



A SAN DIEGO FARM TO BUYER STORY

Top Notch Catering Committed to Sourcing Local Produce for Local Communities



Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Top Notch, a nutrition catering company operating in Chula Vista, has provided scratch meals to nonprofits, private schools, charter schools, preschools, Feeding San Diego and the Salvation Army. Lynley Connor, Chief Operating Officer of Top Notch, leads the company in providing scratch meals for those in need, all while supporting local farms. Despite ongoing challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Lynley and her team continue to prioritize sourcing local. Lynley explains, "If we're proclaiming that we are from scratch, then I want the best ingredients, and you can only get that from local farmers."

Recent months have shown unprecedented demand and Top Notch's meal numbers have tripled, resulting in the most successful quarter in the history of the company. In response to the growing need, Lynley has completely shifted the company's business model, from changing delivery routes and increasing pre-packaged meals to purchasing more locally sourced ingredients. Top Notch began with the idea of supporting the local economy and is dedicated to continuing on this path, "My business partner, Owner/Founder Claye Cantwell and myself didn't want to expand out of San Diego," Lynley explains, "It's worth the little extra work to source locally because you're building that economy within the county."



Lynley Connor, Chief Operating Officer



Lynley met two of her local food suppliers during "The Good Food Showcase," a local food tradeshow event hosted by Community Health Improvement Partners' Farm to Institution Center. The event supports opportunities for local farmers to meet face-to-face with businesses interested in incorporating local products into their meal programs. Through the event, Lynley was introduced to Jose Alcaraz with Pixca Farm and Nick Stridsberg with San Gabriel Ranch.



Jose Alcaraz and Cris Juarez



Jose Alcaraz, owner of Pixca Farm, grows a variety of seasonal vegetables and flowers on a half-acre of land in the South Bay region. Jose embraces the farm's mission of providing high quality food for low-income communities. While the farm has only been producing for two years, it has provided Jose with much more than vegetables. Jose elaborates, "I was going through a quarter-life crisis. I didn't know where to take my life. The farm has been helping me grow from all angles. I love farming, it's a blessing."

During the pandemic, Jose has also had the pleasure of working with one his neighboring plot owners, Erik Rodriguez. Mr. Rodriguez started out supporting the farm through its CSA program, and soon found himself working alongside Jose after being furloughed from his job of 15 years. Erik mentions, "For me, [the pandemic] has been one of the biggest things that has helped push me to leave my previous job and become a farmer."

Nick Stridsberg, owner of San Gabriel Ranch, grew up helping his father run the farm, working side-by-side with other employees, and soon enough irrigating, picking, pruning and fertilizing 40 acres of the land by himself. While farming was always a part of Nick's upbringing, he wasn't always certain farming was where he wanted to make a living. "I really had no intention of going into farming originally," Nick explains, "but it was always in the back of my mind. Coming back to work on the farm from working other jobs before this, it felt more rewarding."



Nick Stridsberg



San Gabriel Ranch
Organic Citrus, Avocado
and Tropical Fruit

Lynley incorporates cucumbers from Pixca Farm, along with oranges and mandarins from San Gabriel Ranch in all of her meal programs. From Monday through Thursday, Lynley and her team can make between 24,000 and 26,000 meals for those in need. Along with the economic benefits of sourcing local, Lynley sees these ingredients as superior for their meal recipients. “It’s a better product for the kids, and it’s healthier overall,” Lynley explains.



Since incorporating the local produce provided by Pixca and San Gabriel Ranch, Lynley has received positive feedback from community members. “I’ve had preschools tell me that they taste fresher ingredients when they’ve had meals where we’ve incorporated Jose’s cucumbers. One of the local chefs says that the cucumbers taste 100% better than what he was using before, and that his cooking yields are even higher due to the lower water content.” Lynley shares every piece of positive feedback she receives with her staff to highlight the impact of their work.



Jose Alcaraz (left) and Erik Rodriguez (right)

The incorporation of local ingredients has also been a learning opportunity for the Top Notch team in sourcing locally. Lynley shares one of her most memorable stories, “One time, our staff freaked out when they found a snail in one of Nick’s order boxes. I told them that that’s a great sign, because if the snail is eating it, I’m definitely going to eat it.” Lynley encourages her team to be adaptable to working with local produce given all of the benefits of eating locally sourced food.



Knowing that the fruits of their labor are being spread throughout the county has provided extra motivation on the farms for Jose and Nick. When asked about the benefit of selling to Top Notch, Jose and Nick both mention the huge growth opportunities for their business. Jose states, “In my eyes, it’s helping us grow and pushing us forward. Having our produce in the school system is both helping us evolve and is very motivational.” Nick further elaborates, “It’s a huge blessing, our old business was selling to the packing houses, and we had no idea where it was going to. Now when I dropped off an order at Epiphany Charter, I am able to see the faces of people who are excited to pick up the food. It’s amazing.”



With the current challenges faced by businesses, schools, farmers, families, and communities, Lynley, Jose, and Nick continue to support one another through feeding those in need. Lynley shares, “When I visit serving sites and see these single mothers, teary eyed thanking me, it just changes your entire perspective. At the end of the day, it could be the only hot meal the families are getting, and that’s what always drives me to keep going.” For Jose, he hopes that his personal connections with his community have a lasting impact, “I feel that [the pandemic] has brought people back to nature, and to their local resources. Hopefully [for] the people I meet along the way, I spark something in them to always follow your dreams and find the platforms to get you where you want to go.”



From left to right: Rio the French Bulldog, Erik Rodriguez, Lynley Connor, Nick Stridsberg, and Jose Alcaraz

What’s next for the Top Notch team? Lynley hopes to expand their meal production capacity to an additional 10,000-15,000 meals per day by opening a new production kitchen to serve more preschools and potentially senior centers. Lynley remains dedicated to their mission of serving San Diego County, “It hasn’t been easy to be the only from scratch program still in San Diego, but the only reason I stuck with it was because our team believes in it. The overall goal is to continue to support local businesses and grow the San Diego economy from there.”

This story was brought to you by The Farm to Institution Center and
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