



Mario Escobar nurtured his connection to agriculture at Cal Poly Pomona. He and his wife Magali and their two sons, Mario and Matteo, live in the Central Valley.

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ROOTED IN FAMILY

EDUCATION HELPS CENTRAL VALLEY NATIVE DISCOVER A LOVE AND CAREER IN AGRICULTURE

By Dan Lee

Growing up as the son of farm workers in the rural Central Valley community of Delano, **Mario Escobar** wanted a different life.

Although Escobar enjoyed gardening with his father, he watched his parents toil as general farm laborers in the grape fields.

"They always came home dirty and tired and always told us there was no money for the things we asked for, such as a bike, basketball court and other things," he recalls. "I did not want that lifestyle in my future."

Today, Escobar ('19, plant science) is a farm manager trainee at **Sunview Vineyards** in Delano — the same San Joaquin Valley grower his parents worked for. He was the first in his family to earn a four-year college degree.

Escobar's long journey and his unexpected return home to enter farming took many twists and turns. It's a story of a young man discovering his passion and also things that he didn't know before. And that knowledge has transformed him.

FAR FROM HOME

After graduating high school, Escobar moved to Rancho Cucamonga and enrolled in a technical institute in 2005 with plans to become a certified auto technician. While in school, he found a part-time job loading packages onto trailers for UPS. Later, he worked as a forklift operator for a health care services company, and as a forklift battery and charger repairman.

But when the economy slid into recession, Escobar lost his job and had difficulty finding work in Southern California. So, he moved back to Delano in early 2009.

There he found work at Paramount Citrus and then Sunview Vineyards, where he used his experience in working with barcode scanning technology at UPS to implement a traceability program with scanners at Sunview, allowing farmers to track grapes.

EPIPHANY

At Paramount and Sunview, Escobar met college interns who inspected fruit on the production line for quality. He was stunned to discover that they were studying agriculture at Fresno State and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

"I have always enjoyed working with crops but never thought that

agriculture was a field of study, so I never looked into it," Escobar says. "Until then, there had been no motivation for me to pursue a four-year degree because no one in our household held a college degree at that time."

With his interest piqued, he began studying agriculture at Bakersfield College. It helped that his future wife, Magali, whom he met while working together at Sunview, was also a college student at Cal State Bakersfield studying business administration.

After a couple of years, he considered transferring to Cal Poly Pomona and visited the campus. He was surprised to see vineyards after exiting the 10 Freeway at Kellogg Drive.

"I was not expecting to see grapevines in this area, and when I saw the ones on campus, I could not believe I would have the opportunity to work on them," he says.

As a student on the Cal Poly Pomona farm crew, Escobar did indeed work on the vineyards — pruning, thinning, hedging, harvesting and even spraying fungicides from a tractor.

Working on a vineyard would not have been possible without the support of alumnus **Don Huntley** ('60, animal husbandry) whose gift established the grapevines by the freeway. Escobar had the opportunity to meet Huntley and thank him personally at the college's annual Farm to Table Spring Harvest Dinner in May.

HANDS-ON LEARNING BEARS FRUIT

Escobar's hands-on experience in the vineyard paid off in an unusual way.

Chad Heath, a private equity manager, contacted the college looking for someone who could help him with a dying vineyard at his La Cañada Flintridge home.

Heath and landscapers tried to revive the private vineyard in the five years he had owned the house, but they were unsuccessful. The withering land stood out even more so in an area where homes sell for millions of dollars.

"Landscaping looks are a big deal," Heath says.

Escobar took the job, installed a new irrigation system and made sure the details were just right.

"He would spend more time than I expected him to commit. He was always Johnny-on-the-spot," Heath says. "He was proud of his work and would bring his family to see it."

Thanks to Escobar's efforts, the vineyard was rejuvenated and Heath sold the property in August 2018 for \$8 million — but not before they harvested a season's worth of grapes to make a private wine vintage. The new owners even kept Escobar on as their vineyard manager.

"They were excited to have him," Heath says.

Escobar credits Sunview CEO **Marko Zaninovich** for mentoring him and giving tips and best practices to maintain the vineyard.



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BALANCING RESPONSIBILITIES

During his time at Cal Poly Pomona, Escobar learned to grow and harvest a wide variety of fruits and vegetables on the university's Spadra Farm, fields and groves. He even got over his fear of heights by climbing ladders to harvest fruits from citrus trees.

"Working on the farm has been a crucial component as it bridged the gap between textbook knowledge and real-world application," he says.

Escobar was also a nontraditional student. He moved to Southern California with his wife and son Mario, who was a little over a year old at the time. Since then, the couple has welcomed a second son, Matteo, to the family.

