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San Diego's organic farmers help feed Pacific Beach

by SEBASTIAN RUIZ

September 11, 2008

The popular movement toward eating locally grown organic, farm-fresh foods has been touted by healthy eaters and environmentalists alike for years. Now because of rising fuel prices, it could be cheaper to buy local, adding further incentive to buy, sell and eat local produce.

Farms such as the Tierra Miguel Farm in Pauma Valley can provide healthier, cheaper organic produce during peak seasons, according to farm director Beth Ann Levendoski.

The farm doesn't have to spend as much on transportation costs, allowing it to sell produce up to 30 percent cheaper than a local supermarket carrying similar organic produce, she said.

The Tierra Miguel Foundation has been partnering with sites around the city — including Pacific Beach — to bring the organic food to consumers through a Community Supported Agriculture program.

The 9-year old program sells food locally, emphasizing the connection between local farmers and consumers “to bring integrity back to the food relationship,” she said.

It's a connection not lost on one local business owner.

Nick Zanoni has opened the doors of the Pacific Bean Coffee shop, 712 ½ Garnet Ave., as a center where customers can pick up the organic produce from Tierra Miguel delivered each week. Any leftover food goes to local church charities.

Zanoni is also involved in another organic farm in Athens, Ga., and uses environmentally friendly practices at his Pacific Beach businesses.

He said it's important to be able to look your farmer in the eye.

“You get your haircut at some place in particular, right?” Zanoni asked. “I think people will start to realize the importance of who grows their food and who feeds them.”

He said he wants to make the journey from “seed to plate” easier for Pacific Beach residents at a time where the food travels more than a thousand miles before reaching the dinner table, incrementally damaging the environment and raising transportation costs.

The Food Program

Anyone can sign up for a weekly or biweekly organic grocery program and is encouraged to sign up in advance. “Full Shares” cost about \$700 and half-shares cost \$350 for the season, which lasts 16 weeks. The farm also has a market at the farm itself in Pauma Valley.

“The biggest complaint I have from people that are members is that there's too much food,” Zanoni said.

Combined with organic food donations through Thrusters Lounge at 4633 Mission Blvd., Zanoni also donates any extra food left behind to help local churches feed Pacific Beach homeless.

Programs such as the Wednesday night Ministries of the Pacific Beach United Methodist Church, 1561 Thomas St., help take care of some of that extra food.

Every Wednesday the church feeds about 200 of the city's chronically homeless and provides free medical and dental services through the UCSD student-run clinic, said Marry Herron, board chair for the Welcome Door Foundation.

In cooperation with the church, Herron said her group still provides food as part of the group's mission regardless of complaints about more than 100 homeless people gathering in Pacific Beach every Wednesday.

“I'm sure it is inconvenient [for neighbors]. But I think feeding the hungry is a responsibility of everyone. Nobody should be hungry in our country,” Herron said.

She said it costs about \$300 to provide a hot meal for about 200.

The organic food donations from Zanoni's business account for a small part of the total food prepared by the church, Herron said.

The Farm

The 85-acre Tierra Miguel Farm can label its produce organic because it doesn't use pesticides or sell genetically modified ingredients.

The farmers also use biodynamic practices. Such practices include recycling a lot of the nutrient-rich compost material back into the soil and monitoring the soil to make sure nutrients are "balanced," Levendoski said.

Through the program, shareholders get a box of seasonal produce approved by California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). The CCOF follows United States Department of Agriculture National Organic Program standards to certify produce as organic.

According to the USDA, products labeled organic must contain at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients. Produce grown using methods including some pesticides, sewage sludge and radiation cannot display the official organic label, according to USDA documents.

The organically grown fruits, veggies, herbs and other foods from Tierra Miguel Farm vary throughout the year, but this fall's harvest would include squash, zucchini, pumpkin, tomatoes and cantaloupe, Levendoski said.

The farm also produces educational programs to inform students and other farms on the benefits and methods of producing local organic foods.

For more information on the farm or to sign up for shares visit www.tierramiguelfarm.org.

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