SANTA CRUZ &GT; Emilie Stevens, 12, scooped teaspoon after teaspoon into her cup, showing classmates how much sugar is in a Rockstar energy drink.

The answer, 15.5 teaspoons, was not surprising, said Emilie, an eighth-grader at Branciforte Middle School.

"I could tell it's really bad for you," she said. "I'm not allowed to drink it."

Emilie was one of about 300 Santa Cruz County students who converged on UC Santa Cruz's organic farm Thursday morning for the Food, What?! Harvest Festival. Food, What?!!, a youth nonprofit housed on UCSC's campus, employs low-income high schoolers as interns not only to grow, cook and distribute organic produce, but also educate peers.

Student visitors picked and carved pumpkins, pressed apple cider, made pies and visited goats and chickens. Interns led five-minute workshops on nutrition and food access disparities and gave samples of squash and apples they planted and harvested.

Miriam Kaplan, Soquel High's agriculture department head, brought four classes to the festival. Nearly 25 percent of Soquel High students are enrolled in agriculture classes and some students work daily on the school's 2-acre farm, she said.

"To be able to see what goes on here and see what's possible, it really brings them home," said Kaplan. "It really is the foundation of what this area is about and what our needs are as human beings."

The festival, sponsored by New Leaf Community Markets, was part of a series of local events centered on Food Day, a national nutrition and food policy campaign culminating on Oct. 24.

Uriel Reyes, a Pajaro Valley High senior, organized the festival, along with fellow intern Maria Guerrero, a Natural Bridges High senior.

Reyes, 18, was introduced to farm work three summers ago, picking berries in Watsonville. Rising before dawn and carrying baskets 10 hours a day taught him he didn't want a career in the fields, he said.

Reyes joined the program last spring, receiving two school credits and a $175 stipend to work on the farm and attend life skills workshops such as public speaking. He continued last summer, commuting two hours by bus, to harvest, cook and eat meals and maintain local school gardens. He received $9 per hour and also a share of produce.

"Besides the job, I think the more I come, the more I learn," he said.
He said thanks to the program, he's found not only confidence, but his voice. Before, he used to complain about inequities he saw in his community, such as poor quality of school lunches, but never did anything about them.

Now he speaks publicly about his desire for a healthier community, most recently at a Watsonville City Council meeting, protesting a proposed McDonald's construction.

Reyes said he plans to attend Cabrillo College and eventually transfer to a university, to study science.

"It's given me the confidence that I know I can change the community. It wasn't in my plans before," Reyes said. "Now I actually want to go out there and do the change."