



TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL

Creating Empowered Stewards for our Planet and All Things Edible

BY ROBIN CARPENTER

Kindergartner helping to plant garlic at Paradise Valley Farm in Bolinas.

"In an ideal world...

We will not have to 'preserve' or 'protect' land

Because we will have learned what it means to be good stewards..."

—Terry Tempest Williams

"Teaching kids how to feed themselves and how to live in a community responsibly is the center of an education."

—Alice Waters

I often wish that the children I know could have days of climbing trees and picking blackberries with their friends.

As a child, I ran free through the marshes and piney woods where I grew up and fell in love with the land and animals in a joyful, natural way. As an adult, I could never imagine doing anything that would harm my first love.

Over the last 60 years we have lost much of our connection to the land, and, thus, our food. That is true even here in Marin, Napa and Sonoma Counties where we are surrounded by gorgeous cultivated fields and ranches. Thankfully, though, we are also surrounded by a growing number of educational programs that are dedicated to guiding our children toward a deeper connection to our planet and our food. These programs are planting the seeds of healthy eating and good stewardship in children of all ages and across all economic brackets.

As also reported in this issue of *edible Marin & Wine Country*, there is a new movement that is taking root in Napa County—one that encourages the cultivating of food crops, alongside the economically crucial grape crops. One of the ways this movement is reaching the children of Napa County is through Connolly Ranch Education Center (CREC), located on a 12-acre working ranch two miles from downtown Napa. The mission of CREC is connecting kids with nature through their farm-based environmental education program.

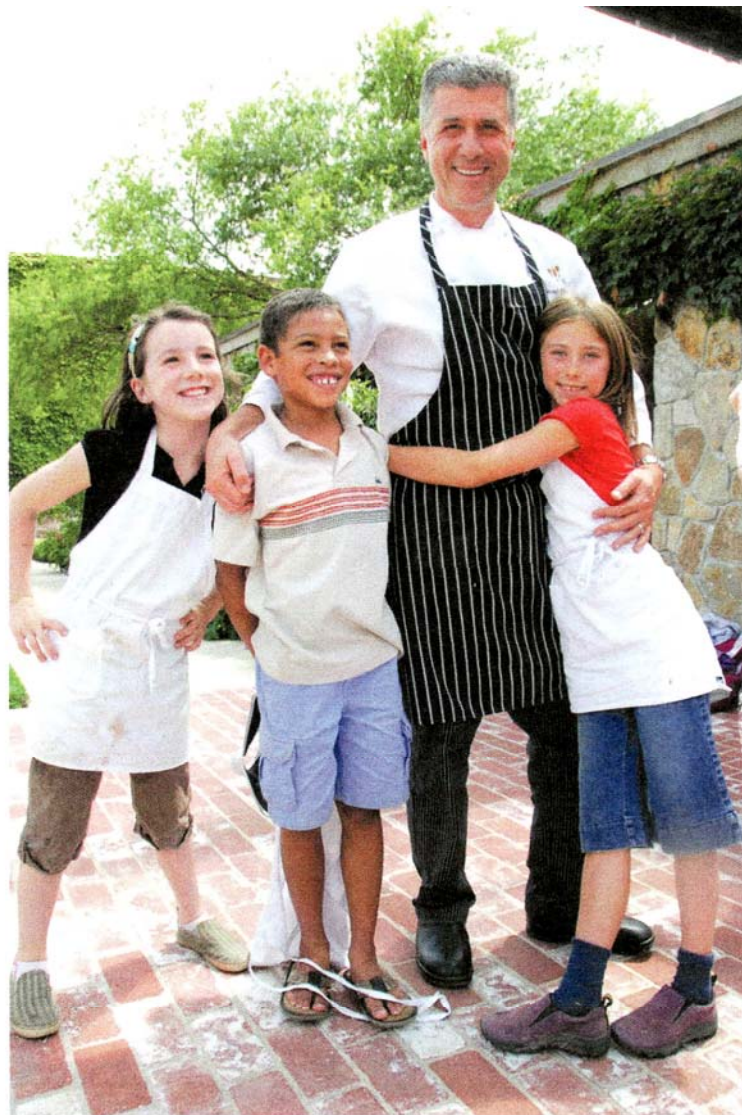
CREC's Executive Director, Bob Pallas, spoke to me about the deep need for what he calls "eco-intervention" when as a country we are experiencing the widespread phenomenon of what author Richard Louv calls "nature deficit disorder" in his book *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin, 2005). He posits that many parents today can't imagine allowing their children to roam in nature without an adult and/or a cell phone and says that he's found that one of the gifts of CREC is that it doesn't feel so remote or frightening to parents who might be worried about the "dangers" their children may encounter while out in nature. He recounts, "Many of the children who come here have never actually been dirty with dirt. One child was sent here by his mother to overcome his fear of bugs and being outside. We were worried about this being a good idea, but within an hour he was elbow deep in worms and compost and laughing."

