

805 LIVING



Give
Thanks
Give
Back

More Than Mere Sustenance

The works of three new nonprofits are a reminder that giving back is the ultimate soul food.

BY JOAN TAPPER PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD FUSILLO

Of all the holidays we celebrate, Thanksgiving is most associated with a meal. So, it's particularly appropriate that in this Giving Back issue, in which we traditionally recognize some of the 805 area's nonprofits, we highlight three relatively new groups whose efforts touch on food, nutrition, and produce.

Serving Meals

Feed The Valley (feedthevalley.org) had its roots in the pandemic, says chef Greg Ryan, who with his wife, Daisy, runs Bell's restaurant in Los Alamos and co-owns Bar le Côte seafood tavern in Los Olivos. "Initially, the program was a way to support the restaurant, pay staff, and get food to people in need," Ryan says.

They built a network through which several local restaurants, thanks to donations, provided meals to area residents who needed them—1,200 servings from April to June 2020. When things opened up again, the Ryans paused the program but used the time to regroup, write grant proposals, and plan improvements for the future. When another shutdown loomed in November of that year, they were ready.

With the Santa Barbara Foundation as a fiscal sponsor, they were able to launch a website, accept tax-free donations, and begin a charitable lunch program with Tyler Winery that would help fund Feed The Valley.

This year, each of the restaurant partners—Bell's, Bar Le Côte, Plenty on Bell's, Valley Piggery, and Full of Life Flatbreads—is responsible for providing meals for a recipient group on a different day of the week. Ryan is quick to cite the organizational help of Companion Hospitality Group's Andi Davis and Brenda Vasquez for making the program work smoothly to the tune of 8,500 meals served in 2022 (and 25,000 since the beginning).

"The biggest challenge is money," he says, along with space to work in confined kitchens. "We're no longer saving restaurants," he adds. "Now our mission is to feed people who aren't able to get food. Restaurants are part of the fabric of the community, but we can't be in everyone's orbit; our restaurant is expensive. Food insecurity affects more people than you or I could imagine. I'm proud and humbled to have a larger reach [beyond] someone who is walking in our door."

While grappling with a pandemic shutdown, chefs Daisy and Greg Ryan of Bell's in Los Alamos came up with a nonprofit—Feed the Valley—that helps those who are food insecure.



Enhancing Health

The role of nutrition in the prevention of disease is often overlooked, says Emma Malina, board vice chair and team leader on programs and partnerships for Rooted Santa Barbara (rootedsantabarbara.org). Founded in 2019 by a committee led by Beth Skidmore, the group has aimed to be a collaborative hub at the intersection of food and health, partnering with groups like the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County and the Breast Cancer Resource Center to educate the community on the value of bringing plants and fiber into our diet.

“Nutrition is a vital component of good health,” says Skidmore, “but unfortunately it plays a very small role in health care. We’re here to change that. We’re here to foster and fuel a coordinated local network of programs and partnerships to ensure that the health benefits of plant-predominant eating are understood, delicious, and accessible for every community member.”

“We believe in the support of pills and procedures,” adds Malina, “and we’re not saying it should be all plants all the time. But upping fiber significantly would result in a shift in health disparities.” Getting that word out in as many ways as possible has been the group’s goal. That means providing community education through cooking demos, online learning, and a recipe portal; collaboration and partnerships for a nutrition network; and partnering with national medical organizations and with nursing and culinary programs in schools.

Locally the organization has run a 10-day Facebook campaign in Spanish about eating more plants and also worked on nutrition videos geared to the breast cancer community. “Our largest project,” says Malina, is “developing a curriculum for a series of research studies with Sansum Institute Diabetes Research, aimed at the Latinx diabetic community.”

Coming in 2023: a campaign to raise \$500,000 to support business development, rapidly growing programs, and outreach; secure a headquarters with a community teaching kitchen; and establish Rooted Santa Barbara as an independent 501c3.

“There’s a lot of confusion about nutrition,” says Malina. “The topic can be divisive. We’re not selling a system, just whole plants, the least expensive produce in the grocery [store]—beans, grains, fruit and vegetables, seeds and nuts. It’s back to basics.”

With Rooted Santa Barbara, Beth Skidmore (on the right) and Emma Malina advocate for the health benefits of eating more fiber and plants, like those on the mural at Tri-County Produce behind them.









Perennial Hunger Fighters

We'd also like to acknowledge our local food banks, which have worked to combat food insecurity for decades and remain steadfast champions of the cause.

Foodbank of Santa Barbara County (foodbanksbc.org)

SLO Food Bank (slofoodbank.org)

Food Share of Ventura County (foodshare.com)

Growing Food and Pride

When Ron and Karen Meier moved to Moorpark with sons Tom and Steve six years ago, they brought with them the nonprofit 501c3 organization they had founded almost a quarter century ago in the Midwest. The Upside of Downs (upsideofdowns.org) began as a support and education group for parents like themselves who had children with Down syndrome.

Four years ago, as the young men started to age out of special-needs education programs, Karen began looking for other supportive activities. She found limited opportunities and long wait lists and instead began volunteering with Tom at various venues, including Moorpark's Apricot Lane Farms, which proved welcoming to the young man and educational for her. Suddenly she could envision how valuable a farm program that accommodated differently abled volunteers would be.

And that's what the Meiers initiated when they bought Mulberry Lane Farm in Somis in spring 2020. The farm itself included six acres of rare and tropical fruit trees. There were also 12 concrete-edged raised beds that made it easy for volunteers with mobility issues to work in them. The Meiers had never owned a farm, but they acquired a valuable employee, a former manager from Apricot Lane Farms, who helps them deal with their 377 kinds of produce—bananas, papayas, cherimoyas, persimmons, pomegranates, and lots of guavas, among other things.

"It's been a journey of discovery," says Karen, who worked through The Arc of Ventura County, as well as with her sons' special needs community, to identify the 20 to 25 participants a week who attend the group's day program. "Each differently abled individual comes with their own caregiver, and they work on harvesting, planting, and packing."

She takes produce, live plants, and seedlings to the Thousand Oaks Certified Farmers' market on Thursday and the Camarillo farmers market on Saturday, and there's an online seed shop as well.

"There aren't enough hours in the day," she says, "but the volunteers take such pride in the tasks, it's awesome to see." ♦

Ron and Karen Meier bought Mulberry Lane Farm in Somis and have incorporated it into day programs for their nonprofit, The Upside of Downs. The produce they sell at local farmers markets also supports the organization.