



## Tour connects small farmers with wholesale buyers

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By Ching Lee



Bay Area farmers toured the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market, where they stopped at S&L Wholesale Produce. Thomas Nelson, second from left, of the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, which organized the tour, talks with Michael Janis, director of the market.

Photo/Ching Lee



Bay Area farmers toured the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market, Ric Tombari, center, owner of Cooks Co. Produce, talks to growers about emerging trends in the produce business.

Photo/Ching Lee



Natalie Hunter of Hillview Organics, Jose Rodriguez of Team Sierra and UC Cooperative Extension advisor Julia Van Soelen Kim look at a box of red-veined sorrel.

Photo/Ching Lee



Napa County farmer Carolyn Kritikos, second from left, asks Tony Leutza, far right, general manager of Washington Vegetable Co., about his requirements as a buyer.

Photo/Ching Lee

For small, beginning and ethnic farmers, finding an outlet for their crops beyond taking a booth at the farmers market or setting up a farm stand can be daunting, particularly if there is a language barrier.

To help them make connections and explore other marketing opportunities, the University of California has been holding group bus tours to introduce growers to wholesale produce buyers and distributors in the San Francisco Bay Area. Meeting with buyers, they learn how wholesale markets work and what buyers need from them.

"I think the thing that's most helpful is the direct conversation with buyers. It sort of demystifies what it takes to go and access new markets," said Thomas Nelson, sustainable supply chain project analyst for the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, which organizes the tours. A tour last week was aimed at Bay Area farmers, whereas the week before, it was mostly Hmong farmers from the Fresno area.

Nelson said while the tours are focused on helping farmers, he noted buyers also welcome the visits, as they are introduced to new growers who could help them build their supply chain. Buyers inform the farmers about what to expect, the kind of crops they want and at what consistency, and the logistics of delivery and payment. They could also offer information on where market demand is heading and crops growers may think about incorporating into their rotations, he added.

During one of the stops at Cooks Co. Produce, owner Ric Tombari told growers about emerging trends such as baby kale, which he said is replacing baby spinach, and baby root vegetables, including white, purple and orange baby carrots. He also noted hard-to-find specialty items such as crosnes, which are selling for \$12 to \$15 a pound, and certain varieties of chicories such as tardivo, which he said he has difficulty acquiring during certain times of year.

He advised small farmers to focus more on specialized products that grow well in their region rather than growing "commodity" crops such as lettuce, spinach and other cruciferous vegetables that compete in the world market, unless they are growing organically. They should also know about packing standards, so that their products are consistent with how buyers are used to receiving them, he said.

Napa County farmer Carolyn Kritikos said she has visited the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market as a customer, but she didn't have the benefit of hearing vendors' perspective and about their purchasing criteria.

She said although she's more interested in marketing her produce and edible flowers directly to consumers, she wanted to learn about the wholesale market for times when she has a surplus.

Most small growers already know about their local outlets, she said, but those who want to expand may not know that there is a large number of wholesale buyers who want to support small, local farmers.

"There's this whole other horizon that most small farmers probably didn't think they would be able to fit into," Kritikos said. "For small-scale farmers, you do have hope. You're not going to be completely overshadowed. There's enough demand for your produce where if you wanted to (expand), you could."

For Heidi Herrmann, who runs a 1 1/2-acre farm in Sonoma County growing vegetables, cut flowers and medicinal herbs, most of the stops on the tour are not realistic market outlets for her, she said, "because the volume that they need, the consistency, the time that they want it and how to get it there just don't add up."

Herrmann currently sells her products to local chefs and to FEED Sonoma, a small produce distributor, and said she went on the tour because she was interested in increasing her sales and expanding her market for the seaweed she also collects. She also teaches sustainable agriculture at Santa Rosa Junior College and she said the tour was not only educational for her as a small-scale farmer, but she came away with useful information for her students who are looking to get into agriculture.

"Size dictates who your buyers are," she said. "If you ramp up a little bit, this whole other reality opens up. That wasn't clear to me before. I didn't realize that there was such a divide. I thought I could start my cute little farm, maybe have one worker."

In order to sell to wholesale distributors such as those on the tour, she said she would need to farm more land, maybe 10 acres or more, "and that's not what a lot of people start at." She would also need staffing, refrigerated trucks and a forklift. It would mean doing payroll and making a two-hour drive into the city to make deliveries at 4 a.m., all of which, she said, is "not in my business plan."

Solano County farmer Shankar Venkataraman, who currently sells his produce to restaurants, said he made

some good contacts on the tour and plans to get in touch with all the buyers so he could expand his customer base.

"It was very helpful because I learned more about the industry," he said. "I learned about different types of customers that are out there."

Jose Rodriguez, whose company Team Sierra in San Jose provides technical support and construction expertise to urban farms and community gardens, attended the tour to learn how to start distribution hubs such as the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market, but on a smaller and more local scale.

He said now that the urban farms and community gardens he helped build are reaping decent harvests, they're looking for markets. But after visiting with the buyers on the tour, Rodriguez said they do not appear to be the best avenue for his farms because they don't produce enough volume and won't be able to meet some of the packing standards.

But he said he plans to follow up with those he met on the tour "to pick their brains" as he continues his long-term research on how to bring a local food hub to his community.

Stops on the tour last week included the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market, home to more than 30 produce distribution businesses; The Fruit Guys in south San Francisco, which delivers fresh fruit to businesses and schools; Cal Dining at UC Berkeley, which provides food service for the campus; and Three Stone Hearth in Berkeley, which sells prepared meals and products.

The university has been hosting the tours since 2013 for farmers from different regions of the state. Nelson said there will be more tours in the fall in Southern California.

(Ching Lee is an assistant editor of Ag Alert. She may be contacted at [clee@cfbf.com](mailto:clee@cfbf.com).)

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