

## SONOMA WEST TIMES &amp; NEWS &gt; NEWS

**Farm to institution movement starts with pilot program**

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**West County farmer leads food localization effort**by Lynda Hopkins  
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The seed of the farm to institution movement in Sonoma County has been planted, and it has taken the form of a farm-to-school pilot project led by West County farmer Milo Mitchel.

"I just think that looking around the country, there are examples of local food being aggregated for institutions that have been beneficial to both the farmer and to the institutions. It's really expanded the local food economy. It's exciting to me because I feel like we can recreate those models here," Mitchel said.



FARM TO TABLE — Ashlee Deller, Sarah Workman, and Milo Mitchel, work the soil at Three Leaf Farms. Mitchel is working with the WSCUHSD to get fresh, in-season vegetables to school culinary programs. - photo by Lynda Hopkins

Price and logistics are often sticking points when it comes to getting local produce into mainstream distribution for institutional use. And price is even trickier in a farm-to-school project.

With school budgets tighter than ever, the price schools can afford to pay is often lower than the price at which local farmers can afford to sell.

"Farmers deserve to make a living wage at least," Mitchel said, noting that his landscaping business is currently necessary to supplement his income from vegetables.

Getting fresh produce into schools brings other challenges as well: school is out during the summer, the season that bears the most diverse and abundant produce.

And then there's the kale conundrum.

"Part of this is we've got to make sure that the kids are going to eat the stuff. Assuming we can get the kids to eat the kale, that's something we can grow year-round. It's incredibly healthy too," Mitchel said.

Siblings Milo and Sarah Mitchel will be growing potatoes, lettuce, radishes, winter squash, and kale at Three Leaf Farms in Sebastopol for local schools. They have worked out a deal with food services coordinator Gayle Dyer, and the produce will be going to Analy and El Molino High Schools in the West Sonoma County Union High School District.

Winter squash and potatoes will be grown over the winter and stored for later use, while other crops

will be harvested fresh. A student culinary program will experiment with recipes — for example, turning kale into kale chips — to be adopted by food services. And hopefully, education will accompany the meals to mitigate the “what’s this?” factor.

The Three Leafs Farm pilot program has been a long time in coming.

“I think the farm-to-school movement in Sonoma County is something that’s been in the works for, from what I understand, over a decade. People have been really interested because agriculture is so rich in Sonoma, and everyone’s interested in seeing the connection between local growers and the school districts. It’s the intersection between health, and establishing a larger connection between people and where their food comes from,” said Diana Abellera, Farm to School director for Community Alliance with Family Farmers.

“But for some reason it hasn’t been able to happen. There’s a lot of different challenges, but there’s a lot of different opportunities,” Abellera added.

The broader farm to institution movement in Sonoma County is in its early phases, with local community leaders, non-profits, and stakeholders gathering to discuss strategies, challenges, and goals. CAFF has been surveying farms and working with institutions to gauge interest. The organization provided technical assistance in the form of purchasing analysis that led to the Three Leaf Farms pilot program.

Ultimately, the farm to institution movement aims to get local produce into the hands of schools, hospitals, and other institutions that provide food services—providing the public with healthful food while supporting local agriculture.

“It is a long-term relationship that has to be built,” Abellera explained. “A lot of people are interested in this model of contract growing, where there’s a contract set up between the farm and the school district. That’s an ideal setup, but it’s one that requires a lot of trust building and relationship building over time. The produce market can go up and down. We have to do education on both sides, and the farmers need to learn more about what the school needs, and the school needs to learn what the farm needs,” Abellera said.

Mitchel acknowledged there were challenges, but he was optimistic about the success of his pilot program and its replicability across the county.

“I think that this sort of partnership between a local farm and a local district is promising,” Mitchel said. “But we’re trying to work out the nuts and bolts of how can you work things into a menu, how can you leave room for seasonal changes, the weather, crop failure. Gail has to plan her menus now for the fall, and it’s hard for us to predict what we’ll have available then. So she has to leave flexibility in her menus.”

He hopes that a non-profit will be able to secure “bridge funding” to help make up the price gap between schools’ budgets and local farmers’ costs, which are greater than those of farmers growing in other counties and even countries.

Harmony Union School District already sources locally, but due to its small size the program is not necessarily replicable on a larger scale. Torrey and Lucy Olson from Gabriel Farm have sold local fruit to schools for years, but consistent local sourcing of vegetables remains largely uncharted.

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