

Fresh food from farm to table

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Getting fresh produce just got easier for mountain residents. Mountain Farms Delivery, a new delivery service, is providing weekly boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables to the mountain communities.

In late March, as people rushed to supermarkets to stock up on provisions, bracing for the uncertain shelter-in-place orders, supermarkets began experiencing artificial shortages.

Crestline residents Bridget and Jake Cruzen said they wanted to help provide a fresh source of food to seniors who would otherwise be forced to risk their health going to get groceries. But they quickly realized the demand reached beyond the elderly.

"In the first week, we got 65 orders," Jake said, recalling the unexpected demand.

Masked and gloved, the couple said they purchased produce from three farms and transported it up the mountain. On the eve of their first delivery, at around 5 p.m., they unpacked their car and hauled the produce up three flights of stairs to a room in their friend's home where they began assembling boxes. Bridget recalled the room as being cramped, making organizing

efforts difficult.

After sorting the food and verifying that each box held the same produce, they bagged the boxes, shielding the produce from the cool temperatures and fog. It was midnight by the time they finished.

The next day, Bridget said, the fog still hadn't lifted as they began the deliveries.

Since their opening day, the workflow has gotten much easier, she said.

Now, they purchase everything from Finca Bonita Farm, a farm specializing in produce grown off-the-tree, such as berries, broccoli, potatoes, lettuce and swiss chard.

"I get on the phone with the farm and I ask them if there's anything they have too much of and what's the best," Bridget said.

Vegetables that are in season pepper the box. Sometimes these include less-known foods like eight-ball squash.

Jake said he recalled finding a Japanese radish early on and, realizing that in order to give customers the freshest food — which wasn't always the most popular or commonly used — they'd have to build customer trust.

"For us to run a business with integrity, it was important that we could make that choice [to customize] each week based on what the farmers say is freshest," he said.



Strawberries from the box delivered on June 5.
(Photo: Zev Blumenfeld)



Most boxes include a specialty item like sugar snap peas, along with fruit and other in-season vegetables. (Photo: Zev Blumenfeld)

Boxes typically include one specialty item like an artichoke or sugar snap peas. Bridget said the peas could be used in a stir-fry but were tasty enough to eat raw.

"They are like dessert," Bridget said. "I couldn't believe how good they were."

The couple said trying different produce keeps their meals exciting. Each week, they post recipes, which include the box's vegetables, on Instagram. Finca Bonita Farm gives them recipe ideas on occasion.

Jake emphasized their attention to quality.

"The longer we did this, the more concerned we became about the quality. We wanted to keep it exciting for people," Jake said.

Limited access to nutritious food is something Jake said he experienced as a child.

"I grew up in essentially a crack house," he said. "We had government food and, when we didn't have government food, we had knockoffs of terrible food. Like Circus Fun — I remember [it] as being a big part of my life. No one knows what Circus Fun is because it was like the oldies version

of some other marshmallow cereal."

In 2013, Jake said he became more conscious about nutrition when he started nannying for a family that ate a plant-based diet.

"I realized that it gave me a more youthful look," Jake said. "I have a ton of energy for someone my age and it's because I eat well."

That experiential learning is something he hopes to provide people leery about consuming more vegetables.

"I don't know what would have been different back then if we had good food," Jake said about his childhood. "But I can tell you, I feel better and make better choices when I eat better."

One-time orders and discounted subscription orders are available online. Subscription customers can have deliveries made on a weekly or biweekly basis for \$34.20 per box. Mountain Farms Delivery also sells a baked goods box. It features plant-based items like muffins, scones and breakfast bars. The Bakery Box is available as a one-time order or subscription.

For more information, visit www.mountainfarmsdelivery.com.