

A piece of the pie

From coastal farm to city cafe, Mission High students learn about baking and beyond

[Janet Fletcher, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Easy to love, wholesome and sweet, smelling of home: That's pie. Even those of us whose mothers never mastered pie associate it with happy times. Now a new Bay Area venture is acting on the potential of pie to connect urbanites to local farms, to inspire inner-city youth, and to encourage more sustainable food choices. Call it Pie Power.

On 25th Street near Mission in San Francisco, the minuscule, 4-month-old Mission Pie fills its 14 seats with locals lured in for a slice. This being San Francisco, diners can have an organic latte with their pear-raspberry pie, served by streetwise Mission High kids working after school. It takes awhile, sometimes several visits, for customers to realize that the teens behind the counter are some of the same ones grinning in the farm photos on the wall, and to learn that those unassuming pies drive an ambitious social experiment.

In a cycle of production and consumption that is rarely so neat and direct, Mission Pie's proceeds help support a farm on the San Mateo coast, which in turn supplies ingredients - - eggs, wheat, pumpkins, berries -- for the pies.

The teens, all of them learning disabled, work on the farm one day a month, getting up-close exposure to the environmental issues they've explored in science class. The students who work in the store stay connected to those berries from farm to table and proudly recommend pies that contain fruit they helped to grow.

"It's this incredible opportunity to demonstrate that there's a need and a place for a city business making a proactive commitment to an agricultural producer," says Karen Heisler, a partner in both Mission Pie and Pie Ranch, a 14-acre parcel in Pescadero that she purchased with partners in late 2002.

Named for the wedge shape of the property and for the positive associations with farm and table, Pie Ranch has, from its inception, been a farm with a mission. Heisler and her ranch partners -- farmers Jered Lawson and Nancy Vail, who are husband and wife -- saw

the property as a vehicle for social change, a working farm that could educate city dwellers, especially youth, about the sources of their food and consequently build urban support for local farms.

Not long after purchasing the farm, Heisler and her partners began hunting for a school that would collaborate on educational programming. They targeted San Francisco, intent on linking city dwellers to the coastal foodshed.

Matt Heller, a science teacher at Mission High School, saw the potential immediately. Heller and one of his colleagues, English teacher Corky Kern, had been talking about providing their special-education students with learning experiences outside the classroom, in an environment where they might excel.

Two years ago, the teachers took the first group of five students to Pie Ranch for a half-day of farm chores and cooking. Now, one morning a month, two vans navigate the long, eucalyptus-lined driveway at Pie Ranch and disgorge 12 to 15 students in jeans, hooded sweatshirts and sneakers.

They divide into small groups and spend the next few hours on collaborative tasks: harvesting berries; planting spinach and radishes; preparing lunch; baking pie; or -- nobody's favorite -- moving the portable chicken coop to fresh pasture. A half-hour of journal writing gets worked into the mix, and the outing ends with -- what else? -- a slice of warm pie all around.

"The first time, they wore really good shoes and their good clothes, worried that somebody might see them," says Kern. "They wanted to look cute. Now they dress down, ready to get dirty."

Pie Ranch nestles in a flat, sun-splashed clearing, embraced by towering eucalyptus, oaks and Douglas fir. When the students arrived on one recent chilly morning, the chickens were patrolling their pen, scratching the ground until the dirt flew. Inside the coop, the laying hens were squawking loudly enough to wake the next county. Despite a brisk wind, a brilliant sun illuminated the farm, its alternating bands of lime green, forest green and Kelly green signaling shifts between pasture and crops. Olallieberries and blackberries clambered up trellises, and strawberries poked up through plastic groundcover.

After climbing a hill to view the farm and note what had changed since their last visit -- a monthly ritual -- the students split into their work groups.

In Lawson and Vail's spacious yurt, Scott Chow and Mark Collins made whole-wheat piecrusts under the gentle direction of Krysten Rudin, a professional baker who oversees both young men in their counter jobs at the pie shop. Rudin showed them how to measure flour accurately by spooning it into a cup and leveling it off and how to work the chilled butter into the flour by hand. They filled their crusts with sugared berries frozen after last year's harvest, and made lattice tops.

In a primitive kitchen in another farm building, with only a two-burner propane stove, students Midget Beltran and Da-Ron Raynaldo prepared lunch for the whole group. Midget chopped fresh tomato and cilantro for salsa and scooped avocado into a bowl for guacamole, while Da-Ron stir-fried the chicken for tacos. Their adult guide, a young and energetic former restaurant cook named Megan Hanson, teaches an informal nutrition class at Mission High and has clearly made an impression.

