

Food they ✓ can bank on

Food Banker

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IT'S LIKE A department store on sale day. Everyone comes out as early as possible to be there for the 9 a.m. scramble. They push and sort their way through tons of perfectly good bread, produce and even frozen food that otherwise would have gone to the dump. And they emerge triumphant, ready to deliver food to those who need it.

This is the Food Bank.

From cavernous warehouses at 1035 No. Main St., Watsonville, up to 20,000 pounds of food is carted off every Thursday before lunchtime — and all of it has been salvaged or traded from companies and growers that otherwise would have tossed it all out.

The pickers and choosers who show up on Thursdays represent tax-exempt non-profit agencies from as far away as San Benito County. It's not exactly a gourmet center, but who's to complain when the food is free.

"We have seen a 400 percent increase in requests for emergency food over the past year," comments director Michael Alexander, who started as a VISTA volunteer when the program had its beginnings in 1974 as a Santa Cruz emergency food box program. Now, the Food Bank reaches people in three ways: the Thursday distribution; providing food on an emergency basis monthly for some 5,000 people referred by social services agencies; and a monthly food bag distribution to needy senior citizens.

That the faltering economy pushes people to find ways to cut corners is clear, Alexander points out.

Take Paula Tanner, for example. Every Thursday, she volunteers as a Food Bank checker, collecting the 12 cents per pound fee which helps pay shipping costs. In return, she will receive a generous bag of groceries to take home.

"Why do I come?" smiles the single parent. "I don't know. Just to help out ... and to tell you the truth, it helps our grocery bill."

On the shopper's side of the scale is Bertie Smiley, cook at Janus Alcoholism Recovery Services in Santa Cruz. The comestibles she has collected will ease the strain on the Janus budget.

"I've been coming over for a year and I'll tell you, it's helpful," she said. "Everything is so high when you're working on a budget. But you have to look carefully through the bins. And you've got to be fast otherwise you won't get the best."

The Food Bank is run through Food and Nutrition Services, Alexander explained. Non-marketable is collected and distributed to low income people in the three-county area as part of Second Harvest, one of 62 nationally-certified food banks in the U.S.

Alexander is a board director for Second Harvest along with representatives of such corporations as Safeway, Beatrice Foods, Quaker Oats Company and General Foods.

Santa Cruz Food Bank is one of the oldest in the country, he says. Last year, two and a half million pounds of food was collected and distributed in Watsonville as part of swapping done with other food banks in Santa Clara, Concord, San Francisco and Sacramento. Nationally, 80

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million pounds of food were distributed last year in all states except Maine, North and South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.

"We are a very important part of the food chain," said the tall, intense director. "It's one great humanitarian program. Granted, it won't ever replace food stamps, but we can buy time for people who are on food stamps in times of emergency. We plug the holes."

It's a case of bread cast — not upon the waters, but upon the highways. And it returns in various forms. Every week, 10,000 loaves of day-old bread are available. Half of the bread is traded with the Grey Bears senior food program in exchange for produce the elders have gleaned from the fields after the harvest.

After that, who knows? Every week the amounts and types of swappable items change. There may be jars of spaghetti sauce or salad dressing, fruit of all sorts, broccoli from Monterey, green peppers and sunflower seeds from Hollister, melons from Sacramento, cauliflower and strawberries from local growers, peas from Clear Lake, potatoes from Gonzales and muffins from Palo Alto.

It's one great, serendipitous grocery swap. The Sacramento branch traded birthday cake candles for Pajaro Valley produce. Three truckloads of dry bleach were donated by another branch.

Once, Alexander was alerted that two deer had been shot at Ano Nuevo. Would the Food Bank want them? "It took me two hours on the phone to find a hunter to take them home, skin and butcher them. But it was worth it — we had venison on the shopping list that week.

Once at midnight, they received 25 tons of confiscated under-size tuna from Terminal Island, San Diego. At an hour when most are asleep, food bank workers found someone to wrap and freeze 16 bins of the fish, at a cost of \$300.

Last year, enough Florida grapefruit juice to fill 30 railroad cars was donated. It had been exposed to the air and was discolored, but otherwise was safe for consumption.

"We bust our backs to bring all the food in," commented Alexander.

Food trades or donations are scouted by phone on Mondays, charted for trade on Tuesday, and delivered to Watsonville, the central trading spot, on Wednesday.

What if a food donation is just too far gone, overripe, a bit moldy ...

what then? Then two pig farmers show up to haul the discards away.

"I still feel like a pioneer," said Alexander. "Just think of all the food that is available. Twenty percent of our country's food is thrown out every year — that's 137 million tons."

People eligible to receive food from the Thursday distribution are reached and screened through non-profit agencies — veterans groups, drug and alcohol related groups, contracted daycare homes and centers.

Linda Abbe and Judith Dicochea drive over from Sunny Slope Christian Center in Hollister. Food they gather is distributed through the church to 25 families — some 96 people.

Sheila Watson picks up food to be distributed to needy members of Candelaria, an American Indian organization in Santa Cruz. Members are native Americans, Hawaiians or Alaskans.

Careful attention is paid to handing out the food, remarked Alexander, showing off a donated deep freeze. "The producers trust us to give it to people who could not buy the product otherwise. Take these French fries. They are covered with ice crystals. In the past, this food would have been dumped. Now

donors get tax write-offs and they save on dumping fees. But they want to protect the integrity of the product. They don't want it to get back on the market for resale — say, to turn up some weekend at the flea market!"

The Food Bank runs on a \$200,000 budget. One fourth comes from the 12 cents service fees; other funds come from the government.

Since the food is valued at \$1 per pound, and 2.5 million pounds of food changes hands each year, \$2.5 million worth of food is made available to the needy, Alexander summed. The USDA butter and cheese hand-outs, included in these figures, have been cut back by half this year, he noted.

The Food Bank relies heavily upon volunteer workers such as Jose Reyes, who began his volunteer work with the Food Bank as a court referral case, but stayed on "just to help."

"I like coming here. It's something to do," he said. "A lot of us don't even take our payment bag."

Duane Marsh from the McDowell youth homes for boys, based in Soquel, had a more pragmatic view: "I don't even know the concept behind it. I just like getting the food for our program."