
WIN-WIN-WIN-WIN:

Kids Meet the Farmer of the Month

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEREMY MILLER

Sliced oranges—not peeled—lend themselves to the novelty of placing the slice flat against one’s teeth and smiling as big as possible, resulting in a reverse Jack o’ Lantern grin, and such placement was repeated over and over in Mary Imes’ fourth-grade class at John McManus Elementary in Chico on a sunny February day. The students’ enthusiasm had another source, too.

“These are really sweet; they’re not sour,” proclaimed Leilina Castillo. “I like it!” added Carl Robinson. When asked what makes these oranges different from other oranges, Elory Ownby explained that it has to do with the source: “It’s close enough so you could go over to the farm and visit. I want to see what it’s like to taste an orange that’s just now ripe.”

Terry Haag, the school nutrition coordinator for McManus, had just highlighted that these are local oranges



from Oroville, from trees in an orchard planted in 1936. The local grove is maintained by Richard and Paula Kelso. An information sheet on these Farmers of the Month gives more information about the Kelsos and the Kelso Black and Gold Ranch, including how they became farmers, what their pets’ names are, and where they sell their produce. Haag had also given the children a presentation that stressed that they should eat a variety of colors every day, though not just any colored product would do. Carrots and oranges make the list; Cheetos and orange soda don’t. “What can you make with oranges?” The answers were diverse and juicy: “Orange smoothies!” “Orange fruit kabobs!” “Fruit salad!” “My dad makes fresh-squeezed orange juice!” “My mom makes fruit lasagna!”

The orange slices, presentation, and information sheet are all part of the Farmer of the Month program, sponsored by Network for a Healthy California—Children’s Power Play! Campaign, part of the CSU, Chico Center for Nutrition and Activity Promotion (CNAP), which is directed by Cindy Wolff. Farmer of the Month brings samples of fresh, local fruits and vegetables to over 21,000 students from Butte, Glenn, Colusa, and Tehama Counties each month, including all 626 students at McManus Elementary in Chico. That’s a lot of children!



According to Gina Sims, program coordinator, Farmer of the Month is the logical extension of the popular statewide Harvest of the Month program, a U. S. Department of Agriculture-funded endeavor created by Network for a Healthy California. This year, apples, pears, broccoli, sweet potatoes, and kiwis have all made an appearance in Mrs. Imes' classroom.

Haag explains the power of the program in supporting healthy nutrition in the schools: "Four years ago there was nothing [at McManus], but now the kids are excited about eating healthy food. They come up to me and show off the fruits and veggies they are eating." Much of the enthusiasm at McManus has come from staff support: during Halloween and a fall Jog-A-Thon event, teachers dressed up as string beans and bananas and Principal Diane Bird dressed up as a bunch of grapes, all to promote healthy eating.

Inspiring students to make healthy food choices is the ultimate goal of Harvest of the Month and Farmer of the Month. Studies show that healthy eating and daily physical activity have a profound impact on children's minds by improving the ability to learn and comprehend, boosting energy, improving school attendance, and changing attitudes and behavior, and more. Healthy eating and daily physical activity also have a profound impact on the body. Harvest of the Month battles an obesity epidemic that has grown to startling proportions. The most recent statistics available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that the prevalence of obese children has nearly tripled in the last 20 years. In all, one out of every six children and adolescents 2-19 years of age was found to be obese. Statistics show that a child born in the year 2000 will have a 1 in 3 chance of developing type 2 diabetes—if that child is Hispanic or African American, a 1 in 2 chance. Although lack of physical activity plays a large role, poor nutrition is a major contributor to this epidemic. In a 1997 study, the CDC found that more than two-thirds of high school students (71%) did not eat the recommended five daily servings of

fruits and vegetables. With children filling up on heavily advertised, unhealthy food, local farmers are losing out on a valuable potential market. Enter the Farmer of the Month.

While Harvest of the Month program began statewide in 2000, Farmer of the Month is in its first year. Inspired by the CSU, Chico's "This Way to Sustainability" conferences and Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Sims wanted to bring the farmer into Harvest of the Month. Since the Sierra Cascade Nutrition and Activity Consortium (SCNAC) began making more effort to purchase the harvest locally, Sims saw the chance for CNAP to connect kids to food sources. "This area is so agriculturally rich, yet most children are totally disconnected from farming. I thought, why not feature a Farmer of the Month to go along with our program?" Sims continued, "Each farmer has such a compelling story and plays a key role in our community."

Over the summer, Sims and colleagues Karen Goodwin and Carol Lams Welty contacted numerous local growers to see if they could provide produce for the Harvest of the Month program and be featured as Farmers of the Month. Many responded yes, but Sims, Goodwin, and Welty discovered a challenge: small local farmers often grow a diversity of crops and cannot provide 21,000 servings of a specific fruit or vegetable on a single day. So Sims and her staff have worked diligently to come up with solutions



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to help meet the quantity required. For example, the first Farmers of the Month, last September, were apple growers Frank and Sally Mazzarino of Green Cedar Farm in Berry Creek and Christine and Bud Keeney of Durham Valley Apples. September's harvest apples also came from Lingaro Family Farms and Diamond HB Organics. February's orange farmers of the month, the Kelsos, got help from Oroville's Chaffin Family Farm to feed these tens of thousands of kids. Sometimes, a single farmer can supply the masses: all of January's kiwis came from Mike and Debbie Ariza's farm in Capay, and Matthew Martin of Pyramid Farms in Chico was approached in September to grow enough carrots for the April Farmer of the Month program.

