
Farm2School: *Giving Children a Healthy Choice for Lunch*

ROBERT KNIGHT
Old Grove Orange
Redlands, California

NEWS4KNIGHT@HOTMAIL.COM

FARM2SCHOOL, A DIRECT LINK BETWEEN LOCAL FARMS AND SCHOOLS, has three objectives:

- Encouraging children to eat more fruits and vegetables—not functional foods, but fruits and vegetables straight from the farm.
- We want children to understand where their food comes from.
- We want to make our local farms sustainable, especially economically, but also in terms of the environment.

Farm2School is part of the local-food and whole-food movements, in the same family as farmers' markets—which are burgeoning—and as CSAs (community-supported agriculture, *i.e.* groups of people in a community who commit to buying and eating produce from a particular farm). CSA members pay up-front and, essentially, own a part of the farm, which provides financial sustainability to the farmer. CSAs are also part of the local-food movement and are burgeoning; in 1990, there were just sixty in the United States, and now there are more than 12,500. There were fewer than ten *Farm2School* programs in 1997, and now there are more than 2,000, gaining traction in various communities because of alignment of the interests of farmers, schools, government, students, and the public at large. They address a grass-roots consensus on health promotion by eating better and how to sustain elements of the community.

The *Farm2School* program that I'm involved with in southern California is called "Old Grove Orange." We grow citrus, a crop that covered much of southern California a century ago. However, southern California has been almost completely developed since then, and just a few pockets of agriculture are left. Southern California's economy and its urban infrastructure were developed on the basis of the citrus industry, which is now, all but gone. There's much resident emotion about this change, much of which has occurred within our generation.

OLD GROVE ORANGE

Old Grove Orange started three years ago, with one farm, mine—I grow oranges, mandarins, grapefruit, and kiwi fruit—and with one school district. Now, it comprises twenty-three local growers—producing oranges, mandarins, kiwis and strawberries—and twenty-five school districts. We also have four apple growers, two peach growers, and two grape growers, who help feed a half a million children within those twenty-five school districts.

Local Means Fresh

A fundamental aspect of *Farm2School* is that “local” means fresh. Since we’re local, we can literally pick and deliver to schools in one day. When we pick strawberries, we have them at the school the same day. When we pick oranges, we have them at schools the next day. Essentially, we are delivering new experiences to environments that are used to chicken nuggets. We are providing a backyard food experience, with a remarkably improved level of taste that children respond to.

Fresh Means No Chemicals

Another important aspect is that “fresh” means no preservative chemicals. Since we can deliver produce in a day or two, application of preservatives is unnecessary. I used to run a Sunkist packing house in which oranges were treated to ensure a shelf life of six to eight weeks. Sunkist put the fruit through a hydrochloric acid pressure wash, then a boric-acid bath, followed by fungicide treatment and a wax coating. The orange that was exported to China was treated the same as the orange eaten by a child in the same neighborhood of the orange grove. For local consumption, we can pick and deliver so quickly that preservative application is unnecessary.

The third thing is that we’re competitive with big global suppliers, primarily because we are local. We don’t need the \$7 million packing-house process. We don’t need all that chemistry. We don’t need the attendant management of effluent. In fact, we can pack citrus for half the price compared with highly mechanized packing houses; therefore, we can be price-competitive to the school district. Being price competitive along with the other advantages we bring, basically makes our clients’ decision for them.

LOCAL MEANS MISSION

Lunch Ladies with a Higher Calling

The other thing about local is, it means “mission.” As mentioned, our now-metropolitan area used to be covered with citrus groves, which are almost all gone. Residual sentiment plays into the concepts expressed by Drs. Biltekoff¹ and Shimek² about “we want to go back,” and “we want something that’s whole and pure and not processed.” These emotions elicit buy-in from the community as a whole about moving from a commodity fruit-and-vegetable or the “Chicken-McNugget” model for schools into getting local produce into

¹Pages 99–106.

²Pages 115–120.

local schools. We have found that lunch ladies who tolerate grim “Chicken-McNugget” working conditions have a higher calling. At Old Grove Orange, we bus in the lunch ladies for a “you pick” day on the farm and they take away with them all the fruit they can carry. Consequently, they realize that some local farms are left, and there’s something that they can do about their “Tater-Tot” existence. These ladies influence choices that children make at school. They encourage the consumption of the locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Linking Food to Farm and Health

“Local” also means, in terms of mission, that we help children make connections between the fruit in their diet and the environment around them. One of the educational components that we deliver to our schools is called “Citrus History in a Box.” Every third-grade classroom gets a citrus carton full of oranges, picked from 100-year-old trees. Southern California is where the fresh-pack navel-orange business started in the late 1800s and some of the original trees have survived. The older the navel-orange tree, the sweeter the fruit, and so we deliver an excellent taste experience. Also in the box of oranges, we provide aerial imagery, showing what the land on which the school was built looked like sixty to a hundred years ago, *i.e.* carpeted with citrus groves. This makes a deep impression; not only do the children eat fruit from trees that were planted when their grandparents were young, they also see what their neighborhoods looked like back then. It brings home the relationship between the food that they’re eating, their supermarket and the surrounding neighborhood.

