

ON EVERYONE'S LIPS: LOCAL FOOD

How Siskiyou County Fosters More than Talk

BY RENÉE CASTERLINE

In far northern California, where Siskiyou County hugs the Oregon border and Mount Shasta affects weather patterns, the local food movement grows. Residents are looking for answers about where our food comes from and planting the seeds to produce our own. Local production comes from established farms and ranches and new projects by beginning growers, while active community partners, College of the Siskiyous' (COS's) new Environmental Resources Program and the micro-enterprise development agency, Jefferson Economic Development Institute (JEDI), support this movement. Both offer classes to assist local food entrepreneurs and spur the growth of Siskiyou County's local food scene.

Siskiyou County is home to a few names that are well established in local food circles. Hunter Orchards in Grenada grows organic peaches and serves as the grandmother of organic farms in the Shasta Valley. Owners John Tannaci and

Kirsten Olsen converted the orchard to organic over twenty years ago and started the Mt. Shasta Farmers' Market. In the Butte Valley sit the headquarters of Prather Ranch, the north state's popular organic and natural beef producer that has its own slaughterhouse outside of Macdoel. New growers and ranchers need look no farther than these models of long-standing, sustainable operations.

The Shasta and Scott Valleys provide prime growing areas for these new growers and producers. As these folks carve out their new businesses, COS's course for entrepreneurs, *It's Your Business*, taught in partnership with JEDI, helps students shape their business ideas and plans. While the course isn't focused specifically on food producers, more and more students are coming with business ideas related to food. The course helps them evaluate their personal and business values, do market research, write a business plan, and create a profit





and loss projection—all necessary and valuable exercises for folks who are more likely to be thinking about producing food.

Two of the new food businesses in Siskiyou County that have benefited from *It's Your Business* have partnered to grow their visions of a local food network. While Jay Carez and Zach Scott weren't in the class together, these young food entrepreneurs heard about each other from the instructor and connected last winter to form a fruitful friendship growing winter greens. Now that Jay and Zach know the potential, come next winter, this project is slated to form the basis of Siskiyou County's first winter CSA.

For Jay Carez and his wife Cynthia, the winter greens were a natural extension of how they utilize their certified organic greenhouse. Three years ago, on the outskirts of Mt. Shasta, Jay and Cynthia Carez began Healthy Gardens, a 2000 square foot certified organic greenhouse operation where they grow organic vegetables and flower starts. They sell their plants, which include heirloom varieties, at farmers' markets in Siskiyou County and also in the Sacramento and Marin areas. Plants and markets are growing so well that they have leased an additional 1000 square feet of greenhouse space this year.

Meanwhile, outside of Gazelle in the Shasta Valley, Zach and Rachel Scott jumped feet first into a permaculture farming endeavor, jumped, that is, after three years of visiting the farmland and researching their move. The old farm they kept visiting had established fruit trees, berry bushes, and plenty of south facing, sunny slopes. Their many visits

convinced the Scotts they wanted to farm this land. And they also learned *how* they wanted to farm this land.

"Over the course of those three years," says Zach, "we became more and more aware of the state of our food and how disconnected we had become as a society to our most basic needs." Zach visited regional growers to look at their farms and talk about their choices and methods. He also read about farming, all the while moving towards a sense of what was possible for the Gazelle farm, given his dream to farm with diversity and resiliency on his northstate property. A quiet pride underscores Zach's description of the result: "This research created the vision of a sustainable farm that would provide food for our local community, allowing the region more stability and the residents better health." The Scotts bought the farm in 2007 and named the old homestead Morningside Farm, after the original settler Morningside McCoy, who they believe settled there in 1909.

After their first year of growing for market, Zach enrolled in the *It's Your Business* class at College of the Siskiyous. He had plenty of dreams for the visioning exercises, and from those, he worked on a business plan and completed market research. This cycle of visioning, developing a plan, and researching feasibility helped him develop new possibilities for market niches in addition to those he had experienced during that first season at farmers' market. As a result, this year, their second selling their fruits and vegetables at the Mt. Shasta Farmers' Market, they'll be adding products like dry kale chips and experimenting with energy bars. Next up, they

plan to invite subscribers into a Community Supported Agriculture venture, a program in which eaters partner with farmers for a regular, usually weekly, delivery of what is grown on the farm.

“The business class has helped me focus my ideas,” Zach said. “We realized last year that we had a difficult time competing at market with the larger, more established farms. The class allowed me to think outside the constraints of tradition, coming up with strategies to make us more competitive.”

Jay and Cynthia Carez have likewise benefited from *It's Your Business*. As they've expanded their greenhouse space and moved into winter production, they've applied what they learned about business plans. Their continues to grow and evolve, and as they diversify their products and sales outlets, the marketing portion of the class has become relevant in new ways. Continuing the winter greens project with the Scotts and providing starts to The Nature Conservancy for a Shasta River restoration project are two examples of actualizing their new and evolving plans.

“This year the flood gate is open,” Jay said of their plans to double their business. “The class gave me the emotional support I needed. The JEDI staff was hip on what we wanted to do, plus it was helpful to see other people who were going through similar business ordeals.”

Siskiyou County institutions and agencies foster such connections not only through *It's Your Business*. College of the Siskiyous' new Environmental Resources Program has forged other links in the local food community. The class *Introduction to Sustainable Communities* visits local farms and ranches, including Healthy Gardens, where Jay speaks about the products of their greenhouse. Full disclosure: as a student of both the *It's Your Business* class and the *Introduction to Sustainable Communities* class, I have created a local food blog to connect the various nodes of the food web. The blog, Jefferson Food Network, posts information about herd shares, egg sales, farmers markets, CSAs, and related events in an effort to distribute as much information as possible about Siskiyou County food resources. Another class in COS's Environmental Resources Program, *Greening Your World*, emphasizes direct action; last fall the class visited a farm and helped plant garlic. And for more hands-on, the College helps student interns gain work experience on local farms through



the Green Futures Program implemented by Northern Rural Training and Employment Consortium (NoRTEC).

On tap in the Environmental Resources program at COS are additional courses that will help Siskiyou County's local food system. *Growing Food at Home* will be offered this summer, an opportunity to learn as you grow, and, just in time for harvest, *Introduction to Food Preservation* will be offered in fall. In 2011, the program will also offer *Agriculture and Food Skills Lab*, where it's likely that other food entrepreneurs will develop farm products that add value both to the farm and to consumers' experience of local food.

The vision of residents eating healthy, locally grown food that informed the Scotts' decision to farm Morningside and the Carez's decision to grow winter greens in Healthy Gardens' organic greenhouses is really a vision of connections, of an ever-expanding network, as eaters connect to growers. It's built on the hopes and dreams of growers seeking a new livelihood based on local sales and of residents seeking a new way of eating and connecting to their community. This year, aided by COS and JEDI, that web has grown by leaps and bounds in Siskiyou County as local food becomes a priority that is on everyone's lips. 🌱

To learn more about College of the Siskiyous' Environmental Resources program:
siskiyous.edu/ctel/environmental

Information about JEDI's services:
e-jedi.org

Read the blog about Jefferson Food Network:
jeffersonfood.com

Renée Casterline is a freelance writer, blogger, author and hopeful farmer living in Mt. Shasta. She recently completed her BA in Environmental Studies through Prescott College, has been a student of COS's Sustainable Communities class, and is currently conducting a food system assessment of Siskiyou County.