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By The Peninsula Foodist

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About this blog: Get the latest food news with the biweekly Peninsula Foodist newsletter. We are constantly on the lookout for new and undiscovered meals, from Michelin-starred restaurants to tac... (More)

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Pescadero's farmworkers can't afford the food they're growing for the Peninsula

Uploaded: Aug 15, 2022

By Anthony Shu

Wildfires and the pandemic have tested the Coastside's isolated communities, but many of its farmers aren't going anywhere.



Volunteer Gabriel Echeverria hands a box of groceries over a fence to farmworkers on the adjacent property during a food distribution held by Society of St. Vincent de Paul of San Mateo County in Pescadero at St. Anthony's Church. (Photo by Adam Pardee)

On a recent Saturday, a line of neatly polished classic cars on the side of Pescadero's Stage Road reflected flares into curious tourists' cameras. Conversing in the shade of a white church steeple, a group of gray-haired hobbyists had gathered for a serene weekend drive. The leading car rested on a bridge marking the end of Pescadero's miniscule downtown, and visitors stopped for photographs as they ventured to

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Society of St. Vincent de Paul of San Mateo (SVdP) rather than a leisurely excursion.



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The fingers patiently drumming on these steering wheels were the same ones that freed artichokes and berries from their stems for the region's restaurants and farm stands, yet they were entirely invisible to the visitors shopping around the corner.



Cars line up on North Street during a drive-thru food distribution. (Photo by Adam Pardee)

A period of instability for the Coastside's farms

For many Coastside farmworkers, days end in tightly packed bunk beds where roommates plan trips to the closest supermarket, a Safeway 20 miles away (Arcangeli mainly serves sandwiches to tourists). These individuals cultivate the houseplants that have kept Peninsula residents company during the pandemic and pick strawberries destined for the dessert plates that commemorate anniversaries, yet they live in rural, isolated communities. Neighbors become babysitters and confidants, children serve as tax preparers and translators, and the few local community organizations supply diapers, jackets and groceries. At the Pescadero Food Pantry, approximately 100 families receive food twice a month. The town has a population under 500.

"They grow the food, the vegetables, the fruit that we eat every day. And sometimes they don't even have enough resources for themselves," says Tony Serrano, SVdP logistics manager and a child of farmworkers.

Pescadero residents help staff the Coastside's seasonal pumpkin patches and Christmas tree farms, and they also harvest truckloads of Brussels sprouts and fill greenhouses with spiky succulents for larger agricultural producers. But the region's diverse farms have faced instability over the last few years. [Peninsula Open Space Trust](#) estimates that 46% of San Mateo County's farms have disappeared since 1990, and the organization works to protect farmland from becoming dormant backdrops to private estates.

In 2019, [Bay City Nursery](#), which operated in both Half Moon Bay and Pescadero, closed after 110 years and laid off nearly 200 employees. Many of them were living paycheck-to-paycheck. When the pandemic began in 2020, nurseries accustomed to shipping off flowers to wedding venues and farms that partnered with upscale restaurants were forced to reshape their business models.

In August 2020, the CZU Fire scorched South Coast farmland and destroyed structures, including Pie Ranch's [157-year-old farmhouse](#), and many farmworkers had to work through hazardous conditions.

A community gathers at St. Anthony's Church

Back in the overgrown lot across from Pescadero's St. Anthony's Church, Serrano slid open the door of a shipping container that housed crossing wires and buzzing refrigerators. He started setting up folding tables on the damp grass and forming an assembly line for the volunteers packing fresh produce into plastic bags until they nearly tore apart. Somewhat out of place was a white canopy tent shading bags of tortillas and tanks of propane. A party had accidentally been scheduled on the same day as the grocery distribution, so each trip from the shipping container to the unpaved sidewalk meant circumventing tables

