

Blue-Green Future



Apogee Spirulina founder Nicholas Petrovic started the business after he attended a program at Santa Fe Community College. | Courtesy Apogee Spirulina

Chances are you've heard of spirulina, currently enjoying the spotlight as a popular superfood and nutritional cure-all. But even food-trend skeptics (sorry, coconut oil) will have trouble questioning this blue-green algae's ancient credentials.

"It's 3.5 billion years old," says Apogee Spirulina founder Nicholas Petrović. "It's been around for a while."

Petrović was introduced to spirulina more recently, when he moved to Santa Fe from San Francisco in 2009, specifically to attend Santa Fe Community College. It had the only program in the country offering what Petrović was looking for at the time in terms of photovoltaic training.

But once enrolled in the dynamic School of **Trades, Advanced Technologies and Sustainability**, Petrović's interest shifted during a course in which students learned how to produce algae as a step toward working in the algal biofuels sector. "I had never heard of this stuff before," Petrović says, "And I thought, 'This is really cool. This is low-hanging fruit.'"

From there, he says, "I ended up killing thousands of gallons of it figuring out how to grow it." His research led him to become interested in France's artisanal spirulina culture. He wrote to leaders in the field there, received a list of growers and, after graduating from SFCC in 2012, traveled to Aubagne, France, and spent the summer interning with a master spirulina farmer in order to learn the art of cultivation. "Twenty-five years ago, there were maybe about three; but now there are over 200 of them in France, Spain and Italy, these little micro artisan cultivation farms, which is great."

Petrović returned home and began the work of setting up his own high-desert artisan spirulina farm. The college supported his endeavors and, with the help of its board and former SFCC President Randy Grissom, the entrepreneur in 2013 founded his business. Today, Apogee Spirulina, using the cultivation and harvesting methods Petrović learned in France, includes greenhouses totaling approximately 5,500 square feet on the SFCC campus. The small greenhouses reduce water evaporation, and also provides a cleaner environment that eliminates the need for any type of pesticide.

Petrović, 51, says he considers himself a "protein farmer" rather than a spirulina farmer. "The big thing with spirulina is it's 64 percent protein," he says. "That's why vegans love it; that, and the iron level and calcium. It's a complete food source, easily digestible, we don't waste any of it." *Forbes Magazine* last June profiled scientists from the food to climate to energy sectors all predicting that algae would play a key role in their various areas in the future.

Petrović also believes spirulina will be key in agriculture's future. Agriculture in its current form, he says, "isn't sustainable." His footprint, on the other hand, from water use to energy, is small. "That's the future of food," he says. "Small-scale community-based farming ... within a few miles of the center of town."

In addition to the benefits for the environment, Petrović notes that the French farmers with whom he trained have humanitarian context for their work; many, he says, work in Africa during their off months helping set up community farms. "It's feeding humanity," he says, noting that in New Mexico, "food insecurity is a big deal" and that is a motivator. At the same time, he says, "I'd like to make a living at this too. I think you can balance the two. I think it's doable."

Petrović has a retail business through his website (apogeespirulina.com) and the Santa Fe Farmers Market, as well as a wholesale business. His company also is developing recipes using spirulina. Much of Petrović's work also includes educating the public; a workshop he ran last summer drew spirulina enthusiasts from around the US, as well as from Australia. Petrović also teaches classes at SFCC. His work with spirulina is one part of the program where he earned his degree, which also includes courses on aquaponics farming—a combination of fish farming and horticulture—**previously featured in SFR** and taught by Charlie Shultz, with whom Petrović collaborates. The environment of SFCC's School of Trades, Advanced Technologies and Sustainability has definitely helped foster creating opportunity for locally grown food. "It's been tremendous," Petrović says. "We're at the cutting edge here in Santa Fe."