



## 2023/2024 Report

# Introduction

Conscious Kitchen has demonstrated that school-supported agriculture is a vital tool to mitigate health impacts and climate change by engaging school districts, local organic farmers, food system stakeholders, and students in an ecosystem rooted in local procurement that promotes human and environmental health and community resilience

2023 and 2024 marked a significant period of refinement and growth for Conscious Kitchen. We not only built upon the successes of 2022 but also devised innovative strategies to overcome new challenges. We solidified our partnership with the Alice Waters Institute, enabling us to broaden our reach hosting Fresh Local Organic Culinary Workshops to bring together and equip school food service teams and local organic growers with the wisdom and determination to engage in unprecedented farm-to-school procurement and shared vision. This year, our focus is on:

- Expanding the demand for Fresh, Local, Organic, Seasonal, Nutritious (FLOSAN) meals in K-12 schools
- Increasing the supply of organic products ready for schools
- Nurturing the next generation of food systems leaders

These three pillars form the foundation of our efforts to transform the school food marketplace.



First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom with Conscious Kitchen Ambassadors



Food Service Leaders, Organic Farmers, and Farm-to-Table Chefs at the First Fresh Local Organic Culinary Workshop



Nature's Path and Conscious Kitchen teams at the California School Nutrition Association Conference 2023



Central Coast Farmers loading up fresh local organic bounty for WCCUSD

## Expanding FLOSN Demand In K-12 Schools

As we work to expand demand for FLOSN food in schools, our work focuses on the following areas: [menu planning and procurement support](#), [staff training and development](#), and [student engagement and education](#). Conscious Kitchen is a thought leader and strategic advisor helping schools navigate local, organic procurement and securing staff and student buy-in. By shifting meal planning to align with seasonal purchasing, equipping school food service teams with skills and experiences to work with farmers and their crops directly, and engaging both students and staff to learn, taste, and experience the differences, we create a positive feedback loop in each school:

[Better food](#) → [more student participation](#) → [larger budget](#) → [engaged staff](#) → [more local, organic food](#).

### Conscious Kitchen x Alice Waters Institute Culinary Trainings

Through a successful collaboration with the Alice Waters Institute (AWI), Conscious Kitchen brings together school food service teams for culinary workshops designed to connect motivated food service leaders with one another and inspire what's possible when we all pool our superpowers and work together. In the 2023/2024 school year, we hosted [3 workshops with 17 food service teams, who serve 300k students through their programming](#). We have recently applied for a CDFRA grant that will further expand these trainings. Our [proposed plan for the 2024/2025 school year includes co-hosting 12 workshops with 100+ food service teams and farmers across Northern and Southern California and aims to reach more than 500k students](#). Each workshop leads to more inspiration and change. As we continue to host workshops, we increase our impact, solidify new partnerships, and expand the demand for local, organic food in schools while increasing livelihoods for small local organic growers and businesses.

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## From 0% to 25% to 100%, Albany Unified Goes Organic!



Darrell Valor, Sustainability Manager of Albany USD & Jennifer Sherman, Culinary Director of AWI at the the CK x AWI Culinary Workshop

After Darrell Valor of Albany Unified walked away from his first Fresh, Local, Organic Culinary Workshop hosted by CK and AWI in October, 2023, he was brimming with enthusiasm, ready to partner with CK and elevate Albany's commitment to local, organic procurement.

Albany Unified's Executive Chef had not yet felt comfortable shifting a supply chain, a totally new experience. After one meeting with Darrell and Sabina where the CK team provided them with resources like the actual pricing of local organic products, helped identify specific farms and delivery processes to get access to food, and finally seeing the quality of the fresh products being delivered directly, they were both hooked! The goal was to start with one item in their salad bar, then a target of 25%.

A month later, after joining the next culinary workshop together and speaking with other motivated school districts and organic farmers, we got a call from Darrell to tell us that 100% of their produce that week was organic and they continued to transition item by item! Today they remain committed to maintaining this impressive standard.

## Communication

Ensuring food service teams are updated on day-to-day produce availability and seasonality is critical for maintaining demand for local, organic foods. Conscious Kitchen is the throughline for information flowing between the farms and the school districts. **Our team develops 3-month rolling crop calendars, “Harvest of The Month” newsletters, seasonal recipes, and pricing guides.** Additionally, Conscious Kitchen keeps a pulse on the weekly/monthly demand for each participating school, so not only can farmers produce to the market demand, but should they see excess crop yields, Conscious Kitchen works to find a buyer quickly.



## Mimi's Organic: An Opportunity For A Learning Moment



In April, Mimi's Organic Farm harvested its first crop of sugar snap peas. Inspired by West Contra Costa USD's desire for fresh, local produce, Mimi's dedicated a few acres of its organic fields to growing sugar snap peas exclusively for schools. However, nature had its own plans. Increased sunlight left these peas with a few brown spots, causing imperfections and a hesitation for WCCUSD to purchase them.