The five main themes of the programs offered by CREC are farm animals, environmental history, gardening, pioneer life and woodland ecology. Their newest program is called Dirt-to-Dine. The “dine” portion of the summer camp program was developed by Napa resident and celebrity chef Michael Chiarello and his wife, Eileen, who serves on the CREC board. The campers spend the mornings “in the dirt” with CREC’s Education Director Michael Lauher and afternoons with CREC’s Lead Culinary Educator Jennifer Carden (who authors the regular Stone’s Soup Corner feature in this magazine) learning how to prepare food using the ingredients from the farm. As the Dirt-to-Dine team expresses it, “Through farming, gardening and cooking experiences, children discover the source of foods and the joy of creating, nurturing, harvesting and growing what they eat. This leads to healthy low-impact food choices, responsible eating and good stewardship.”

In the Napa Valley, over 38% of households fall below the poverty level and a large number of schools in the region receive funds from the Federal government because so many of their students are at risk of failure and living at or near poverty. In response to this reality, CREC provides scholarships to 50% of the participants in its programs.

Plantation Farm Camp (PFC), located on a 500-acre livestock ranch and farm in the redwoods on the Sonoma Coast, has been teaching children to be good stewards and helping them to connect with nature since 1952. I spoke with Kelly Marston, Camp Director with her husband John Chakan, about the PFC experience. “We like to think of this time as a renewal where the kids can return to themselves and nature in order to thrive during the times they are not at camp. Removal from their electronic world—everyone at PFC lives outdoors, without electricity, the farm buildings being used for other purposes—gives them a chance to process their feelings. It also gives them a chance to make choices free from parental or cultural pressure. The period from age 8 through 11 is a magical, fearless time. Kids are open and not worried about peer approval; they’re adventurous. It’s also the time to begin presenting them with models for living in community, how to eat and how we take care of ourselves and our planet.” Each camp session is three 3 weeks long and campers actively participate in taking care of the farm twice each day by performing specific chores of their choosing. According to Kelly, about 80% of their campers return each year.

My friends Laurie and Tor are raising their 8-year old nephew, Hiroki, and gave him the gift of attending PFC last summer. They wanted him to have the powerful experience of being on his own with his peers, bonding over the discoveries they could make in nature and learning about how to raise food and be a part of a sustainable community. Hiroki shared with me his thoughts on chores and the food at PFC. His favorite chore was “chicken chore” which



Michael Chiarello with campers at Dirt to Dine Camp.

entailed feeding them, gathering eggs and learning to hypnotize a chicken. “Just gently turn her over and find the little ‘v’ bone in her chest and rub it until she gets really still,” he instructed. “After morning chores, we ate. The food was delicious! We grew it, collected eggs and found berries, and all the meat came from there too.”

Kelly describes the PFC food as “farm-fresh camp gourmet.” The beef, lamb and pork served are all raised on the farm. I asked Kelly if there was any discomfort among the campers when they learn the origin of the meat they are served. She told me that they explain to the children in the beginning that farming and ranching always involves killing—whether it’s the disturbance of microbes in the soil during planting or the death of an animal when it’s harvested. She’s impressed by the deep conversations that occur between campers and staff about where our food originates and what we should be eating. At camp, some children apparently decide not to eat meat, and some previously vegetarian campers try meat for the first time because they know that the animals they are eating were treated with respect.

I asked Hiroki’s aunts if they felt that PFC had been good for

Photo courtesy of Connolly Ranch Education Center

Hiroki. Laurie laughed and said it was worth it for “the six magic words.” Apparently a few days after Hiroki returned from camp their dog ran onto the highway and chaos ensued until Hiroki calmly asked, “What(1) may(2) I(3) do(4) to(5) help(6)?” Laurie and Tor learned that Hiroki had been taught to say this at camp when things happened that were upsetting. Hiroki told us that “Big John (Chakan, the Camp Director) told us to be ready because the first time we said them the grownups at home might faint. He told us that if we say these words when we don’t know what to do, your life will be good forever.” I asked Hiroki what the best thing was about going to PFC and he said, “You feel like you are your very own person.”

