



For Immediate Release

Students from Elite Cooking Schools Get Lessons in Valley's Farm Fields

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By Robert Rodriguez - The Fresno Bee

Culinary students from some of the nation's top cooking schools traded their chef coats for sweatshirts to learn how food in the central San Joaquin Valley is grown.

Ten students from The Culinary Institute of America's Hyde Park campus in New York walked through broccoli fields during harvest in February, watched an almond orchard being platted and visited the sprawling [Harris Ranch](#) feedlot in west Fresno County.

"I had no idea the farms were so big out here" CIA student Nancy Fisher said.

Culinary schools are increasingly getting their students out of the kitchens and onto farms to learn more about the farm-to-table movement -- a trend that's being embraced by restaurants and consumers.

The phrase farm-to-table can mean different things, but its most basic definition is the sourcing of meat, dairy or produce directly from a specific farm. As part of that, some restaurants are using the names of growers or branded products, such as Harris Ranch beef, on their menus to show their support of local, high-quality producers.

Culinary school officials say that what they are trying to do is give their students a deeper appreciation of where good comes from, how it is produced and what issues are involved in getting it from the farm to the table.

"We are not trying to indoctrinate anyone in a particular way of thinking," said Bruce McCann, president of The International Culinary Center in Cambell. "But the modern chef has to understand the issues outside the four walls of the kitchen, such as: How do you source food? What does quality food look and taste like? And what is a fair return for their purveyors?"

Last fall, McCann's culinary center students toured several farms, including a cheese plant in Hilmar, a carrot farm in Salinas and a winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Chef Larry Forgione, a leader in the farm-to-table movement and instructor at CIA's Napa Valley campus, said the program is also designed to help students see farmers not just the suppliers, but as partners in producing food for consumers

"increasingly, it is becoming more important to know where food comes from," Forgione said. "Consumers want to know, and we want students to know."

Among the CIA's more well-known graduates are celebrity chefs Rocco DiSpirito, Anthony Bourdain and Anne Burrell.

For Valley farmers, the food-to-table movement holds the potential to create new relationships with restaurants and their customers -- all of which translates to high profits.



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"As beginning chefs, we want to be able to educate them about what California agriculture is all about," said Brad Caudill, vice president of marketing for [Harris Ranch Beef Company](#). "And in a few years, they will be the decision makers."

Caudill was with the students as they toured Harris Ranch's 14,000-acre farming operation that includes vegetables, nuts and beef. He was a bit surprised to learn that, of the 10 students, only one had any connection to farming.

Caudill said that concerns him, because the further removed a person is from agriculture, the greater the potential for misinformation about how food is produced.

"There is sometimes a bit of snobbery out there from some restaurants who only feature natural or organic products," Caudill said. "But what we are trying to show them is that we raise a safe and wholesome beef product. The whole world can't be fed on free range or organic beef."

Several students said they were impressed by the scale of farming in the region, the diversification and the amount of labor required to run a farm.

"It really does make you appreciate what it takes to produce a crop," said Eric Brown, CIA culinary student. "And the more we know, the better able we are to make decisions about what we may buy."

Culinary student Marc Kantrowitz was shocked at the amount of food that does not make it to the grocery.

During their tour, the students watched as workers carefully sliced fist-sized heads of broccoli from a west Fresno County field. The customer specifically wanted smaller-sized broccoli and the rest was going to be disced into the ground.

"You don't realize it, but there is some waste in farming," said Kantrowitz. "And it's too bad, because the broccoli tastes good. There just isn't a way to sell what isn't being picked."

Kantrowitz said part of what he learned during the tour is knowing what produce is in season and where it may be coming from.

"It really makes you think about what fresh ingredients you have available that day and how you are going to use them," he said.

Local restaurant owner and farmer Tara Hamilton embraced the attention agriculture is getting among culinary schools. "It is amazing that culinary students have been taught the art of preparing food without the connection of how it is grown or what its nutritional value is. But that is changing."



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For high resolution photos, POP materials or to arrange an interview with Harris Ranch Beef, please contact Brad Caudill at Brad.Caudill@HarrisRanch.com or by phone: 800.742.1955

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