"Da-Ron's saying is: Healthy food looks nasty but it tastes great," said Hanson as Da-Ron pushed his browning chicken around the skillet. "Midget used to sneak in Doritos and Cokes. "Now he's kind of a fruititarian." Midget mashed the avocado, seasoned it with salt, and offered a taste to Hanson.

Getting teens to eat well is "not that tricky," claims Hanson, a program coordinator for Nextcourse, a San Francisco nonprofit that teaches youth and low-income communities how to eat healthfully and support local agriculture. It helps to engage them with culturally appropriate food that they already like, she says, such as this day's taco lunch, a nutritionally balanced feast with shredded lettuce, steamed brown rice and black beans grown on the farm, beans the students had shelled the previous fall.

Several students said that they had cut out sodas or cut back on junk food after Hanson's classes, which highlight the difference between whole and processed foods and attempt to make the kids into competent label readers.

"It has changed how we eat," says Helen Chow, a San Francisco teacher's aide and Scott Chow's mother. "He talks a lot about organic food and is more picky about what he eats. He stopped drinking soda, and when we shop, he's looking more at labels."

The kids have planted apple trees on the farm, with the vision of apples for pie in the future. By hand, they have harvested and winnowed the farm's wheat, a low-protein variety suitable for piecrusts.

Lawson and Vail have struggled to find equipment to process the wheat efficiently as few American wheat farmers operate on a small scale. In the meantime, Mission Pie crusts contain what might be called a symbolic amount of Pie Ranch flour, with more to come.

Also on the wish list: a dairy cow that can provide the milk needed for butter. Until this young farm hits its stride, many of the pie ingredients must be purchased, with preference given to local organic sources.

"I'm not even sure our aspiration is to provide a certain amount of produce to the pie shop," says Keisler. More important, in the partners' view, is for the shop to demonstrate the contribution of local farms and to engage customers in supporting them.

Later this year, the tiny shop will undergo an expansion into an adjacent space and add a professional pastry kitchen. Currently, the pies are baked at Destination Baking Co., a Glen Park shop whose owner, Joe Schuver, is a Mission Pie partner.

When the new kitchen is up and running, the teens who work in the shop will get pastry training to supplement what they've already learned: how to make cappuccino, interact with customers, and show up for shifts on time.

Lawson and Vail say these learning-challenged youth have blossomed visibly since the farm visits began. "They were withdrawn when they first arrived," says Lawson. "Now they are gaining a sense of capacity and confidence."

They call themselves the Piesters now, a tight group initiated into the mysteries of pastry dough and pie filling. They are white, black, Hispanic, Asian, sophomores, juniors and seniors, and they have bonded in a way no one imagined.

"A sense of family has developed," says Kern, the English teacher. "They are talking to kids they wouldn't normally talk to, across color lines and class lines and all the ways they normally divide themselves at school. It's an amazing evolution."

In town, they are more competitive, she says. They have to maintain their street cred. But on the farm, there is no such pressure.

Last year, the adults initiated a conversation with the teens to solicit feedback about the farm program. "They stunned us," says Heisler. "They talked about love and community. They said, 'You don't have to watch your back here.'"

Aware that summer is a threatening time for these city kids, when gang activity soars, Heisler and her partners have tried to devise a way to stay in touch with them. Some teens will work in the shop over the summer; others will assist at the Pie Ranch farmstand, if transportation can be arranged.

As transformative as the project has been for the youth, the teachers say they have profited, too. Whether the subject is renewable versus nonrenewable energy in science class, or the immigrant experience in English class, the teachers link their classroom lessons to life at Pie Ranch.

Both students and teachers say that thanks to their time on the farm together, and especially their leisurely communal lunch, they have developed a rapport that rarely occurs inside a classroom.

"This has definitely been one of the best experiences I've had teaching in 15 years," says Heller, the science teacher. "Probably the best."

Where to buy pie

Mission Pie. 2901 Mission St. (entrance on 25th Street), San Francisco; (415) 282-4743. Open 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 7 a.m.-10 p.m. Friday, 8 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday, 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Sunday.

Pie Ranch Farmstand. 2080 Cabrillo Hwy. (Highway One), Pescadero (about 10 miles south of Pescadero Road; (650) 879-0971 or www.pieranch.org. Scheduled to open Memorial Day weekend, noon-6 p.m. Saturday-Sunday.

Operated in collaboration with neighboring Blue House Farm, the farmstand will have berries, eggs, beans, pumpkins, whole wheat (ground into flour on site) and other produce in season.

Pie Ranch's Mixed Berry Pie

Makes 1 double-crust pie Serves 8 to 12

INGREDIENTS:

The Crust

2 1/2 cups whole-wheat pastry flour

1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

1/2 pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter, chilled, cut into small pieces

Approximately 1/3 cup ice water

The Filling

2/3 cup sugar

3 tablespoons cornstarch

6 cups mixed berries (raspberries, blackberries, strawberries)

INSTRUCTIONS:

To make the crust: Put the flour and salt in the work bowl of a food processor and pulse to blend. Add the butter and pulse until all the pieces are coated with flour and about the size of peas. Transfer the mixture to a bowl.