The Agricultural Institute of Marin’s (AIM) “Diggin’ the Market” tours for kids at the Marin Civic Center Farmers’ Market are a beguiling mix of *Mad Men* marketing genius, information rich *Jeopardy* and the playful joy of *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* and *Captain Kangaroo*. The mission of these tours is to educate children and their parents about the nutritional, environmental and economic benefits of buying locally grown food, directly from farmers. My afternoon at AIM started with meeting a real life Mr. Green Jeans in the personage of Tyler Thayer, Education Program Coordinator. Wearing green overalls and a cow tie, his enthusiasm for empowering children to make healthy food choices is palpable. Tyler’s been working in farmers’ markets for over 23 years. He works closely with Leah Smith, Program Director at AIM, who has worked in Marin County for over 10 years advancing the sustainable agriculture movement.

Getting children to recognize differences in taste is generally the easy part. Leah used the “Jet-lagged Apple” advertising campaign that AIM had used for the farmers’ markets they operate throughout the Bay Area as inspiration for a teaching tool, creating an anonymous taste test of four different apples. They asked the children to taste three local apples and one flown in from a great distance. Over 90% of the children correctly identified the “jet-lagged” apple. Often, the children on these tours have never tasted unprocessed foods, and by the end of the tour, many of them are choosing a fresh snap pea over a potato chip.

Tyler and Leah emphasized that fun and memorable activities are particularly critical when it comes to teaching children about the economic reasons for buying local. Accordingly the duo invented another game they call “Pass the Peach” where two children “farmers” are each given a peach and a bag of quarters. The other children play the roles of different parts of two food distribution systems. One line of children represents a conventional/global system

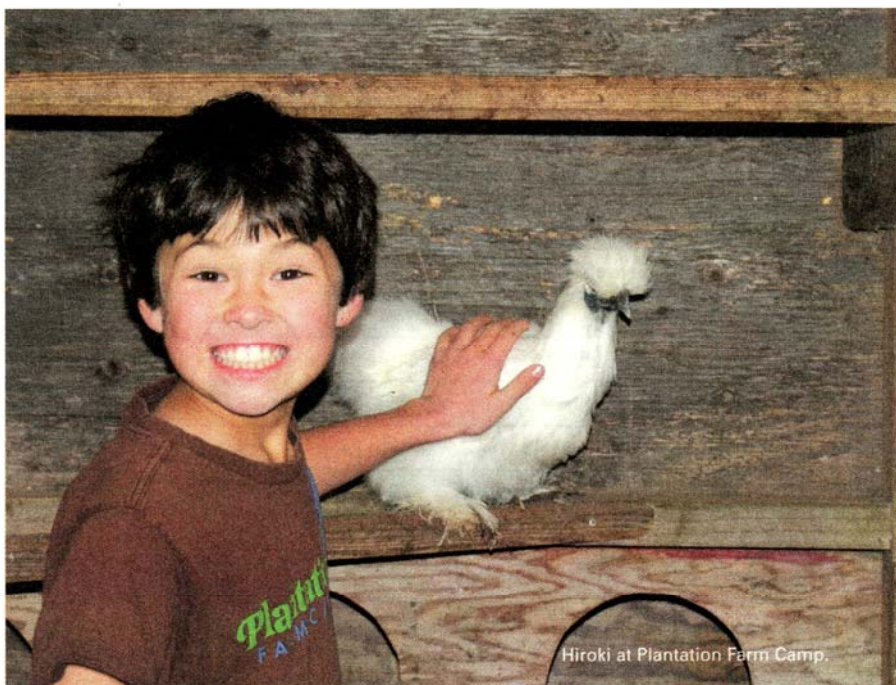
with a distributor, airfreight company and so on. The other line represents the local farmers’ market model with only a market manager between the farmer and the consumer. As the peach is passed from child to child in each line, the farmer must give each one a quarter. Obviously, the farmer using the farmers’ market model will have more quarters at the end of the game, and the peach will be far less bruised.

Leah and Tyler emphasized that encouraging the kids to teach their parents and others is necessary to create change. They always ask the children to take one thing they learn on their tour and share it with three other people.

Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) Education Director, Constance Washburn, oversees their Farm Field Studies program (FFS) and has also been organizing teacher tours and trainings as well as family oriented “Hikes and Tours” for many years. Bolinas farmer, Sandy Dierks, works closely with Constance as the Farm Educator for FFS.

FFS offers farm field trips for K–12 school groups throughout the Bay Area. Because public schools have very specific teaching requirements, Constance and Sandy work with teachers to help them tie the visits into the state curriculum standards. “Because I was a teacher, I know what teachers need, and because I’m a farmer I know what the farms and farmers will be able to deal with,” Sandy says.