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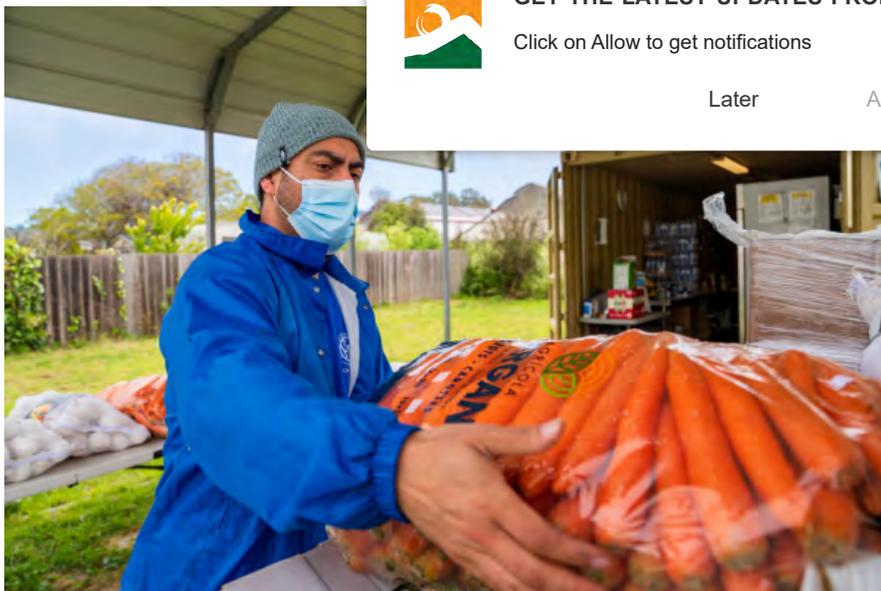
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and beverage coolers stocked with ice.



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Pescadero Food Pantry logistics manager Tony Serrano unloads carrots in preparation for the food distribution being held at St. Anthony's Church in Pescadero. (Photo by Adam Pardee)

One of the first volunteers to arrive was 74-year-old Gabriel Echeverria, who leaned his bicycle against a tree. His hands were wrinkled, yet each finger was broad and muscular from decades of cutting flower stems with shears as a farmworker. An oversized button-down allowed him to move freely and protected him from the sun, and a multicolored logo on his vest read "PUENTE." Puente de la Costa Sur is one of the few nonprofits serving San Mateo County's South Coast, and Echeverria was the organization's first board member. He connected the organization, founded in 1998 by a pastor and new arrival to Pescadero named Wendy Taylor, and local farmworkers. During the nonprofit's early days, Echeverria transported boxes of food and clothing to his peers hidden on winding roads without cars (Puente isn't officially associated with this Pescadero food pantry.)

Echeverria's assistance was crucial in the unincorporated and sparsely populated town. Pescadero relies on San Mateo County for essential services that support both its touristy, historical downtown and a high school that serves a total of 96 students. It sits about 30 miles away from the Midpeninsula cities of Menlo Park and Redwood City, and a trip between the two regions requires navigating the winding roads of Highway 84 or 92.

Echeverria also earned an elementary school education through Puente, and the organization helped him become a vocal advocate for farmworkers.

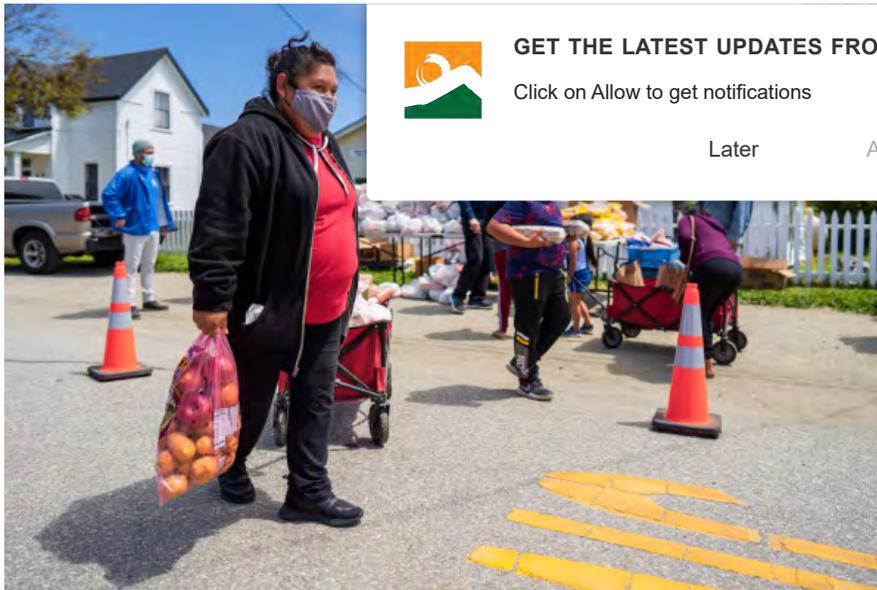
"I want you guys to know that people come here to work," he said. (Echeverria and farmworkers interviewed for this story spoke in Spanish through a translator.)

After arriving on the Coastside in 1989, Echeverria assembled flower bouquets on a farm that bordered St. Anthony's back fence before it closed down. His hours have become inconsistent, and he's piecing together shifts to cover his rent. The pandemic, along with some abnormal weather conditions, made it harder for Echeverria to find steady employment. "Things haven't been back to normal," he said. Echeverria pays \$375 for a bunk in a room that houses six people.