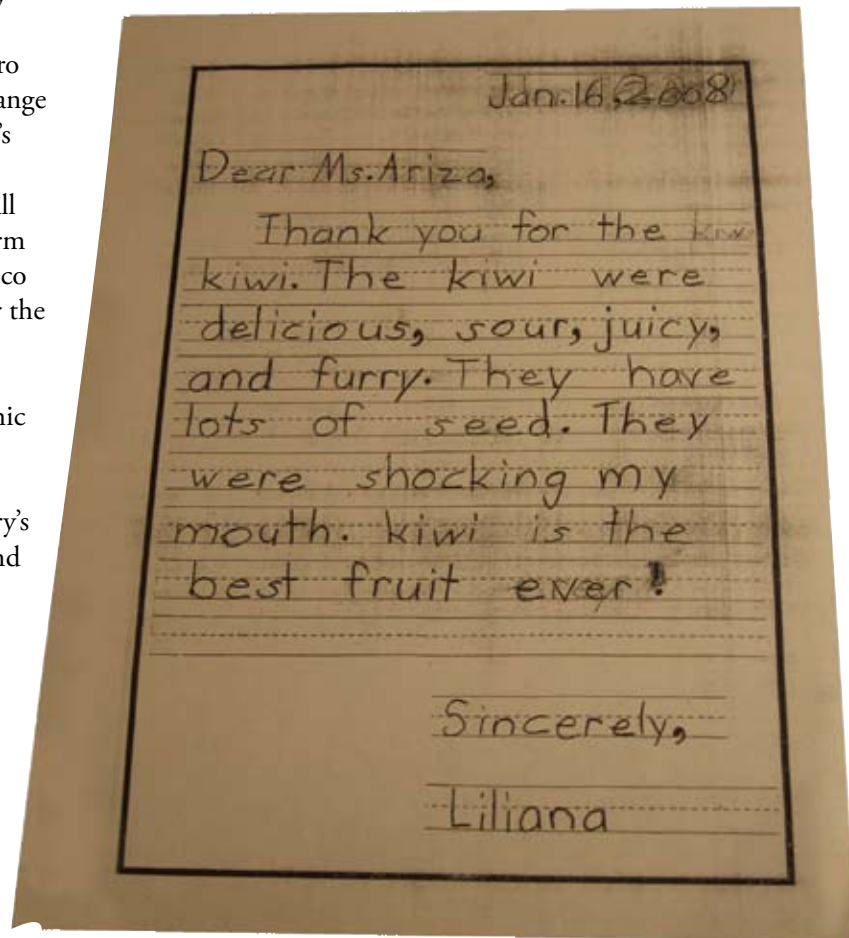
As September's Farmer of the Month, the Mazzarinis were able to find a market for some of their smaller organic apples, which are harder to sell at the farmers' markets. "The smaller size doesn't sacrifice quality," pointed out Frank Mazzarino, "and they are perfect for kids." February's Farmer of the month, Debbie Ariza—she and her husband Mike provided kiwis—points out the benefits to selling large amounts of fruit at once to the program. Matt Martin, who is growing 2000 lbs. of carrots for the April program, adds, "For a small farmer, [that many carrots at once] can be a nice little chunk. An added benefit of selling to the SCNAC program is the ability to get quality into 21,000 kids' mouths, get them aware of what good carrots taste like."

Even when the fruits and vegetables cannot be sourced locally, the program attaches a local farmer's face to the produce. November's Harvest of the Month was broccoli, and the Farmer of the Month was Dennis Biro. Biro grows a number of winter crops, including broccoli, which he sells at the Chico Saturday Farmers' Market. "I think it's wonderful that kids can learn that a lot of these products can and are being grown locally," said Biro. He also noted that since being featured in the fall, he has had a number of teachers approach his booth at the market. Rob Montgomery of Durham is the Farmer of the Month for

March. His six varieties of spinach are being featured, though he, too, grows a diversity of vegetables.

Says Gina Sims, "Our goal is to honor and celebrate local farmers and help children feel more connected to the people in our community who grow our food. We hope that children will encourage their families to take them to farmers' markets to purchase fresh, in-season produce and that they will recognize and seek out the Farmers of the Month there. I also hope that more and more local items will be found on school menus and we will celebrate that and make it more known to the public."

It's a win-win-win-win program: kids, farmers, SCNAC, and kids' families all win. One measure came in a thank you note to Debbie Ariza from Liliana at Orland's Mill Street School:



Readers of Edible Shasta-Butte can enjoy Jeremy Miller's writing more often by checking out his blog at www.norcalblogs.com/sustainable/. Recent posts have kept regulars up to date on school farms and particulate pollution and predicted a tidal wave of shoppers at local farmers' markets this season. It's not wholly on the blog, but you want to see how he and his wife Amy have been transforming their yard.