

AGRARIAN ADVOCATE



COMMUNITY ALLIANCE WITH FAMILY FARMERS

"I Didn't Know You Could Eat These"

*Increasing Awareness & Changing Perceptions
in Esparto, California*

BY KELLY VAN BOXTEL

The cafeteria at Esparto Elementary has undergone some changes in the last couple of months. Brightly colored drawings of students' favorite fruits and vegetables decorate the walls, and there is a noticeable difference in what is on the lunch menu. In the past, lunch offerings have consisted of hot dogs, crinkle fries (which count as a serving of vegetables), canned peaches and snack chips. On a November day, the "garden ole" salad served in the cafeteria was made up of organic lettuce mix generously provided by a local grower in the Capay Valley. In the past, the salad consisted of iceberg lettuce and tasteless cherry tomatoes.



Esparto is a small, rural town in the Capay Valley, an area that is known for its richness in small organic family farms. In the Esparto community many children are connected to a local farm through their parents. "My dad grows those in the soil!" said Jose, a third grader at Esparto Elementary School, when a picture of a garden beet was held up during a "Harvest of the Month" (HOM) nutrition education presentation. It is one of many programs geared toward improving the overall health of students through Esparto Farm-to-School. HOM combines nutrition education with taste testing of local fruits and vegetables, movement exercises, and grade-appropriate curriculum, connecting the presentations to California curriculum standards. Students are taught in a style that allows them to use their senses in the learning process. During the taste testing children are encouraged to think and talk about the flavors and textures they experience.

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The Next Step for Buy Fresh Buy Local: Compre lo Fresco de Nuestra Región!

by Marisol Asselta

The Central Coast "Buy Fresh Buy Local" (BFBL) campaign has had three years of increasing success in connecting local family farmers with community retail outlets and customers. BFBL is now expanding the campaign to include the region's dynamic and growing Spanish-speaking community.



The "Compre lo Fresco de Nuestra Región" (CFNR) is getting its start in Watsonville and Salinas. There are several strong sources of motivation for this campaign, but two particularly timely ones are 1) health and fitness concerns and 2) the need for a strong and stable local economy with corresponding employment opportunities. Many of the Spanish-speaking residents in the Central Coast are employed in agriculture, yet very often they have little or no access to the fresh, healthy food they help to produce. The obesity and Type 2 diabetes epidemic is hitting the Latino community hard, with many children struggling with weight-related health issues at increasingly younger ages, even down to the toddler years. In addition, many farm workers are subject to seasonal availability of jobs, with little assurance that they will be able to find dependable, year-round employment.

Small, local family farmers tend to hire workers directly and to offer employment stability, preferring to keep on good workers who are familiar with the operations of their farm. Providing a consistent market and support structure for these farms will hopefully translate into more opportunities for stable, sustainable employment in the farm working community. Smaller, local farmers are also able to interact more directly with their customers and employees, and are therefore presumably more likely to respond to their community's needs and concerns regarding worker treatment and responsible farming practices.

After an initial pilot phase, CFNR will be offered as a resource to partner BFBL organizations throughout the United States. To this end, CAFF and ALBA (Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association) are working to provide language translations that would be relevant to a wide and diverse Spanish-speaking audience.

ALBA is an organization that works primarily with limited-resource Latino farm workers who are in the process of becoming organic small farmers. Several of their members have been involved in the creation of CFNR and six of their farmers were the first to use the Spanish language materials, with great success, in the new Oldtown Salinas Farmers' Market.

On Tuesday, September 12, 2006, the City of Watsonville's mayor Antonio Rivas issued an official proclamation to make September "Local Food Month." The first official kick-off of this bilingual celebration was

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In another sense, a lot has changed. Thanks largely to term limits, 36, or almost half, of the Assembly members in the new legislative session will be freshmen. More than half of the Assembly Democratic caucus (25 out of 48) will be in their first term. And except for three termed-out Senators who were elected to an Assembly seat, all the new members will have no state legislative experience.

In the Senate, conversely, term limits have created a very different result. Twelve of the 20 seats up for election will be filled by freshmen—not surprisingly since a Senator is limited to two four-year terms and therefore only runs for re-election to the Senate once.

But of the twelve newly elected Senators, 11 are former Assembly members who will enter the Senate with legislative experience.


One of the many effects of term limits has been to widen the differences in the two houses. Since Assembly terms are only two years and all 80 seats are up for election, most new candidates first run for the Assembly. The fewer opportunities to win a four-year Senate term mean that they are usually sought and won by former Assembly members from the same area, who have established their name and record with the voters. As a result, the Senate has much more combined legislative experience than the Assembly. 

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In spring of 2007 children will have the opportunity to participate in food production when the Esparto “VIVA” garden project begins. This gives students the opportunity to move outside the classroom walls to plant and harvest the foods that later appear in their lunch at the cafeteria. Students will be inspired to make healthy food choices through positive interactions around growing and eating fresh food, showing them the link between what they grow, what they eat, and how they feel. Gardens are a direct form of education, where children will have real and tangible hands-on experience in the outdoors.

“I didn't know you could eat these!” exclaimed Veronica, a fourth grade student at Esparto Elementary when she was given her first opportunity to taste a Fuyu persimmon. That afternoon Veronica went home from school and picked as many persimmons as she could from the tree standing in front of her house. She brought some “delicious, ripe persimmons” to school the next day to share with her teachers.

The majority of the foods in school cafeterias, like the one at Esparto Elementary, come from large central suppliers, a great distance away, with ingredients from surplus US commodities sources. Within this system it is expected that all ingredients will be available all times of the year. The Esparto Farm-to-School program hopes to change this current method of procurement for school meals and rely on buying fresh, locally grown, seasonably available foods from smaller family farmers.

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers' Esparto Farm-to-School Project was initiated to improve the overall wellness and health of the residents of Esparto. The program provides nutrition education and taste testing in the classroom, increases awareness of where food comes from and how it is produced, enhances the offerings of local and seasonal produce items in the school meal program, and provides support and new income for local farmers. 

For more information on Farm-to-School in Esparto or Davis contact Kelly van Bostel, CAFF Esparto and Davis Farm-to-School Coordinator, kelly@caff.org, (530) 400-5922, or (530) 756-8518

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on Friday, September 22, 2006 with the raising of a 24-foot banner over Main Street in downtown Watsonville.

The banner design is in the style of Pajaro Valley's old-time food crate labels. It is emblazoned with the BFBL logo and the words “Celebrate Locally Grown Food and Support Our Farming Community!” on one side, and the CFNR logo and “Celebre lo que Cultivamos Aquí y Apoye a Nuestra Comunidad!” on the other, with the Spanish translation of CAFF's name on the bottom (Comunidad en Alianza con Fincas Familiares), representative of a timely and exciting expansion in CAFF's continuing mission to serve beleaguered, yet crucial, facets of the Nation's food systems network.

To join the Compre lo Fresco de Nuestra Región campaign, please contact Central Coast Coordinator Marisol Asselta at 831.761.8507 or by email at Marisol@caff.org.

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