

Farm-to-Table Breakfast in San Diego County, California

Olivewood Gardens provides environmental education workshops, nutrition classes and cooking demonstrations to visitors who range from students and families from underserved communities, to health and wellness professionals exploring the connections between diet and disease, to home gardeners and cooks who want to learn more about the burgeoning back-to-farm-to-table movement.

Olivewood's flagship visiting schoolchildren's program provides standards-based lessons in science and nutrition education, sustainable agriculture, and environmental stewardship to elementary school students. Olivewood is one of the few school garden programs in the country – and the only one of its kind in San Diego County – that emphasizes food preparation along with garden cultivation, teaching children and adults not just to grow but how to cook – and enjoy – tasty, healthy, whole foods.

What could be better than gathering around communal tables to talk about farms and food on a misty fall morning? As chickens scratched the ground nearby, 40 “farm-foodies” met October 21 at Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center in National City, California, some 10 minutes south of the city of San Diego. The occasion: Talking to Nourish director Kirk Bergstrom, screening Nourish film shorts, and discussing the state of American food.

San Diego County's Healthy Works hosted the breakfast as part of its Nourish Day, a local warm-up to National Food Day on October 24. Healthy Works is a component of the County of San Diego's "Live Well, San Diego! Building Better Health" initiative, a 10-year strategic vision for improving health and wellness and combating the toll of chronic diseases, including obesity. Healthy Works engages San Diego County residents, businesses, and community leaders in systems and environmental approaches such as farmers markets, community gardens, bike-to-school and work programs, school exercise and nutrition programs, as well as changes involving land use and transportation.

Everyone at the Nourish breakfast at Olivewood had a connection to food, in one way or another: farmers and growers, chefs and restaurant owners, produce distributors, students and professors, nutritionists, farmers market operators, food advocates and policy-makers, and program staff, volunteers and interns from local nonprofit agencies. Participating organizations included the International Rescue Committee, San Diego Foundation, County of San Diego, U.C. San Diego, San Diego County Farm Bureau, and San Diego Restaurant Association.

“Having Kirk and the Nourish team here gave us an excuse to gather the food community together to learn what's happening in the movement, share tips and tools, and brainstorm the next steps in the food revolution,” remarked Olivewood's Executive Director, Amy Carstensen.

The assembled group discussed food system change at the local level, including recent changes to land use policies throughout the region. Cities like San Diego have been updating regulations to allow community gardens – previously rare within the city's limits – to be developed on empty commercial parcels. As Kirk facilitated, breakfast participants made new friends and connections as they talked about barriers that can still work to limit access to healthy food.

Part of the day's discussion centered on expanding support to organic farmers and suppliers. While most people probably see palm trees and wide beaches when they picture San Diego, this large county has a substantial agricultural sector and is home to more than 6,500 farms – more than any other county in the United States. This county also boasts the greatest number of organic growers in the state and nation, with 374 farms growing more than 175 crops.

Yet while San Diego's mild climate provides a near year-round growing season, bottlenecks in transportation, distribution and reasonable regulation can work to raise costs for small producers and, ultimately, the consumer. Guests were urged to support the local food chain and “vote with your fork” by dining and sourcing food ingredients from providers who practice or support local and sustainable farming.

Later, the participants broke into small groups and turned to their neighbor with questions that had been left on cards at each table. They exchanged stories and shared cherished memories of food and cooking. Chef Flor Franco, one of the volunteers who teaches cooking classes to schoolchildren who visit Olivewood, recalled growing up on a farm in Veracruz, Mexico. Being at events like this at Olivewood, she says, reminds her of those days, when abundant, fresh, whole foods fed nourishing family traditions built around home-cooked meals. "When I come and cook at Olivewood," she said, "I go back to my childhood."

Flor's company, Indulge Contemporary Catering, provided the mouth-watering farmstyle breakfast. Most of the breakfast's ingredients were harvested on-site at Olivewood Gardens, from squash and onions to the eggs that were used in three different frittatas.

After breakfast, participants toured the historic 6.85-acre property and learned about Olivewood's on-site gardening classes, weekly tours, weekend family days, and weekday field trips, where schoolchildren participate in hands-on, inquiry-based workshops in cooking, sustainable agriculture, water conservation, recycling and composting.

Olivewood's Amy Carstensen hopes that the Nourish Breakfast becomes an annual tradition. "Our desire is that that this will be a seed for future collaboration. There was such an energy and buzz as people shared ideas for working together to support San Diego agriculture and strengthen the local food system. Everyone met new folks who were equally passionate about celebrating healthy, sustainable, local food. And what's true elsewhere is doubly true in this movement, doubly true today: When you break bread together, you build community."