But where others saw flaws, Conscious Kitchen saw an opportunity. CK purchased the entire crop and brought these sugar snap peas into the hearts and hands of students across five school districts to learn and taste. Through taste-testing sessions, the Conscious Kitchen team introduced students to the joy of savoring natural, organic produce. Students learned that perfection isn't always about appearance and that taste is what truly matters.

## Catching The Attention of Local, State and Federal Leadership

Through work with West Contra Costa Unified, and the network of schools and farms across California's Central Coast, Conscious Kitchen has caught the attention of local, state, and federal officials. Each event Conscious Kitchen hosts sees ongoing participation from the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), USDA, as well as elected officials such as the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Thurmond.

[Thurmond has committed to supporting California to to move all school districts towards 100% organic meals!](#)



Tony Thurmond at launch of the first organic K-12 cereal, developed by Nature's Path

## Conscious Kitchen Ambassador Program

The CK Ambassador program continues to be a critical piece in garnering student engagement. [In the 2023/2024 school year, CK hosted 16 ambassador workshops which included classes on specific fruits and vegetables as well as hands-on culinary and gardening classes.](#) This program is a platform to taste test and collect feedback on new and seasonal items the district is preparing or launching in their dining halls such as seasonal organic strawberries, scratched-cooked pizza, and organic bulk milk. In a big leap forward, [the Conscious Kitchen Ambassador program plans to expand to Albany Unified and Santa Clara Unified in the 2024/2025 school year](#)

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## Increasing Supply of Organic Products

Our work to increase the supply of organic fresh and packaged food for the K-12 school marketplace focuses on three areas:

- [Partnering with Small, Local, BIPOC producers and organic food companies to prioritize schools](#)
- [Connecting producers with schools interested in local, organic procurement](#)
- [Providing expertise and hands-on support, and supporting producers with funding opportunities](#)

Since 2022, CK has successfully brought in 24 local, organic farmers to grow for schools, collaborated with Nature's Path to launch the first USDA Organic, K-12 compliant breakfast cereal, and drove adoption of Straus Family Creamery bulk, organic milk across many northern California participating school districts. Focusing on these three areas enables schools to have access to FLOSN foods and farmers and producers to thrive in the K-12 school marketplace.

## Farmer Convenings & Technical Trainings

[In 2023/2024, Conscious Kitchen hosted 7 farmer technical trainings and convenings](#) to bridge the gap between farmer needs and school needs, setting expectations and equipping farmers with market knowledge and business acumen such as billing/invoicing, packing and palletizing, and food safety.

CK created farmer resources such as the K-12 Sellers Guide to equip farmers with a reference guide with customer expectations regarding quality assurance, delivery, billing, and communication. [CK leverages partnerships with local organizations such as the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association \(ALBA\), Kitchen Table Advisors \(KTA\), California Farmlink, and Regenerative California,](#) to further support our work.

## Communicate School Demand

To secure organic produce supply, CK understands schools' needs and compiles demand forecasts to communicate with farmers. **Conscious Kitchen works hand-in-hand with school food service teams to collect weekly/monthly volume needs and communicate that with farmers to influence planting and harvest calendars.** Our team has influenced the growth of items such as romaine lettuce, sugar snap peas, strawberries and tomatoes, popular items, with our farmer network to guarantee annual volume and lock in fair pricing. This program will continue to expand exponentially in the 2024/2025 school year.



Strawberries growing for WCCUSD



Delivery of Romaine grown for WCCUSD

## Organic Business Partnerships

In May 2024, Nature's Path in partnership with Conscious Kitchen and West Contra Costa USD **launched the nation's first USDA Organic, K-12 National School Breakfast Program-compliant cereal.** This was a two year process and CK played a critical role in both the development and launch. We brought the opportunity to Nature's Path post Covid, facilitated product testing & learning, and captured expected demand for company forecasting.

Additionally, we've continued our longstanding partnership with Straus Family Creamery, working closely with school districts to expand their bulk organic milk offering, replacing conventional milk and reducing milk and packaging waste.



Launch of Nature's Path Monarch Butterfly and Choco Chimps at the Cereal-ously Organic event at WCCUSD in May 2024

## Hands-on Support

In the absence of a farmer-centric, regional food hub to facilitate farm-to-school supported agriculture, Conscious Kitchen has stepped up to fill this gap. Each week, CK is on the ground with farmers, coordinating school purchase orders, aggregating produce from many farms, ensuring logistics and trucking are secured, and invoicing is submitted and paid. This hands-on support is critical to ensure we continue to build momentum and prove farm-to-school viability so that further investment can be made in regional infrastructure to support farm-to-school programming.

## Grant Applications or Funding for Small Organic Farmers

Conscious Kitchen enables our network of farmers, many non-English speaking, to apply for state grants. These funds are allocated to operating expenses such as labor and crop starts, on-farm equipment, and refrigerated trucks. Through our support on grant applications, we have helped 3 farmers secure \$475k and in 2024 we supported 14 farmers to apply for \$4.5M. (we are awaiting the outcomes)



“The support from Conscious Kitchen has given me a greater chance to connect with schools and students as well as tap into resources to increase farm to school programming without which I would have never known or have been able to receive the grants to buy equipment and succeed in my farm operations”

- Javier Zamora, JSM Organics

Conscious Kitchen supported Javier to receive \$150k grant to purchase a refrigerated truck that will support his farm to school deliveries!