To support his family, Escobar worked as a barista at Panera Bread on top of being a full-time student and working on the college farm crew. His prime hours for studying were late at night and early in the morning when his family was sleeping.

"Pursuing higher education while raising a family has been the toughest journey of my life," he says.

His parents' example – coming from Mexico to the United States as teenagers without any formal education or parental support – encouraged him to persevere. Scholarships from **Pine Tree Ranch, Dole Fresh Fruit** and the **Fruit Industries Endowment** helped ease the financial burden, while the **Children's Center** at Cal Poly Pomona provided a flexible schedule and nurturing environment for his son.

Faculty and staff in the Department of Plant Science soon noticed Escobar's efforts.

"His excellent grasp of agricultural knowledge and skill, his work ethic, and his leadership and engaging personality made him a well-respected part of the department," says Professor **Valerie Mellano**, the department chair.



Horsehill Wine comes from the vineyards at Cal Poly Pomona, including those near the Farm Store at AGRIsCAPES.

"My experience at Cal Poly Pomona was more than extraordinary. The hands-on learning experience well exceeded my expectations."

Now Escobar has come full circle: He's returned to Central California to work with Sunview, his old employer, growing table grapes – the very crop that his parents worked on, and the company where his father continues to work. In his new job, he assists in crop evaluation, pest management, irrigation and supervising farm work for the grower, which farms several thousand acres in the San Joaquin Valley and counts Walmart, Target, Sprouts, Whole Foods and Trader Joe's among its customers.

"It takes scientific knowledge to properly manage the resources necessary to produce an aesthetically pleasing cluster of grapes with good color, size, flavor and texture," Escobar says.

Mellano is confident that Escobar will be an agricultural leader who will ensure that Californians will have a safe and generous food supply in the future.

"His knowledge is exceptional and his innovative attitude is highly important to agricultural production," she says.

But one thing is certain: Escobar would not be where he is today without the polytechnic education he gained at Cal Poly Pomona.

"My experience at Cal Poly Pomona was more than extraordinary," he says. "The hands-on learning experience well exceeded my expectations."

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ALUMNUS AND PROFESSOR RECEIVES INNOVATION AND LEADERSHIP AWARD



By **Monica Rodriguez**

Biological Sciences Professor **Steve Alas** has helped thousands of students enter graduate school and launch careers in STEM fields.

These Cal Poly Pomona students, many from modest means and the first in their families to attend college, gain the confidence and technical skills critical for graduate school and their careers by participating in programs Alas oversees.

"He's a champion for our students," says Associate Provost **Sep Eskandari**. "He channels all his creativity and energy for students."

The California State University recently presented Alas with the **Faculty Innovation and Leadership Award** and a \$5,000 prize. The biological science department also received \$10,000 for professional activities.

"I stand on the shoulders of 50 people across my lifetime," says Alas ('94, biology). "What I think of is all the people from my mentor to my mom. This is all of our award."

Alas, in his 15th year teaching at Cal Poly Pomona, is director of **Science Educational Enhancement Services (SEES)**, which serves historically low socioeconomic, underrepresented minority students in the College of Science. SEES provides mentoring, paid research fellowships, a First Year Experience course and workshops to assist students enrolled in advanced courses. Students also find a supportive peer community.

Chemistry Professor **Paul Hiemenz** established SEES in 1987. As a Cal Poly Pomona student and SEES participant in the 1990s, Alas found camaraderie among fellow students who assisted each other in their academic journeys and offered guidance as he entered UCLA's graduate program.

In Hiemenz, Alas found a professor, a mentor and a father figure.

"Dr. Paul Hiemenz took us all under his wings," he says. "I would not be here today without him."

Alas says he could never repay Hiemenz for all he did, but leading and growing the program that his professor founded is a way of honoring him.

After earning his doctoral degree at UCLA, Alas conducted research at the City of Hope but wanted to teach in the CSU. His dream came true when he joined the Cal Poly Pomona faculty. In 2013 he was named SEES director.

Alas also oversees the university's **Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation** and was instrumental in establishing **Discovery Camps**, a summer program offering tracks in computer and app programming, robotics, science, entrepreneurship and horse riding.

His research grants and fellowships include the NSF Biological Training in Education and Research Scholar program, as well as the five-year, \$1 million NSF Scholars Program in Research, Education and Science. He is the 2018-19 recipient of the Provost's Award for Excellence in Service at Cal Poly Pomona.

Alas says he loves his alma mater and its students.

"This isn't my job, this is my home," he says. "When I walk around campus, I see myself in the students."

Support the Science Educational Enhancement Services program

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