FFS emphasizes that agriculture and ecology must go hand-in-hand. When Sandy describes the importance of riparian zones to the children she tells them that the creeks and rivers are like the veins and capillaries of the earth. On the farm visit, she will



Hiroki at Plantation Farm Camp.

pause next to the creek and ask children to give thanks to the water for keeping the earth and all of its creatures alive.

What do the children think? Stone Shepard and his second grade class at Old Mill School in Mill Valley visited Gospel Flats Farm in Bolinas on a FFS outing last year. “It was really fun and interesting. Being a farmer is really hard work. I want to be a farmer, but I like to sleep late. So maybe I could raise rabbits,” Stone told me. He also shared that last Halloween he dressed as his favorite rabbit-raising Marin farmer, Mark Pasternak of Devil’s Gulch Ranch. Information about Devil’s Gulch’s summer camps and educational programs can be found in the box below.

At Slide Ranch, an environmental and agricultural education center near Muir Beach in Marin County, the wild beauty of one of the world’s most abundant marine systems merges with the terrestrial wealth of West Marin. The juxtaposition of the wild landscape and agriculture can create tension, but at Slide Ranch it creates teaching opportunities. The Miwok Indians visited the site for centuries to gather food from the sea before Portuguese dairy farmers settled there in the 1870s. One hundred years later, local attorney Doug Ferguson and conservationist Huey Johnson with the Nature Conservancy rescued the ranch from commercial development.

Today, Slide Ranch hosts over 8,000 program participants per year, the majority of whom come from inner-city schools throughout the Bay Area. Slide’s Executive

Director Charles Higgins told me, “The theme of food is the universal springboard for teaching stewardship to our children.” Slide’s seven on-site teachers facilitate activities for the children and work within the State of California’s school curriculum requirements. Programs include school and community field trips (day and overnight), week-long summer day camps and regular “family days” which promote intergenerational learning. Scholarships are available for school groups as well as summer campers.

Charles generally speaks with ease and fluidity, but when asked to describe notable surprises and impacts on the kids, he pauses between words and smiles to himself as he uses his hands to shape what he’s expressing. “They’re always shocked that newly laid eggs and fresh milk are warm—they realize they came from a living creature. You see how tactile it is for them. I’ve watched them feeling the roundness and the warmth. They feel it beyond words and you feel it with them. It’s a beautiful thing on so many levels—the land and the life have such powerful impacts on these kids. I know it seems so simple, but for kids who’ve never connected to nature or animals, well, it’s hard to measure. They often come back to visit us as adults and their comments and feelings about their time here are movingly deep.”

Robin Carpenter is a freelance writer who grew up in Ragg Swamp on the Gulf Coast of Alabama, where she learned the finer points of storytelling and food in a land rich with rituals, myths and well-marbled alligators. She now lives in West Marin and can be reached at balsorate@gmail.com.

AGRICULTURAL AND COOKING CAMPS AND CLASSES FOR KIDS

Here are some great camps in edible Marin & Wine Country where your kids will learn where their food comes from, how to prepare it and have fun doing it!

CAMP	LOCATION	AGES	DATES	CONTACT
Connolly Ranch	Napa	6–11	June–August	www.connollyranch.org
Slide Ranch Day Camp	Muir Beach	5–18	June–August	www.slideranch.org
Devil’s Gulch Day Camp: Basic Agriculture/Nature	Nicasio	6–13	June–August	www.devilsgulchranch.com
Devil’s Gulch Day Camp: Leadership in Training	Nicasio	12+	June–August	www.devilsgulchranch.com
The Children’s Garden	Sonoma	5–11	May–October	www.childrengardenco.com
ITK Cooking Summer Camp	Sausalito	4–14	June–August	www.itkculinary.com
Summerfield Farm Camp Farm & Permaculture Sessions	Santa Rosa	4–12	June and July	www.summerfieldws.org
Pine Point Cooking School (Mediterranean Emphasis)	Sausalito	9–15	Spring/Summer	www.pinepointcooking.com
Plantation Farm Camp (Multi-week overnight camp)	Sonoma	8–17	June–August	www.plantationcamp.com
Operation C.H.E.F.	San Rafael	7–14	July–August	www.operationchef.com
What’s Cooking	San Rafael	6 & up	July and August	www.whatscooking.info
Windrush Farm Spring & Summer Camps	Petaluma	7–12	June–August	707.364.9929 Arann Harris
4-H Summer Camps: Marin, Napa & Sonoma	Las Posadas Angwin	9–14	Varies by county	www.lasposadas4hcamp.com
Relish Culinary	Healdsburg	6-12	July	www.relishculinary.com