

15,000 UCSC students reap benefits from ALBA Organics

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LAS LOMAS — At this very moment at the University of California, Santa Cruz, as many as 15,000 students at five dining halls may be chomping down on organic leeks and collard greens direct from Guilebaldo Nuñez's seven-acre farm off Hall Road.

In what may be a trend-setting concept, UCSC now gets more than 10 percent of its organic produce from small farmers like Nuñez who sell through Salinas-based produce distributor ALBA Organics.

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association began its produce distribution arm, ALBA Organics, three years ago as a component of its small farm training and business incubator program. The nonprofit operates two organic farms in Monterey County, including the Farm Training & Research Center in Las Lomas.

Since the contract between UCSC and ALBA Organics was finalized in September, the amount of organic produce hitting dining halls is already exceeding expectations, said UCSC dining services program coordinator Candy Berlin.

"It's a very dynamic partnership. They just made it so easy for us to work with them," Berlin said. "It's hard for a small farmer to work with a big behemoth like us up on the hill."

ALBA Organics also sells to Stanford University Dining Services, Asilomar Conference Center and Dominican Hospital. Plans are currently in the works to provide produce to local elementary schools as part of a project with advocacy group Community Alliance with Family Farmers, said Gary Peterson, ALBA communications and development director.

"We're focusing on food service providers that want to put a face on their food, that want local food and want to know exactly where it is from," Peterson said. "That's the niche we're trying to build upon."

The UCSC contract was too big for ALBA alone, so it joined with CAFF to form the Monterey Bay Organic Farming Consortium. The group includes Coke Farm of San Juan Bautista, Phil Foster Ranches of San Juan Bautista, Happy Boy Farm of Watsonville, New Natives/Greensward Nursery of Freedom, Swanton Berry Farm of Davenport, the UCSC student farm at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems and citrus grower France Ranch of Porterville.

The UCSC partnership with ALBA Organics followed student requests for more organic produce and sustainable practices. UCSC also moved toward university-run dining facilities in 2004. Fair trade coffee, a new pulper at one dining hall that turns waste into compost and plans for organic dairy products round out the school's strategy, Berlin said.

The goal at the Campus Earth Summit in 2004 was for 2 percent of produce at UCSC to be organic within one year and 4 percent within two years. Within five years, the goal was to reach 10 percent, but numbers have already climbed higher. "In December, we were at 18 percent," Berlin said. "I know a large portion of that was due to ALBA."

Nuñez, a Watsonville resident, has been farming a growing array of about 30 varieties of produce, including dandelion greens, fennel, zucchini, beets and broccoli for the past three years as an ALBA farmer.

In the slower winter months, he sent about 10 percent of his produce to UCSC. During the growing season, he sent about 30 percent, at prices that were "better than average," Nuñez said.

Peterson allows that the UCSC contract may not be the most profitable outlet for ALBA farmers, but he said most like its consistency. ALBA Organics takes about 5 percent commission on sales, while most companies take about 40 percent.

To do justice to all the new produce, UCSC chefs are now experimenting with an array of unusual vegetables (parsnips anyone?) and creating menus based on which produce is in season, Berlin said. ALBA also submitted biographies of some of the farmers for dining hall displays.

"It's really nice," Berlin said. "We actually feel a connection to the farmers." For ALBA, the UCSC partnership is also a step in the right direction. "We would like to be in a position to work with a lot more food service providers," Peterson said. "We foresee more and more opportunities like this one."

For more information about ALBA, visit www.albafarmers.org.