Facing fires and COVID-19

"This particular community has been through a lot, not only with COVID," Serrano said. The food distribution has operated for around 10 years in partnership with [Second Harvest of Silicon Valley](#), but the last couple of years transformed the site. Traffic cones started directing winding lines of cars, and familiar faces disappeared from the line when they were shuttled to motels in Oakland because the CZU Fire threatened their homes. When respirators were reserved for medical staff and nearly impossible to locate, they were handed out alongside boxes of groceries. Farmworkers needed protection from pesticides and ashy air.

Despite hazardous conditions, many agricultural laborers toiled away during the fire. "It was very hard for us to come and say, 'Hey, you have to leave?' What were they going to do? They weren't going to have income," Serrano said. The [Economic Policy Institute](#) estimated that California's agricultural laborers earned an average hourly salary of \$14.62 in 2020.



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Leydi Cervantez and her son Alonzo walk to their car with the food they have picked up from the food distribution. (Photo by Adam Pardee)

With the line of vehicles starting their engines and the folding tables on the sidewalk stacked high with bags of onions, cauliflower and carrots, a mother and her 10-year-old son approached the volunteers. Waiting patiently with a wagon in tow, Leydi Cervantez had been coming to the food distribution since it started, before her son Alonzo was even born. She and her husband are both farmworkers, and she's been employed at the same company for 28 years. Her days followed a mechanical rhythm of alarms buzzing at 4 a.m. and pulling flowers, strawberries and pumpkins from the ground as the sun rose overhead, each crop marking a change in the seasons.

This schedule was disrupted by the pandemic, when she and her husband were laid off. They've recovered some of their hours, but the company Cervantez works at announced that it's closing permanently.

Farmworkers are accustomed to working over 40 hours a week in order to pay for rent and child care, and the gradual rollout of [Assembly Bill 1066](#) means that many of them started to earn overtime pay in recent years. So when Cervantez and her husband found their incomes reduced, they needed to take on additional jobs in landscaping and yard work. With Alonzo and two other children at home, Cervantez uses the food from the distribution to cook for her family. In her kitchen, the onions sweat alongside boiled pasta and the fruits are served as snacks.

Even once her employer shuts down operations, Cervantez still wants to stay in Pescadero. "It's very peaceful. The wind, being able to breathe nice air, clean air," she said, laughing as a gust grabbed her hair.

After Cervantez and her son walked away, a truck appeared to take on endless amounts of boxes in its bed. Shouts of numbers rang out and announced the arrival of Jesus Zaragoza, who picks up food at the bi-monthly distribution both for himself and his 10 roommates who are busy at work. He's grateful for the resources provided at the food pantry but said that his finances don't add up, especially after he missed months of work suffering from COVID.

"\$15 an hour, that's nothing. We don't envision a lot of money but we need to be able to afford living," he said.

New partnerships in Pescadero

San Mateo County Agricultural Commissioner Koren Widdel says that partnerships between community organizations, government officials and agricultural laborers were strengthened over the past few years. Masks and vaccines traveled from government offices to vegetable fields through grocery distributions and mobile clinics, and firefighters battled blazes while nonprofits set up [evacuation centers](#) behind the fire lines. The city of Half Moon Bay will partner with nonprofits Mercy Housing and Ayudando Latinos a Soñar (ALAS) to build 40 affordable units and a resource center on a vacant property that the city has [owned for five years](#). San Mateo County is now accepting applications for its new [Farmworker Advisory Commission](#), which will assemble farmworkers and community organizations in a model it claims is the first of its kind in the state.

Widdel says that local farms have steadied themselves, but drought conditions and issues around labor threaten their success. Climate change has forced some growers to fallow land and pushed [others to relocate](#). Farmworkers struggle to find steady, well-paying employment, and business owners have found it difficult to avoid overtime wages and hire seasonal staff [in an industry that fluctuates as the seasons change](#).

According to Widdel, the situation on the coast is something we've done throughout our civilization. (farmwork) is a very honorable job," she said.

A disruption at the SVdP site

When Zaragoza's truck rumbled away from the site, it left a gap from the line of waiting families to the back of the line.



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Where there previously had been only interspersing patches of dirt and wild grasses, a crowd had gathered. A group of farmworkers, the women with their hair tied up in buns and the men with hats shielding their faces, stepped up one at a time as cardboard boxes filled with carrots and celery slid over the fence. A small stretch of the partition's sharp edges had been covered in fabric so that bright yellow bags of frozen chicken, jugs of milk and cartons of eggs could be easily passed up and over the barrier.

In the middle of a 15-minute break from packing mushrooms, the farmworkers hurriedly organized plastic bags and cardboard boxes in the dirt that the fruits and vegetables inside may have once sprouted from.