Alternatively, you can incorporate the flour and butter by hand: Put the flour and salt in a bowl and stir well to blend. Add the butter and massage it into the flour with your fingers, working until all the butter is flattened into thin, flour-coated flakes. You should not see any large pieces of butter, but don't over blend the dough or it will be tough. The flakes of butter will produce a flaky pastry.

Add the water gradually, tossing with a fork until all the flour is moistened and the dough begins to come together. Divide the shaggy dough into 2 mounds, one slightly larger than the other. With your hands, gather each mound into a ball, kneading it gently if necessary to help it adhere. Wrap each ball in plastic wrap, then flatten each ball into an evenly thick disk resembling a hamburger patty, and refrigerate for 1 hour.

Preheat the oven to 400°.

To make the filling: Just before rolling out the pie dough, whisk the sugar and cornstarch together until well blended in a small bowl. Put the berries in a large bowl and add the sugar-cornstarch mixture. Toss gently but well.

Put the larger disk of dough on a lightly floured surface, or between 2 sheets of parchment paper. With a rolling pin, flatten the disk into a round large enough to fit your pie pan and overhang the pan by about 1/2 inch. Transfer the round to the pie pan. You may find it easier to transfer if you fold the circle in half first, then place it in the pie pan with the fold in the center and unfold it. Gently press it against the bottom and sides of the pan.

Top the dough with the sugared berries, spreading them evenly.

Repeat the rolling procedure with the second disk of dough, flattening it into a circle large enough to cover the pie. Place it over the berries. Fold the overhanging edges of dough under and use your thumb and forefinger to crimp the rim of the dough decoratively, sealing the top and bottom doughs together. With a paring knife, make 6 to 8 slits in the top of the dough to allow air to vent.

Put the pie in the oven and lower the temperature to 375°. Bake until the crust is golden brown and crisp and the filling is bubbly, about 1 hour. Transfer the pie pan to a rack to cool, and cool completely before slicing.

Per serving: 280 calories, 3 g protein, 34 g carbohydrate, 16 g fat (10 g saturated), 41 mg cholesterol, 92 mg sodium, 5 g fiber.

Rhubarb & Strawberry Galette

Makes 1 galette Serves 8 to 10

San Francisco's Destination Baking Co. makes a strawberry galette for Mission Pie but declined to share the recipe. This rhubarb and strawberry galette is a variation on the theme, inspired by the Rhubarb and Strawberry Pie in "Chez Panisse Desserts," by Lindsey Remolif Shere (Random House, 1985). Note that you need parchment paper for rolling out the dough.

INGREDIENTS:

The Dough

2 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 teaspoons kosher salt

15 tablespoons chilled unsalted butter, in small pieces

1/4 cup ice water

The Filling

Approximately 1 1/4 pounds rhubarb

1 pint strawberries

1 cup sugar

2 1/2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 egg yolk whisked with 1 teaspoon water

Coarse decorating sugar

INSTRUCTIONS:

To make the dough: Put the flour and salt in a food processor and pulse to blend. Add the butter and pulse just until all the butter pieces are coated with flour and are about the size of large peas. Do not overblend.

Transfer to a bowl and stir in the water with a fork, mixing until the dough just begins to come together. With one hand, knead it briefly, just until you can collect the dough in a single shaggy mass. Resist the temptation to add more water. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and press it into the shape of a large round hamburger patty. Refrigerate at least 2 hours.

Preheat the oven to 425°. If you have a baking stone, put it on a rack in the lower third of the oven and preheat for 30 minutes.

Remove the galette dough from the refrigerator and let it soften for about 15 minutes so it will be easier to roll.

To make the filling: While the galette dough softens, trim the ends of the rhubarb stalks, then cut the stalks into 1/3-inch-wide slices. You should have about 3 3/4 cups. Hull the

strawberries and chop medium-fine. In a large bowl, toss the rhubarb, strawberries, sugar and flour until well blended.

Roll the galette dough into a 15-inch circle between two large sheets of parchment paper. If the dough threatens to stick to the paper, lift off the paper and dust the dough lightly with flour. Replace the paper, flip the dough over and continue rolling.

Transfer the dough, still between sheets of parchment paper, to a pizza peel or rimless baking sheet. Remove the top sheet of paper. Top the dough with the filling, spreading it evenly but keeping it about 2 inches from the edge. Working quickly, slide a palette knife (the type used for frosting cakes) or a chef's knife under the edge of the dough and fold it over the filling to make a wide border all around. Be fastidious about patching any cracks in the dough or the filling will leak out.

