A HAPPIER MEAL
Ceres Project Cooks for the Community

BY NAOMI STARKMAN

In ancient Roman religion, Ceres was a goddess of agriculture, grain crops, fertility and motherly relationships. The Ceres Community Project, founded in Sebastopol in 2007, adopted her name in a nod to the celestial goodness delivered by the goddess.

Ceres’ mission is to build healthy communities by restoring fresh, whole and organic food to its place as the foundation of health. The organization does this by providing free, nutrient-rich meals, delivered with a healthy dose of caring, to individuals impacted by cancer and other acute illnesses. According to the group, theirs is the only meal program in the country committed to providing 100% organic foods to those suffering with illness. This year, it delivered 81,300 meals to 500 clients and engaged 450 teens in 19,000 hours of service learning.

The organization is the real-life manifestation of Hippocrates’ famous prescription: “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.”

With operations in both Marin and Sonoma counties, and a new location sprouting up in Oakland, Ceres’ primary chefs and gardeners are teenagers who, along with growing and cooking organic, nutritious meals, gain life skills in creating community around healthy food.

“If we’re in a relationship with a healthy food system and with ourselves, it generates well-being,” says Cathryn Couch, Ceres’ executive director, noting that cultures live well and longer when they have a deep connection to the earth and to each other. “Ceres’ meal program is that connection,” she says.

This emphasis on connection is deeply woven throughout Ceres’ work. And, according to Couch and many others, Ceres’ unique approach is making an immediate and profound difference in the lives of its clients and supporting long-term prevention of disease by giving its teen volunteers the knowledge, skills and inspiration to make healthy choices for themselves and their families. The teens at Ceres come from more than 60 schools and a number of group homes serving foster youth, developmentally disabled youth and those struggling with mental illness and drug addiction.

“Ceres puts kids in an incredibly rich stew of values and they discover their power to be contributors,” says Couch. “All of the kids learn to eat and cook kale, but they also learn how to make a greater contribution to the world.”

And it’s not just the kids who benefit from Ceres’ mission to connect. Executive Chef Rob Hogencamp says working in the Ceres kitchen is the most important thing he’s done.

“A parent told me that she heard her teens talking, and they said, ‘Do you think that, when Rob decided to become a chef, he knew he was going to change the world?’ That totally changed the way I view my job. Instead of simply teaching teens to cook, I see myself as creating catalysts for positive change and I can’t wait to see what these amazing human beings will accomplish,” he says.

Sebastopol teenager Ailya Bohr knows firsthand the importance of Ceres’ work. A volunteer at Ceres since July 2011, she became a Teen Leader in January 2014, serving as a peer teacher and role model in the program. Her father, who had liver cancer, was a client of Ceres. She says it’s easy to overlook the value of food, but when her dad stopped having the energy to cook and was lacking much-needed nutrition, “opening the refrigerator to find containers of gorgeous healthy food honestly changed our lives.” And though her father sadly passed away in 2013, Bohr has learned the larger story of food.

“Whatsoever we choose to eat, that’s the story we’re perpetuating,” says Bohr. “We can support local, healthy environmentally conscious farmers and businesses or we can support large corporations that harm the environment, put chemicals in our food and pay their workers low wages. We, as consumers, have much more power than we think, and it’s so important that we realize that and become characters in the right stories.”

A HAPPIER MEAL

The link between diet and health is now undeniable and many studies have shown that how cancer patients eat during treatment can both reduce side effects and increase treatment effectiveness. Marin-based Rebecca Katz, MS, a culinary nutritionist and author of The Cancer
Fighting Kitchen, explains it this way: “Your body is a garden and you want to make it hospitable for cancer cells to grow. When you’re going through cancer treatment that puts your body in a pro-inflammatory state, the goal is to let food nourish you and mitigate the side effects.”

Katz, who also sits on Ceres’ National Ambassador Council, is one of those who believe that there’s more at play than just the food, and notes that the human contact and interactions during delivery are critical.

“When we’re sick, there’s something about being nourished by the community. It’s the fact that you’re being delivered this nourishing food, cooked with attention and intention, that is remarkable,” she says. “Ceres goes further, it creates a community, a circle that surrounds you and helps you through it.”

Here’s how it works: Each week, clients receive four entrees with side dishes, soup, salad and a healthy dessert. And what’s more, everyone in the family is eligible to receive meals, so that the entire family can dine together and learn about healthy eating.

In addition to its commitment to organic, much of the food used by Ceres is locally raised or produced. The poultry is free-range and antibiotic-free and the fish is primarily wild-caught. Everything is made from scratch and Ceres follows the American Institute of Cancer Research’s recommendation that two-thirds of one’s diet be plant-based.

Meals include dark leafy greens, cruciferous vegetables, dark orange vegetables, sea vegetables such as arame and kombu and mushrooms such as shiitake, maitake and trumpet royale. According to Ceres, these foods have proven supportive benefits for those who are ill, particularly with cancer. They also cook with a wide variety of organic beans and grains, including quinoa, millet, wild rice and brown rice. They don’t use white or refined flours, refined sugars, processed foods or additives of any kind. Their desserts are made with whole grains and whole sweeteners such as raw honey and organic maple syrup.

