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'I'm Blessed to Be Here'



Michael Rios oversees the Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County congregate dining site at London Nelson Community Center in Santa Cruz.

How Michael Rios Found Meals on Wheels

After Michael Rios retired from his career in customer service at a phone company, he wanted to do something that didn't feel like work. That's when he found Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County.

He started supporting the program as a volunteer in 2007.

"The mission is wonderful," he said. "The food is excellent for the older adults, and the social part is great, too. We can't forget that. The social aspect feeds their brain, and the food feeds their heart."

Michael volunteered for a few months when a staff job as a volunteer coordinator and dispatch manager became available. He landed the position and has been with the program ever since. He now serves as a dining site manager at the London Nelson Community Center site in Santa Cruz, where 30 to 40 people come daily for hot, nutritious meals.

He brings freshly prepared meals from the program's bustling central kitchen to the [Elderday](#) program site and the London Nelson site, then coordinates the volunteers who unload and serve the food. The site even has piano players who come daily to play music and create a joyous atmosphere for older adults as they gather and enjoy each other's company while dining.

Michael added that people at the site come from all walks of life, but in their time there, "we're all the same: We're just there to take care of each other."

"I am blessed to be here," Michael said. "It's not only what I'm doing for them, it's what they do for me. I've learned so much from different people."

Finding Our New Home

News & Notes



Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County is searching for a new permanent home where we can continue to serve our 1,500 participants.

An Update on Meals on Wheels HQ

The Live Oak Senior Center has been home to Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County since 1977, serving as our primary kitchen and distribution center for senior meals across the county for decades.

As many of you know, the senior center property owner, the Live Oak School District, hopes to develop the location into a teacher-housing complex. Because of this, we continue to search for a permanent home where we can establish a community-invested space for the program to ensure older adult services can continue to blossom to meet the increasing demand in Santa Cruz County.

We are relieved that the Live Oak School District board voted at its Sept. 6 meeting to continue our ongoing discussions around a two-year extension of our stay at the senior center, and we continue to explore collaborative approaches to the site.

We are asking the district to work with us so we can continue providing meals for older adults and ensure we can continue to have a Mid-County dining site to help us meet the area's needs—instead of using our limited resources on emergency short-term solutions—until the program can relocate into a permanent new facility.

Current plans for Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County's dream home would allow us to increase meal production by ten times our current output, feeding more older adults and creating other opportunities for additional vulnerable populations who require medically tailored meals to meet the forecasted increase of older adults in our community.

Keeping older adults healthy, nourished, and living independently keeps them out of costly institutional care and saves public dollars. One study found that expanding medically tailored meal programs across the country could help prevent 1.6 million hospitalizations and save insurers a net amount of \$13.6 billion per year. Our new location would also serve as a safe community hub for older adults to gather as their numbers continue rapidly growing in our region.

Please contact us if you have feedback or would like to help with our search for our new home. We would also like to ask you to write to the LOSD to support our continued senior center use.

—Darren Daley, Program Director, Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County

Longtime Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County program director Lisa Berkowitz's final day with the program was August 31st. Lisa, who had been with the program since 1979, has big dreams for the future of Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County.

To read more about Lisa's career and her hopes for the program, [CLICK HERE](#) to read an article recently published in Lookout Santa Cruz.

In the Press

Click the headlines below to read local and national news about Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County and older adult services.

- [More than a meal: Restaurant-based programs feed seniors' social lives](#)
- [The Case for Meals on Wheels: An Evidence-Based Solution to Senior Hunger and Isolation](#)
- [Meals on Wheels America Rallies the Nation to Call on Congress to #SaveLunch for Seniors](#)

From Our Kitchen



Yaza Shafai, Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County's director of kitchen services

One-Pot Pumpkin Chicken Alfredo

As the leaves change and the air gets cooler, this pumpkin chicken alfredo will add warmth and depth to your dinner table. It is a delicious way to embrace the season without unnecessary frills. This dish is perfect for those crisp autumn evenings, offering comfort and indulgence in every bite. I like to serve this alongside a leafy green salad with a lemony vinaigrette and some garlic bread if you really want comfort.

Prep Time: 20 minutes

Cook Time: 20 minutes

Total Time: 40 minutes

Servings: 6

Ingredients:

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1/2 cup diced onions
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1 1/2 pounds diced chicken breasts or thighs
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves or 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 pound whole wheat pasta
- 4 cups water
- 1 cup milk
- 1/2 cup cream cheese, cubed
- 1 15-ounce can pumpkin puree
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne, optional
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Toasted pumpkin seeds for garnish, optional

Instructions:

1. In a large pot or dutch oven, heat the butter with the onions over medium heat. Allow the butter to lightly brown for around 3 minutes.
2. Once browned, add the garlic and chicken and continue to cook for 5 minutes.
3. Add the thyme and pasta then toss, coating the pasta with the brown butter.
4. Add 4 cups of water and bring to a boil over high heat. Add 1 1/2 teaspoons salt.
5. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 8 minutes. Do not drain the water.
6. Stir in the milk, cream cheese, and pumpkin puree, and cook until the cream cheese has melted, and the pasta is al dente, about 4-5 minutes more. (Time may vary depending on the type of pasta you use.)
7. Add the cheddar cheese, paprika, cayenne, and nutmeg, and stir until melted and creamy. Remove from the heat. Season with salt and pepper. Finish with optional garnishes of fresh cracked pepper, grated nutmeg, fresh thyme leaves, and toasted pumpkin seeds.

Notes:

- If the sauce feels thick, add 1/4 cup milk or water to thin.
- Switch up the herbs with either sage or rosemary or a little of each.
- Experiment with different types of cheeses, including gouda, parmesan, or mozzarella.
- Garnish with toasted seasoned panko breadcrumbs.
- Easily make this vegetarian by substituting the chicken with diced pumpkin or butternut squash.

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