Brush the rim of the dough with the egg wash (you may not need it all) and sprinkle the rim generously with coarse sugar. With scissors, trim away excess parchment paper. (It's OK if a little paper is exposed; it won't burn.)

If you are using a baking stone, slide the galette, still on parchment paper, directly onto the baking stone. If you are not using a baking stone, bake the galette on a rimless baking sheet.

Bake until the crust is well browned and the filling is bubbling, about 50 minutes. Slide the galette onto a rack to cool. Let cool for at least 30 minutes before slicing.

Per serving: 355 calories, 4 g protein, 45 g carbohydrate, 18 g fat (11 g saturated), 68 mg cholesterol, 166 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.

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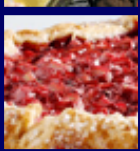
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Students Scott Chow, 17, and Mark Collins, 17, roll out whole-wheat dough for piecrusts. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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Another Mission High student, Alex Grasteit, 17, helps behind the counter at Mission Pie on 25th Street. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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After a labor-intensive morning, students and teachers sit down for lunch at Pie Ranch in Pescadero. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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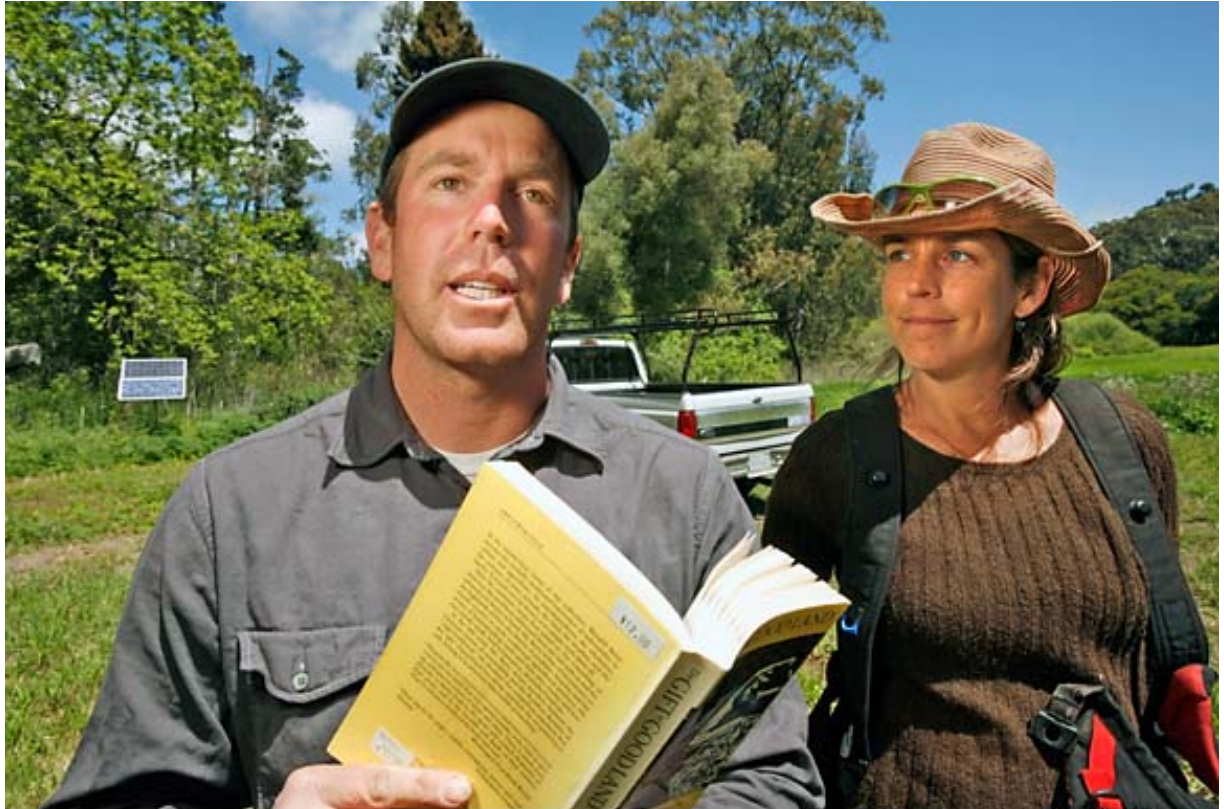
Mark Collins (left), who helped make the berry pies earlier, serves a slice to his fellow classmate. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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Husband and wife Jered Lawson and Nancy Vail, the founders of Pie Ranch, are active participants in the project. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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Rhubarb & Strawberry Galette. Chronicle photo by Chris Stewart



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