

# The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



## Connecting the Dots

Marin Organic nurtures synergistic creativity for people and the planet

In 2004, Marin Organic's newly-hired executive director Helge Hellberg was visiting the organization's member farms when he landed at Peter Martinelli's Fresh Run Farm in Bolinas. As he toured the abundant fields, Hellberg noticed some large zucchinis lying on the ground, clipped off the vine. When he asked why they hadn't been harvested, Martinelli replied that there was no market for zucchinis that big, and so they were destined to be worked back into the soil. Distressed at this beautiful organic food going to waste, Hellberg asked for the veggies, dropping them at a nearby elder-care center, which was thrilled by the gift.

In researching further, Hellberg learned that up to 20 percent of U.S. food crops don't meet market standards for size, shape or cosmetic perfection, and thus end up either plowed under or fed to animals. "But if you look at the energy and care it took to grow that food," Hellberg says, "there's a much wiser way of using it."

As he considered who could benefit from these discards, he remembered discussions with local schools that wanted to include fresh organic produce in their offerings, but found it difficult with budgets allocating just over \$1 per child per day. At those levels, Hellberg says, schools are "almost forced to buy preformulated" synthetic foods that are often "high-sugar, high-fat and don't even taste very good." Plus, Hellberg notes, there's growing evidence that this type of diet contributes to problems such as obesity, ADD and decreased learning ability.

So he talked with area schools and farmers, and from that created the

Marin Organic School Lunch and Gleaning Program. Participating schools receive free, slightly imperfect produce (called "seconds"). In return, they buy additional food from member farms at regular prices; the seconds lower the schools' total costs. Marin Organic transports the food from farms to schools in a donated biodiesel-powered truck.

In less than three years, the program has delivered 100,000 pounds of local certified organic products to over 40 Marin schools, camps and community groups, which in turn feed 12,000 children each week. The project also helps local organic farmers diversify their income, nurturing both their survival and a healthy rural environment. Supporting farmers is especially vital now, with the United States losing an estimated 400 family farms a week because of economic pressure and development.

Hellberg hopes this program can be a model for other communities, and sees it as an example of how we can turn apparent problems into opportunities. "We just need to connect the dots more wisely," he advises.

For instance, he points to the Straus Family Creamery's innovative system for converting its cows' methane, a harmful greenhouse gas, into energy that powers its organic dairy. Another example is Marin Organic's new Marin Climate Initiative, which has partnered with the Marin Carbon Project to explore ways that local farming practices can help solve global climate change. Increasing the stored carbon in all the world's agricultural land by as little as 1.6 percent would significantly reduce the atmosphere's current excess carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>).

Also vital to Hellberg is nurturing the connection between the public and farmers, deepening our shared understanding of "the critical importance of local and organic agriculture." Thus, Marin Organic offers farm tours, education programs, food events and a farmers market. He also encourages consumer support of certified organic, with its third-party verification of practices, to help ensure that "we're all literally on the same page."

This season, Marin Organic plans to gather with community members and farmers to savor local organic food at its Holiday Farmer Dinner. Held at the MarketBar in the Embarcadero's historic Ferry Building in San Francisco, half the proceeds go to Marin Organic. Hellberg likes the intimacy of these dinners. "You really feel part of that community, that family," he says.

"It's actually those relationships," he adds, "to each other, our farmers, our land and our soil, which will be the key to our survival as a society. This economic crisis is an opportunity to come back to seeing how abundant everything really is, when we let nature guide us, and apply our creativity and beautiful minds to problem-solving within nature's systems."

*Marin Organic's Holiday Farmer Dinner is held on Saturday, Dec. 13, at the MarketBar. \$50 per person; no-host bar. For reservations or more information, call Marin Organic 415.663.9667 or go to [www.marinorganic.org](http://www.marinorganic.org).*

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