Parents Invested in Green Space, Heritage Preservation and Health

A key mission element is parents who understand that, “If our children eat this produce, the local growers will be able to maintain the open space, and preserve their heritage. Of course there’s a health aspect also, born of feeling, “Oh great, it’s not just Tater Tots it’s also whole food. It’s also natural products.” They relate to that.

Figure 1 shows the seals of five cities in southern California. Each includes citrus fruit and/or groves, revealing the essence of these communities at the time of their establishment. Dozens more could be included. Practically every single city seal in southern California has an orange on it, whereas not a single one of them has a grove left.

Happy Farmers

Another fundamental element is that “local” means happy farmers. Growers who belong to Old Grove Orange receive substantially better returns than when selling on the commodity market. In fact, our growers are all “refugees” from the global distribution network. At the very least, we match the return a grower would get on the global market. In 2010, we paid more than four times the global rate. Clearly, the pairing between schools and farmers is truly beneficial to both sides.

Farm2School provides price predictability and stability. When linked to a global commodity market, the price changes from day to day and from week to week. We tell our member growers what price we can meet or exceed for the coming season, and we’ve never varied from those projections. They appreciate that. Also, our customers, the schools, like



Figure 1. Southern Californian city seals.

that as well; otherwise, they have no idea what they will pay for their produce until after the fact. Because, as farmers, we're not tied into a global market, we can decide what the local prices will be in conjunction with the school. There could be a freeze in Florida or a drought in Australia, but that price won't change, which is something that's appreciated on both sides. It's another win-win.

Most of the Farm2School growers have tried farmers' markets and CSAs, which are labor-intensive and relatively small in scale. In a school district, one person may make decisions for 30,000 children. Having convinced one person, you have 30,000 new consumers. That's attractive. A school district as a customer is like six supermarkets selling your product.

Another thing that farmers like is satisfaction gained from their community role. When selling into the global market, they never knew their customers. Their fruit would be hauled away and they don't know what happened to it. There is community satisfaction, and satisfaction for growers with the fact that their fruit is going to children in their local area. It's an experience that binds communities.

ICING ON THE CAKE

Needy Children

The majority of the school districts in southern California provide free or reduced-price lunches to 60% to 80% of the children; the families are so poor that the government either pays for or subsidizes the meals. From a local foods and whole-foods point of

view, farmers' markets and CSAs are laudable, but they sell to elite, well-to-do customers. It is gratifying that Farm2School makes elite food available to the poorest people in the community, and on a massive scale. A half a million children are now eating fancy farmers' market fruit—the same as is sold in elite communities like Santa Monica and Palm Springs.

Needy Adults

There's a lot of waste with agriculture. We throw away about a third of what we grow in the United States because it's not big enough or it's too big or it has undesirable marks on it. In commercial agriculture, these leftovers are ploughed into the ground. Such oranges usually go to a juice plant or to a cattle farm. We donate them to the needy; we donated 93 tons of oranges in 2009 and 196 tons the year before. If you see a needy person carrying an orange in southern California, it's almost 90% likely that it came from Old Grove Orange. And that is also something to which our community responds well. Having fruit and vegetable farms in an urban area can help solve the problem of hunger, especially.

Carbon Footprint

Another source of pride stems from our belief that we provide negative carbon-footprint food. Since our farms are collocated with our customers, we travel negligible mileage to deliver our unprocessed food to the school districts. Furthermore, our groves are in the same air basin as our customers, and so we have forty or fifty thousand trees sequestering carbon. On one hand, much of the food eaten by our customers is shipped over long distances, some of it frozen and thus is energy intensive; on the other hand it's reassuring to eat food in the knowledge that, the more you eat, the better it is for the environment.

A PARTING SHOT

Science and technology have produced a consensus that we need to promote consumption of fruits and vegetables by our children, and one of the ways to achieve that is to gauge community understanding. What are the factors—besides the food itself—that can rally a community to make this a priority for their children? I'm sure that a different set of factors prevails in each community, but we feel that, around Redlands in the southern California area of Inland Empire, we've found those factors, because we are doing well as demonstrated by our win-win relationship.



Robert Knight was born in Redlands, CA, and raised in an orange grove. As a restless teenager, the grove was the last place he wanted to be, and, upon graduation from high school, he headed to New York City. After spending the bulk of 20-odd years overseas, working as a telecom exec with AT&T and Lucent, ironically he returned to the Inland Empire to manage his family's citrus business and raise his own pair of restless teenagers amidst an orange grove. Proud to be a fourth-generation orange grower—but shocked by how quickly Inland Empire groves are disappearing—Knight founded the Inland Orange Conservancy, a group dedicated to saving groves and building an orange-loving community.