Clients receive these meals for free for up to 12 weeks. After this initial period, a second 12 weeks of delivery is available, if needed. Ceres asks for a donation in the range of $10–$50 per week for this second 12 weeks, but no one is turned away for lack of funds. After the 24-week period, clients are eligible to be considered for Ceres’ low-cost meal program ($65 per person per week), which is offered for another 24 weeks. In total, someone who is facing a serious illness could be fed well and connected to their community for almost an entire year at a fraction of the cost of being in the hospital.

Sonoma County client Robert Karcie, who has undergone treatment for a recurrence of cancer, says, “Ceres has given me permission to try and eat in a different way. The other times [I was in treatment] it was just hard. I didn’t even want to eat. The Ceres food is just delicious. When I learned that the food was being made by teens who are volunteering, what struck me was that everybody wins because we’re all learning together. It’s a community. I can’t believe how powerful it is and how many people it touches.”

SOIL-TO-COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Just down the road from Ceres’ Sebastopol headquarters lies a half-acre organic production garden, overseen by garden coordinator Sarah McCamant. There, Ceres’ teen volunteers learn firsthand about where food comes from, gaining skills to grow their own, and the important role that local organic food production plays in community health. The produce is harvested and then used in Ceres’ Sebastopol kitchen.

“The teens get to experience health from the soil to the table to the community,” says McCamant. “We wanted to give them an experience that makes them think about the whole food system and how it affects our health and our planet. They learn about how healthy soil that is teeming with microorganisms means more nutrient-dense foods, which means healthier food for our clients. We also know that giving teens the experience of pulling out a carrot and eating it does more for getting them to eat more vegetables than any lecture.”

CERES GROWS

Since the fall of 2010, Ceres’ Marin County site has served Marin families in need. In 2013, Ceres launched its second Sonoma County site to better serve both clients and teens in the Sonoma Valley area, and is now operating out of the catering kitchen at the Hanna Boys Center, as well as growing food in a small garden on the campus.

Ceres’ next outpost will pop up in Oakland in 2015. The intention is that the meals prepared by the teens in that program will support clients at the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Care Clinic, whose cancer clients are all at or below 200% of poverty-level income; 40% don’t speak English and 78% are nonwhite.

As interest in Ceres’ Healing Meals for Healthy Communities model has spread across the country, the organization has also created training and support programs to aid new communities in successfully replicating its work. Affiliated programs span the country from Positive Community Cures in Eugene, Oregon, to Meals 2 Heal in Brentwood, Tennessee, to Pathways Cooks in Summit, New Jersey.

CIRCLE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Ceres survives, in part, due to its impressive list of donors and thousands of volunteers, from the mentor chefs and kids in the kitchen, to delivery “angels,” to the dozens of Northern California food producers who contribute to Ceres’ widening circle of love.

In 2013, Ceres received nearly $200,000 in in-kind donations from local farmers, ranchers, dairies, other food producers, grocers and others, including Laguna Farm, the nonprofit WHOA Farm, meat producers Marin Sun Farms and Felton Acres (which also supplies pasture-raised organic eggs), tempeh producer Alive and Healing, Gibson Honey, Gourmet Mushrooms, Wild Brine, Redwood Hill Dairy and Oliver’s Markets. Oakland-based Artisana, which produces organic nut and seed butters and coconut oil, became a Ceres partner in 2013 and now donates thousands of dollars of product each year.

Two and a half years ago, Whole Foods Market in Sebastopol started selling salads made from some of Ceres’ recipes and donating a part of each sale back to the nonprofit. Ceres now receives a $1 donation for every pint of the salads purchased. Today, all nine stores in Marin and Sonoma counties sell the Ceres-branded salads, generating more than $30,000 annually for Ceres—enough to provide three months of meals to 58 clients. Whole Foods says it hopes to expand the program in Northern California. The local Whole Foods also support Ceres by donating food and providing meal bags. They also sell the Ceres cookbook and are the main sponsor of its annual fundraiser.
Ceres is also supported by a number of well-known Sonoma County chefs, including Barbara Hom of Night Owl Catering, Duskie Estes and John Stewart of zazu, Daniel Kedan and Marianna Gardenhire of Backyard Restaurant, Justin Wängler from Kendall Jackson Wine Estates and Karen and Lucas’ Martin of K&L Bistro, all donating their time to help train the student chefs. And, in the spirit of offering teens real life skills, some of Ceres’ current and former teen chefs now work at zazu, the Railroad Square Hyatt and Backyard Restaurant.

“We got involved with Ceres not only because of the great work that they do for individuals, but also for how they bring the entire community together through helping people,” says Chef Daniel Kedan of Backyard Restaurant in Forestville. “We are fortunate enough to have two teens working with us, at the restaurant, from Ceres. The dedication, passion and work ethic that these young people possess is inspiring. They are really setting the standard for future generations.”

REAL RESULTS
Ceres just undertook an evaluation of its work as part of a California Specialty Crop Block Grant to measure changes in consumption of specialty crops (fruits and vegetables) as a result of program participation by both clients and teen volunteers. They discovered that the youth increased their consumption by 16% and their clients increased consumption by 23%. That is remarkable given the fairly short-term investment of time and resources, and the potential to reap huge short-term (for clients) and long-term (for both clients and teens) health benefits that research shows are related to increased rates of fruit and vegetable consumption and decreased consumption of unhealthy fast and processed foods.

Add to these tangible results what Rebecca Katz calls “sustainable nourishment,” because, she explains, “Ceres empowers people to incorporate this kind of eating over the long run, during a time when they have little control over their life,” and that is a real return on investment.

CeresProject.org

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