One of these workers was Ricardo Moreno, who like many other Pescadero residents travels nearly 20 miles to Half Moon Bay's Safeway to purchase groceries. While the exchange at St. Anthony's was slightly hectic, it didn't require gallons of gasoline. With the help of food from the distribution, Moreno tries to shop for groceries only once or twice a month and always goes with a friend who helps cover the transportation costs. "That's the only place we can go," he said. (Puente's community development director Corina Rodriguez purchases her daughter's milk at the same supermarket, and the organization started its own food distribution after she saw that the refrigerators were almost empty near the beginning of the pandemic.)

Moreno arrived from Mexico 10 months ago, and while farmwork is physically demanding, he finds it relaxing compared to the shoe factories he was previously employed at. Inside these workshops, electronic systems and managers carefully tracked each laborer's productivity and harassed anyone who fell behind. When he first came to California, Moreno lived in a house shared with other men, separated from his wife and daughter. Recently, he started renting a mobile home in Pescadero where the three of them now live together, and his child bombards him with her rapidly developing English vocabulary.

"It is difficult for people like me, Mexicans coming to this country. But I'm fortunate that I was able to bring my family this quickly ... We can accomplish our dreams and move forward. I know many people think we might not be able to, but I'm doing it," he said.

Similarly, his co-worker Carmela Cruz has no plans on leaving the Coastside community that's provided her with diapers, food and neighborly support.

"I really appreciate the help that they give us ... For us farmworkers, the money isn't enough, but with the help we get, it is bearable," Cruz says. Combined with her husband, who works in maintenance at the same farm next to St. Anthony's, they earn around \$4,400 a month in gross income.



Farmworkers adjacent to St. Anthony's Church are handed food from the food distribution by volunteers in Pescadero at St. Anthony's Church. (Photo by Adam Pardee)

Just a few minutes after they materialized at the fence line, the ephemeral throng of gloved hands carried their grocery boxes to a relatively shaded spot to await the end of the workday. The farm's greenhouses rose above the surrounding shrubbery, but no evidence of the food distribution remained. The vehicles

passing in front of the church gave way to the tent.

Instead of yells of numbers and directions, the air in half resonated through the clearing skies. San Mateo, gathered for a group photograph

Near the road, Echeverria bent over, picking up strands of onion roots and stuffing empty produce bags into stacks of garbage.

"It makes me feel at ease, helping out. I'm not sure if you get it. I feel at ease when I'm helping," he said.



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Posted by **PaulK**, a resident of Shoreline West, on Aug 16, 2022 at 3:45 pm
PaulK is a registered user.

Great article. Thanks.

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Posted by **Heath Carlton**, a resident of another community, on Aug 17, 2022 at 11:42 am
Heath Carlton is a registered user.

Why don't the growers provide their field workers with some of the surplus produce?

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Posted by **Consider Your Options.**, a resident of Another Palo Alto neighborhood, on Aug 17, 2022 at 12:29 pm
Consider Your Options. is a registered user.

It has always been hard to be poor, but these times are unusually bad for these people who work so hard to produce the food we all need. How can we help?

My family donates to Second Harvest, but can you provide a link to a local charity that directly helps these folks?

Thanks very much.

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Posted by **Anna Dyer**, a resident of another community, on Aug 17, 2022 at 3:39 pm
Anna Dyer is a registered user.

Thank you, Anthony for an important story about about people and our larger community.

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Posted by **JB**, a resident of Evergreen Park, on Aug 17, 2022 at 7:38 pm
JB is a registered user.

These farmworkers are so important, and they're rarely seen or written about. Thank you for telling us their story. Maybe I can contact Second Harvest to see if donations can go directly to these people. I know we're in a drought and the economy is still fragile, but I wonder why these people aren't paid more per hour. The grocery prices in my area are pretty high, including produce.

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Posted by **The Peninsula Foodist**, a Mountain View Voice on Aug 18, 2022 at 4:25 pm
The Peninsula Foodist is a registered user.

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620 North Street
Pescadero, CA 94060
Tel. (650) 879-1691
Fax (650) 456-2844
Hours: Mon-Fri 9-6 pm

St. Vincent de Paul, San Mateo:
Mali a check made out to St. Vincent de Paul, Pescadero Food Pantry, 50 North B Street, San Mateo, CA 94401

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designate the funds go to Peninsula Family Resource Center and write "Pescadero Food Pantry" in the Honor/Memory box

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Posted by **stephen levy**, a resident of University South, on Aug 21, 2022 at 8:25 am
stephen levy is a registered user.

We support Puente. It is a great program for a great cause. These farmworkers deserve our support.

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