

BY JONO KINKADE

Waste not, want not

GleanSLO turns leftover produce into a meal in the making

After the harvest has passed a field, but doesn't quite get everything; when fresh produce brought to a market isn't all sold; and when a backyard fruit tree has fruit ripen faster than it can be picked, what becomes of all that food?

That age-old question is timeless, being as ever present as the challenge of feeding those who go hungry. The modern era of food aid is rife with scenarios where food that may be unwanted by some is redistributed to others. Oftentimes, the challenge of feeding the hungry is more a question of distribution than it is of production, especially on California's Central Coast, a place marked by a rich agricultural heritage, where the fields are endless and the growing seasons are long.

In a business where the product is perishable and labor costs are high, passing by and throwing out food is an inevitable part of the job. Enter the gleaners. A tradition that goes back to biblical times—maybe even before—gleaning is the practice of gathering and harvesting food that would otherwise never make it to the market. It began as a relationship between the producer—who may even purposely leave a little

bit behind—and the consumer. Today, gleaning has taken on a renewed life, as it becomes a tool for food aid organizations to close the gap between wasting and wanting.

Locally, GleanSLO has been hard at work mobilizing volunteers to harvest the unharvested and rescue would-be refuse from grocery stores and farmers' markets. The group, a program of the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County, has been able to make vital connections within the community, which Jen Miller, GleanSLO's program manager, calls a "win, win, win."

"It helps the low-income folks, because they have access to fresh food," Miller said. "It helps the farming community because they can get a tax write off on what they donate."

As for the gleaners, Miller said volunteers become more closely acquainted with how food is grown, all while playing an active role in feeding people.

The SLO Food Bank Coalition distributes approximately 6 million tons of food annually; of that, about 3 million pounds is fresh produce. In 2014, GleanSLO provided a grand total of 200,092 pounds of produce to the food bank. If it weren't for the gleaning, Miller says much of that produce would have not otherwise been accessible to the food bank. Thanks to GleanSLO's 1,250 volunteers, two coordinators, and a

driver, however, that produce was put to use, adding that much more local, fresh produce into the food shed.

"That's our primary goal when you look at the purpose of GleanSLO, [which] is to change our food culture so that eating healthy local produce is the norm," Miller said. "We're so lucky to live in such an agriculturally abundant region."

The gleaning doesn't just happen in commercial fields. The group has been building quite the network. Gleaners work with homeowners and green-thumbed hobby gardeners throughout the county, gleaning from gardens-gone-crazy or from fruit trees so full of fruit that most of it would otherwise end up on the ground and be left for the birds. They also go to farmers' markets and collect what is left after the market closes, repurposing produce that would otherwise be composted.

For those who grew the food, there's a little something sweet that comes in return: a tax write-off. Opening up a space to GleanSLO can be counted as a tax-deductible donation, which can come as a nice perk for homeowners. For farmers, that deduction can be a big help in what may be an otherwise rough year.

At times, the agriculture business can be a bit of a leaf in the winds of markets and weather. Some years, a crop may not be worth harvesting because the market value isn't much higher than the labor costs required to pick it. So instead of

picking it, they'll just walk away. With a group like GleanSLO, not only can that crop be picked—rather than tilled back into the ground—the farmer can recover some of his or her investment.

"To be able to recoup some of their costs is kind of a silver lining," Miller said, adding that the farmers are also generally happy that they're still able to feed people.

In 2013, the record-setting drought conditions complicated things after weather patterns left tough growing conditions where crops grew to be small or didn't grow at all.

"With the drought, a lot of farmers had to leave their produce in the fields because it wasn't worth it to pay people to harvest it," Miller said.

That made for an interesting year for GleanSLO, which saw a reduced yield from neighborhood gardens, where fruit trees didn't produce or homeowners downsized their gardens and watered them less. GleanSLO saw much more produce come from farms than they did in 2013, however, as more farmers decided not to harvest more of their fields.

But whatever happens with the weather in 2015, GleanSLO is looking forward to a fruitful new year. With the help of a sophisticated computer database to manage their volunteers and glean sites, and the community's growing interest in local food, the future is bright for the group.

"The program has grown so much so fast that each month is busier than the last, which is a good problem to have," Miller said. "It's a small community, and I think Glean SLO just makes sense to a lot of folks." Δ

Contact Staff Writer Jono Kinkade at jkinkade@newtimesslo.com.

Get into gleaning!

For more information on how you can get your hands dirty by volunteering with GleanSLO, fill out an online volunteer registration form at gleanslo.org/volunteer.