

Tierra Miguel gives kids a taste of farm life

By Deborah M. Schneider
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PAUMA VALLEY – The road to Tierra Miguel farm winds from the I-15 up a steep and stony valley, past historic Gomez Creek and Warner Ranch, past the mega-story Pala casino, and into the Pauma Valley at the foot of Mount Palomar.

Bison and horses lounge by white-board fences. Oranges glow like Chinese lanterns among the leaves. For most of Tierra Miguel's student visitors, this countryside is a world away from their neighborhoods and schools.

The 86 acres of Tierra Miguel Farm stretch out on all sides in a haze of a hundred shades of green. Past a nascent orchard of peaches and apricots, not far from the farm trailer, second- and third-graders from the Waldorf School of San Diego are lined up on either side of a heaped row of earth, planting spindly plants.

They have dirt up to their elbows, and their faces are streaked with sweat and sunscreen. Several mothers hover, applying more sunscreen.

"These are sunchokes," farm teacher Robert Farmer tells the children working beside him. "These are a special kind of plant that nobody else has. It has a kind of carbohydrate that diabetics can use. They're very special."

The kids nod, showing varying degrees of interest. Some are fooling around and talking instead of working.

Farmer lines the class up to help stretch a long line of black drip irrigation tape. He patiently coaches them through the steps of straightening, turning and sealing off the drip line, then hands out an array of fierce-looking rakes, hoes and shovels.

The kids set to work grooming the sides of the rows. The Waldorf School has its own garden, so most have an inkling of what they're doing, though Tierra Miguel shows it to them on a much larger scale.

Farmer supervises the grooming, coaching a child on the use of a cultivator while working himself with quick, efficient motions. "I like them to get their hands on everything and really feel what they're doing," he explains.

Tierra Miguel regularly hosts outings like this, where students can spend a day learning about composting, planting and harvesting. The closure of nearby Bell Gardens farm has greatly increased the number of school groups scheduling visits to Tierra Miguel.

The certified organic teaching farm also offers internships to postgraduate agriculture students from around the world.

The farm supports itself through grants, donations and Community Supported Agriculture, a kind of seasonal produce time share in which members pay a fee and receive a weekly box of fresh-from-the-farm

fruits and vegetables.

Farmer (his real name) is educational program director. His vision is to create an integrated learning cycle linking farm visits, school garden development and learning, and hands-on cooking techniques.

He's upbeat about how farms and schools can work together: "This program can be very enriching and support the classroom in a positive way, while teaching these kids some real-life basics in a hands-on way."

He turns again to the very hands-on students, who are almost finished planting.

Soon the sunchokes are tucked into surprisingly neat, even rows, and the drip tape is delivering water. Farmer calls the group to the end of the row for a lesson in farm math.

"We planted about 100 sunchokes today," he says. "Each of these plants is grown from one tuber, and every one of these plants you put in the ground today will make about 10 new tubers. So when we harvest, how many new plants can we make?"

Hands shoot up. "A thousand plants," says one student.

"That's a lot!" someone chimes in.

Farmer continues. "And when we plant the 1,000 new tubers, and they each make 10 tubers, how many plants will we be able to grow?"

"A hundred thousand!" a boy calls out, and his friends roll their eyes. "Ten thousand," says a blond child in a straw hat, smugly.

Everyone is suitably impressed by their morning's work. Before they head over to pick strawberries, Farmer tells them, "Let's put our rakes back in the pile over here. And remember, always put the points down."

Even one generation ago, most of these children would have known to set a rake with points down. Today, things are different.

"We had a school out last week, and most of those kids had never been on a farm before," Farmer says, as he leads the way to the strawberry fields. "They had grown one huge carrot in their school garden, as long as my forearm, and they all had their pictures taken with it."

The strawberry field is full of bees working the tiny white flowers. The students fan out, each with a stack of clear plastic clamshells to fill. The scene is like a relaxed, quiet Easter egg hunt.

"Ms. Austin!" calls a boy urgently. Heide Austin, the Waldorf teacher, hurries over.

"Look, here's a whole family of strawberries, big ones and little ones. And this one's the grandfather. He's all shriveled up."

But now the students have discovered a trap with a dead ground squirrel, and the strawberries are forgotten. The carcass dangles at the end of the chain as the bravest of the boys swings it around.

"Drop it," commands Austin. Exploration of nature only goes so far, even at Tierra Miguel.

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