CASE STUDY

Accessing the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program as a Market Opportunity

Joseph Martinez, Arizona Microgreens, Phoenix, Arizona

Meet the Farmer

Joseph Martinez and his brother David founded Arizona Microgreens seven years ago in Phoenix, Arizona. Operating out of a medium-sized greenhouse in the heart of the city, they produce organically-grown microgreens – like micro salad mixes, micro kale, and pea shoots – for restaurants, farmers markets, schools, and hospitals throughout Arizona.

“I never planned to work with schools,” said Joseph. “I assumed that the only people working with schools would be really massive produce companies or distributors. I thought, ‘Farm to school is great, but it doesn’t apply to me.’” That changed when, several years ago, Arizona Microgreens began leasing a building from a local school district and Joseph made a friendly connection with the school food service director. Joseph initially thought his engagement with the school district might be a few visits to classrooms to talk to students about growing food. But soon, the school food service department approached him about getting his microgreens into the students’ snack rotation.

Selling Through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

The school district purchased Joseph’s microgreens with funding provided by the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) provides free fresh fruit and vegetable snacks to children at eligible elementary schools during the school day, with goals of introducing children to new and different fresh fruit and vegetable varieties and increasing children’s overall acceptance and consumption of fresh produce.¹ Educating children about the foods they eat is also a key focus of the FFVP.

The uniqueness of microgreens as a fresh vegetable, and Joseph’s willingness to meet with students, made Arizona Microgreens a perfect fit for the school’s FFVP program. Although the first sale seemed like a feel-good, one-off to Joseph, the school district was excited to do more. So, next, he recorded a video – that way, every participating elementary classroom in the district could meet Joseph.

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¹ https://www.fns.usda.gov/ffvp/ffvp-fact-sheet

About Arizona Microgreens
- Phoenix, Arizona
- Specializes in microgreens
- Grows in urban greenhouses
- www.arizonamicrogreens.com

Credit: Arizona Microgreens

Arizona Microgreens greenhouse fieldtrip. Credit: Arizona Microgreens
“Once we did it with this one school district, we were set up to offer the program to other school districts,” said Joseph. “I already had the video, we understood the pack sizes and pricing – there was nothing stopping us.” For Arizona Microgreens, the FFVP offered a way to break up the monotony of their more traditional institutional sales, as well as directly serving a very different kind of microgreen client – kids – which kept Joseph motivated to keep pursuing schools as a market option.

**Relationships, Communication, and Transparency**

As Joseph learned, building relationships with school nutrition departments takes time and effort – but these relationships are key to sustaining and growing school sales. Arizona Microgreens’ initial relationship with one school district quickly led to a relationship with another. With each new school district, Joseph honed an outreach and marketing strategy that worked for his business.

He spent time researching which school districts participated in the FFVP (most state departments of education can provide this information) and how many FFVP sites each school district had. Focusing on districts with only a handful of participating FFVP sites was a good early fit for Arizona Microgreens, so they didn’t have to worry about fulfilling a demand above their production capacity.

Next, Joseph called school districts to identify the right person to talk to – this could be a specific FFVP coordinator, the school nutrition director, or someone else. “Many are open to new ideas for FFVP products, but they may be quick to ask questions about shelf-life, serving size, and lead time,” said Joseph. Understanding what these decision makers are open to and what they’re hesitant about can help you navigate and build a new relationship. The payoff? “Once you develop the relationship, they’re ready to do it again the next year.”

Clear communication and transparency have also been key to the relationships Joseph has built with schools. For example, Joseph has had to be transparent that Arizona Microgreens isn’t able to individually package its product, but it does have recommendations for how to make its existing packaging work. Large or small packs of microgreen – depending on the number of students in each class – can be broken down by teachers into individual servings. Joseph has also had to be transparent about the lead time Arizona Microgreens requires in order to be able to deliver its product. “Nutrition directors are used to being able to order and then receive the next day,” said Joseph. “But we need three weeks advance time, because we’re growing directly for the school district. It’s not difficult, but it does mean planning ahead.” Nutrition directors have shown they’re willing and able to adapt, as long as the communication lines are open.

**The Role of Local Produce Distributors**

Another relationship Joseph had to navigate was with local produce distributors, which schools in Arizona use to place their fresh food orders. For Joseph, this was helpful for transporting the microgreens from the growing site to the school. However, the produce distributors haven’t necessarily been “full service” – Joseph has still had to lead the sales, marketing, and promotion of his product.

“It’s good to know a school’s purchasing process first, and then know who the key players are within that distribution process,” suggests Joseph. Every school district is different, and some are able to purchase directly from producers, while others will want to go through an intermediary. Joseph used a combination of both.
Connecting with local produce distributors may also be a good way for growers to get their foot in the door for FFVP sales. Build a relationship with the point-person who fulfills FFVP orders for schools, and then ask if they would consider adding your product to their catalog for schools.

**The Bottom-Line Benefit**

Joseph’s journey in adding school buyers to Arizona Microgreens’ market mix has been a multi-year process, but it’s one in which he sees both community and bottom-line value. “It’s good for us to have something that’s a big order, all at once,” he said. “As a business that sells to restaurants and consumers, we deal with a lot of fluctuation. So we appreciate having big sales that are in the pipeline. Once a school sale is set up, it’s pretty much guaranteed to happen. This makes it good for us financially.”

For other growers looking to use the FFVP as an opportunity to make school sales, Joseph recommends asking schools what they’re looking for and offering suggestions of how you can help. “Schools that participate in the FFVP have money to spend. Ask what problems they’re running up against and how you can help,” offers Joseph. “Is it price point? Looking for new, unique products? Shelf-life? Education component?” As Joseph’s story shows, schools are able and willing to adapt when they see a clear addition of value. Focusing on how your product can meet their needs is a good place to start.

To listen to a podcast conversation with Joseph, visit this page: [http://www.farmtoschool.org/bringingf2s-casestudies](http://www.farmtoschool.org/bringingf2s-casestudies)