



## Feed our elders well

*"Good foods are not the privilege of people who have money"*

By Amanda Witherell

> [amanda@sfbg.com](mailto:amanda@sfbg.com)

**GREEN CITY** Conventional wisdom is that it costs more to eat well, but Alameda County Meals on Wheels has found real value in switching from processed foods to the kind of fresh, local, sustainable fare being touted at the upcoming Slow Food Nation conference, which begins Aug. 29 in San Francisco.

Bay Area Community Services (BACS), the nonprofit that manages Meals on Wheels, has been struggling with a perennial budget deficit, rising fuel and food costs, and a waiting list of 200 seniors eager to join the program.

Even though the easy, heat-and-serve method is the national model for feeding large amounts of people cheaply, BACS was finding that trying to supply 1,200 people a day with meals in their homes and at 21 different congregate sites through a contract with a food processing company just wasn't working.

"Our solution to the problem was a social enterprise kitchen," Jenny Huston told the *Guardian*. The 20-year veteran chef and educator is director of Culinary Social Enterprise at BACS. She and her boss, executive director Kent Ellsworth, took the program in a new direction. They went "farm to table," meaning they stopped serving frozen food and started serving meals made with fresh meat, dairy, fruits, and vegetables, and they did it by establishing a culinary arts training program with a curriculum based on the day-to-day work of preparing the Meals on Wheels fare from scratch.

"If you have a structural deficit, why are you spending more money on food?" Huston pondered, asking herself the question many critics might raise. "Sure," she said, "processed stuff is much cheaper, but you're not seeing the full cost."

What is that full cost? That's a hot topic for the Slow Food Nation forums, such as how far an avocado travels to become guacamole in Maine. Beyond aligning meals with produce that's locally available, Huston and Ellsworth are attuned to what happens to a community when its most vulnerable populations — children, seniors, and the disabled — stop eating well.

"Good foods are not the privilege of people who have money. It's the right of everybody," Ellsworth told the *Guardian*. "When we buy wholesale, local, and fresh, we get a better product for a good price. It's the right way to do business."

But raw ingredients require more kitchen work. By partnering with a number of organizations, including the Pleasant Valley Adult School and Oakland Adult and Career Education Program, BACS was able to find budding cooks through a free, 12-week job training program.

They also connected with Community Alliance for Family Farms, a network of local growers and distributors who could provide up to 350 pounds of each raw ingredient a day. Just a few months into the new program, a typical Meals on Wheels lunch now includes all local milk, 10 percent local meat, and 19 percent local produce — and it's made from scratch by workers who are learning enough food preparation skills to qualify for entry-level kitchen jobs.

And they're doing it for just pennies more a day. "Our food cost has only gone up five cents per meal since we've gone farm to table," Huston said. Yet donations since April have increased 25 percent — about \$20,000 — meaning that people who were once asked to give a dollar or two for their lunches are voluntarily giving more for better food.

Though the Meals on Wheels budget gap hasn't disappeared, Huston likens it to the first few months of any business, when turning a profit is elusive. They're hoping to expand catering services and market the meals to other day and residential programs.

At the Aug. 14 graduation dinner, Ellsworth announced that a foundation had approved a \$200,000 program investment loan to purchase new equipment, remodel their kitchen, and grow the school. It was welcome news for the first class of five cooks. Reflecting on the experience, Geri Haas said, "It was really nice going there, knowing I was relied upon to provide fresh food for our elders."

Orlando De'Aguero, another graduate, announced that he got a job with a local organic food preparation company, eliciting cheers from the gathering of friends, family, and fellow classmates. He said, "I wouldn't have traded the three months I had here for anything at a culinary school."

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