A CSA is described by Extension educators as a "shared-risk" way of buying from a local farm: you pay the farm, and you share in the harvest, good or poor. Here's how most work:

- **You pay up front.** Most farms ask you to pay before the growing season. Some take full payment, some take a deposit and then installments, and some let you pay at pickup.
- **You get a box on a schedule.** Most farms give you a share every week during the growing season. Some do it monthly or every other month.
- **What you get follows the season.** You'll get what's ripe: lots of greens in spring, tomatoes and corn in summer, roots and squash in fall. Many farms also add fruit, eggs, meat, dairy, honey, or flowers.
- **You pick it up or have it delivered.** Options include on-farm pickup, a pickup point in town, or delivery to your door.

The honest trade-offs

- You pay before the harvest, so you share the risk of a bad year.
- You'll get some vegetables you've never cooked.
- Most farms don't give refunds if you can't pick up. You may be able to send a friend or donate the share.

Questions to ask before you join

- ☐ What's in a share, and how much? How does it change through the season?
- ☐ How long is the season, and how many weeks do I get? (Divide the price by the weeks to compare farms. A bigger share isn't a better deal if your household can't eat it.)
- ☐ What are the payment options? Can I pay in installments?
- ☐ Where and when is pickup? Is delivery available?
- ☐ How does the farm handle a missed pickup, a shortage, or a bad crop?
- ☐ How do you stay in touch with members?
- ☐ Is the farm certified organic, and if not, how do you grow?
- ☐ Can I talk to a current member?
- ☐ Do you offer a smaller share, a work share, or a payment plan?

Part 2: Meat shares

Whole, half, and quarter shares of beef, pork, and lamb.

A meat share lets you buy a portion of an animal directly from the farm and fill your freezer at once. You pay once, usually when the animal is ready, and you get your meat packaged in a batch.

Three weights to understand

Term	What it means
Live weight	What the animal weighs before processing.
Hanging weight	The carcass after the animal is dressed, before it's cut. Many farms price meat by hanging weight. One ranch-industry FAQ puts it at roughly 62 percent of live weight.
Take-home weight	The packaged meat you bring home. It's less than the hanging weight because of aging and trimming. The same FAQ figures about 21 percent less than hanging weight.

So when you hear "\$X a pound," ask: *a pound of what?* Hanging weight and take-home weight give very different prices per pound.

The cut sheet

Before processing, you fill out a **cut sheet** telling the butcher how to cut and package your share: steak thickness, how lean you want ground beef, package sizes, and whether you want the bones or organ meats. If you're not sure, ask the farm or the butcher for help. They do this all the time.

What it costs

You usually pay two things: the farm's price for the animal, and the processor's fee for cutting and wrapping. Sometimes the farm bundles them, and sometimes you pay the butcher directly. **Ask for the total, in dollars, for your size of share**, so you can compare.

Will it fit in your freezer?

Meat takes more room than people expect. The ranch FAQ figures about 35 to 40 pounds of packaged meat per cubic foot. A quarter of a cow, at roughly 160 pounds, takes around 5 cubic feet. Measure your freezer before you order. A chest freezer holds more than the freezer on top of a refrigerator.

Custom or inspected?

Meat can be processed in two ways. In an **inspected** plant, meat can be sold to anyone. In a **custom** plant, the meat is processed for the owner of the animal, which is why some farms sell a share of the live animal. Custom meat is generally labeled as not for sale. Both are common. Ask the farm which one they use and how the share works, so you know what you're buying.

Questions to ask the farm

- ☐ How much meat will I take home from a quarter, half, or whole?
- ☐ Is the price by hanging weight or take-home weight?
- ☐ What's the total cost, including processing?
- ☐ When will the animal be ready, and when do I pay?
- ☐ Who processes it, and is that plant custom or inspected?
- ☐ Can I fill out a cut sheet, and who helps me with it?
- ☐ How do I pick it up, and is it packaged frozen?
- ☐ How was the animal raised and fed?
- ☐ What if I want a smaller amount, or want to split a share with a friend?

Part 3: Finding a farm

And when to start looking.

Where to look

The Hudson Valley Almanac has dozens of farms listed as offering CSA shares or meat shares. Open the map, use the search box, and try "CSA" or "meat shares." Then use the county filter or "Near me" to find the ones close to you. Visit the farm's website or call. Your local farmers market is another good place to ask how shares work.

When to sign up

Because members usually pay before the growing season, sign-ups for vegetable shares generally open before spring. If you want a share for next summer, **start looking in winter** so you don't miss out. Meat shares depend on when the farm's animals are ready, so ask the farm for its calendar.

Before you pay

- ☐ I know the price per week (CSA) or the total cost (meat).
- ☐ I know how and when I pick up.
- ☐ I know what happens if I miss a pickup.
- ☐ I have room in my freezer or fridge.
- ☐ I'll cook with what's in season, even the unfamiliar items.

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