## Nurturing the Next Generation Food Systems Leaders

From developing a food hub feasibility study to collecting farm coordinates and mapping the supply of Conscious Kitchens farmer network with GIS, the next generation food systems leaders are developing creative, complementary resources that not only drive Conscious Kitchen's work forward but equip the students with the knowledge, skills, and real-life experiences to excel in their future careers. Each year, CK hires college undergraduate and graduate students interested in diving deeply into the nuances of the school food system as interns and fellows. This year we had a remarkable cohort. Meet the fellows below:

### Fellows

#### Project Snapshots



Hilla Abel pursued her Master's in Public Affairs from UC Berkeley and a Graduate Certificate in Food Systems. With a culinary and healthcare background, Hilla is interested in systems thinking and policy that will strengthen the local food system, so that food better serves people and the planet.

Hilla's capstone project involved interviewing food service directors on their experience implementing fresh, local, organic procurement, with the goal of understanding what variables promote or inhibit its adoption. She created a short "buyer's guide" for food service leaders to buy from small organic farmers. After graduating last month, Hilla is currently consulting for Conscious Kitchen on the West Marin project.

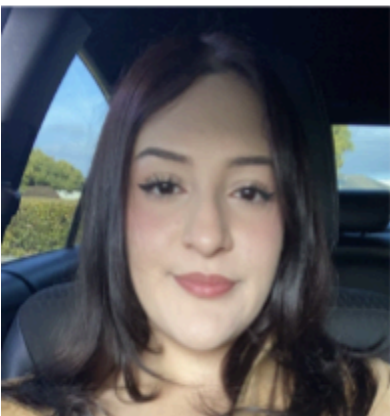
Michael Blampye pursued his Masters in Public Health focusing on Behavioral Health from USF.

Michael created a Wellness Policy template that reflects the mission and values of Conscious Kitchen. He oversaw two interns in compiling data on 10 existing wellness policies, conducting a thorough literature review and analysis of top-rated policies across the country via Alliance for a Healthier Generation. The team drafted a nutrition and policy analysis chart and compiled data to create framework for the policy.



Brianna Melgoza-Ortiz graduated from UC Berkeley, majoring in Statistics and minoring in Food Systems. Growing up in Watsonville, she spent most of childhood surrounded by fields and agriculture.

Brianna worked to develop experimental designs to conceptualize benefits of farm to school at the students and farmer level. One experimental designs was on quantifying improved student attendance and enhanced food literacy, in response to farm to school programs with scratch cooking. The other was on tracking changes in farmers' percentage of acreage dedicated to these programs, indicating a preference for doing business with schools over other customers.



# Impact By The Numbers

Expanding FLOS N Demand	2022-2023 SY	2023-2024 SY
Local, Organic Food Procurement (WCCUSD) <sup>1</sup>	\$175k	\$570k
Organic Food Procurement (All Other Districts) <sup>234</sup>	-	\$85k
Districts Partnering with CK to Expand Organic Meal Programming	2	15
Total School Sites	134	243
Total Students	68k	130k
FLOS N Culinary Workshops	-	3
Total Participating Districts	-	17
Total Students Impacted	-	300k
Farm to School Convenings	1	-
CK Ambassador Workshops At WCCUSD	-	13

Increasing Supply of Organic	2022-2023 SY	2023-2024 SY
Organic Suppliers in the CK Network	14	24
Organic Producers	13	21
Organic Distributors	1	3
Spillover fundraising: Grants won by farmers and organizations working from the WCCUSD initial program	\$420k (grants secured)	\$4.5M (grant applications submitted)
Total Farms	3	12
Organic Farms/Suppliers Enrolled In USDA Unprocessed Fruits and Vegetable Pilot Program <sup>5</sup>	2	6
Farmer Convenings & Technical Trainings	6	7
Co-Development of K-12 Compliant Products (Cereal launch 4/24)	0	1

Nurturing Next Generation Leaders	2022-2023 SY	2023-2024 SY
TG Fellows (Graduate)	3	6
TG Interns (Undergraduate)	4	8
Food Systems Projects Led By Fellows	3	5
Farm to Table Chef Advisors	3	5

<sup>1</sup> Procurement Data from Aug 2023 to May 2024 for SY 2024 from CK supported organic farmers

<sup>2</sup> Procurement data from mid March to May 2024 from CK supported organic farmers

<sup>3</sup> Other School Districts include Albany, Mt. Diablo, Morgan Hill, Monterey Peninsula, San Leandro, and Santa Clara Unified School Districts

<sup>4</sup> Began tracking Albany, Mt. Diablo, Morgan Hill, San Leandro, and Santa Clara Unified School Districts in March 2024

<sup>5</sup> Conscious Kitchen supported farmers apply for the USDA Pilot Program

# CONSCIOUS KITCHEN JOURNEY MAP

