

Point Reyes Light - September 29, 2005

West Marin organics a hit in schools across county

By Peter Jamison

Do Marin County's high school students eat their greens? They do when those greens are organic, and grown in West Marin.

That's what Sandy Partee, canteen manager at Sir Francis Drake High School in San Anselmo, said as she unloaded boxes of zucchini and yellow cucumbers from the Allstar Organics farm in Nicasio (run by Woodacre residents Marty Jacobson and Janet Brown) off the back of a delivery truck.

"This is really exciting," Partee said. "[Students] love it. This is a big deal for Drake High School."

The deliveries were part of the Organic School Lunch program – now in its second year – run by Point Reyes Station-based nonprofit Marin Organic and the Marin Food Systems Project. Last year, Marin Organic executive director Helge Hellberg said, about 12,000 pounds of food were delivered.

Roughly a dozen organic farmers, most of them based in West Marin, contribute to the program (for a full list of participating farmers, see below). Fruits and vegetables that might otherwise be left in the field because of what farmers call "cosmetic" faults – zucchini that are too large, for example, or crooked carrots – are donated to almost 70 schools. Social-services centers, such as the San Rafael-based Canal Alliance and the Novato homeless shelter New Beginnings, also receive food.

Donations haven't been limited to fruits and vegetables. Last year, a sizable batch of Straus organic yogurt was mislabeled for flavor. The yogurt, no longer fit for retail, was donated to the Tamalpais Union High School District. Drake High canteen manager Partee and her staff used it to create a parfait that was a hit with students.

‘Ecoliteracy’ cited

"They've all been asking since school started, 'Where's the Straus yogurt?'" Partee said. Carrot cake and a Tuscan vegetable soup have been among students' other favorite dishes prepared from organic ingredients, she added.

Sales figures in school cafeterias confirm students' enthusiasm for organic lunches: since the program was started, Hellberg said, revenues at participating lunchrooms have risen by hundreds of dollars per week. Partee confirmed that Drake High canteen sales have "greatly increased" since organic ingredients were introduced.

Hellberg said that the program's popularity comes as little surprise in an area that prizes its history of sustainable farming.

"We have feedback that as soon as kids knew they were organic carrots, they ate them," he said. "The level of ecoliteracy in Marin County is so high that if they know it's grown here and organic, they're much more open."

The cost of free produce

But West Marin's agricultural bounty comes with strings attached. Hellberg said that with the money freed up in their budgets from the food donations, schools are required to buy more organic produce from farmers participating in the program. As a result, he said, the schools get an equal or greater quantity and superior quality of produce in their cafeterias.

"Schools have never really been an outlet for farmers because of their very tight budgets," Hellberg said. "This program brings them together. Everyone in this program wins."

Starting this fall, Hellberg said, he hopes to take that cohesion a step further. Marin Organic has plans to purchase a machine – called the "Dieselmeister" – capable of producing biodiesel. Students in science classes at participating schools will use

the Dieselmeister to turn grease into biodiesel fuel. The grease will come from restaurants that use locally-grown organic produce, and the biodiesel will power Marin Organic's refrigerated delivery truck. The truck itself was provided by an anonymous local donor.

The Marin Food Systems Project rounds out the program by educating students at participating schools about the importance of organic food. At some schools, students have planted their own organic gardens.

More organic lunch programs

Al Baylacq of Forest Knolls is one of the owners of Good Earth Natural Foods in Fairfax, which runs its own organic lunch program at 11 schools in Marin County, including the West Marin and Lagunitas Schools. While the Good Earth program differs from the Marin Organic effort – the store delivers prepared meals, rather than ingredients – Baylacq said the programs share the goal of getting healthier food into our schools.

"The way we've been feeding kids in this country, the results show that it's been a pretty deplorable effort," Baylacq said. "It's time that we change our focus and really understand and appreciate what good nutrition can do for our kids."

If a healthy diet is rare among schoolchildren, it's also rare among another group benefiting from Marin Organic's produce distribution – low-income families in San Rafael's predominantly Latino Canal District. "For them to have access to fresh fruits and fresh vegetables is unheard of," said Canal Alliance development associate Anna Lindgreen. Unlike participating schools, the Canal Alliance is not required to purchase food from organic farmers, but receives a free delivery of produce once a week.

Benefits Latinos

The Canal Alliance, which provides social services to residents of the Canal District, now uses the produce in its emergency food program and youth cooking classes. But

Lindgreen envisions other programs – such as a "weekly box" of organic produce – accompanied by more education on the virtues of eating organic.

"We're just starting to introduce the idea of why organic is better," Lindgreen said. "There's a lot of really good possibilities here."

West Marin organic farmers participating in the Organic School Lunch program include Warren Weber, Peter Martinelli, Don Murch, and Dennis and Sandy Dierks of Bolinas; the Straus family of Marshall; David Little of Tomales; Peter Worsley of Inverness; Diane Matthew of Lagunitas; Janet Brown and Marty Jacobson of Woodacre, Dave Evans of Point Reyes Station; Mike and Sally Gale of Chileno Valley; Muir Beach's Green Gulch Farm, run by Liz Milazzo of Sausalito; and Jesse Kuhn, who farms near the McEvoy Ranch off the Point Reyes-Petaluma Road.

Also participating in the program is Fairfax Fresh, run by Patti Elliott of Fairfax. Schools interested in becoming part of the Organic School Lunch program can call 663-9667.

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