



Other News

SOUTH BRONX TO SOUTH BAY

The culture in agriculture

by Roger Repohl

On Tuesday mornings from June through October, Karen Washington is out the door of her Bronx home well before six. In her workhorse Jeep Grand Cherokee, she heads across town to the Bronx Terminal Market near Yankee Stadium, where she meets three upstate New York farmers who were out their doors even earlier to truck fresh-picked fruits and vegetables to the city. With her Jeep packed full of produce, she drives back across town to Tremont Park, where other early-risers have set up tables, chairs, and a fold-out awning. Neighborhood gardeners drop off their own vegetables and home-canned pickles and preserves to be sold. At eight o'clock, Washington begins her barker's cry: "Get your fresh vegetables here! We grow 'em, you eat 'em! We got corn! We got collards! We got apples! We got South Bronx honey! Get your fresh vegetables here!"



Manager Karen Washington and customer at the La Familia Verde Farmers Market in the Bronx. Photo by Roger Repohl

Tremont Avenue, a venerable but now ragged commercial strip in the central Bronx, is coming alive. Passers-by stop to look and buy. The La Familia Verde Farmers Market is off and running another day.

Karen Washington, a physical therapist and ebullient community activist, started this farmers market last year with a company of enthusiastic volunteers from the La Familia Verde Community Garden Coalition, comprised of five nearby gardens. In the past, they had run a little sidewalk farm stand on Saturdays, selling the gardeners' surplus tomatoes and peppers. To Washington, this seemed much too small.

"In our neighborhood, there are no really fresh markets," she told me. "The fruits and vegetables are terrible in the stores. We have a very high incidence of childhood obesity, heart disease, diabetes. What better way to combat this than to do something that's healthy for us? People should take ownership of food in their community."

La Familia Verde is one of four farmers markets in New York City sponsored by Just Food, a Manhattan-based food-resources organization. While there are many farmers markets in upscale areas providing the well-off with exotic and expensive organics, Just Food situates its markets in low-income neighborhoods, keeps its prices low, and accepts food stamps and WIC coupons. The markets are organized and run entirely by people in the community.

Farmers markets are but one component of Just Food's comprehensive agricultural vision for the entire city, rich and poor: to turn community gardens into little farms, to support small farmers within delivery range of the city, to get fresh produce to people who need and want it and instruct them how to cook and keep it.

Just Food was founded ten years ago in response to the crisis in family farming occurring across the nation, with mass agricultural production and marketing forcing them out of business. "Here in New York, small farmers were going under because they had no access to secure markets," said Kathleen McTigue, manager of Just Food's City Farms program. "At the same time, New York City residents had no access to locally-grown fresh foods. This is a typical example of the disconnect in our country's food system. Japan and Europe have plans that link rural producers with urban consumers; why couldn't we do that here?"

Just Food first moved to bridge the producer-consumer gap through a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) system. Using school buildings and church basements as distribution centers, people buy "shares" in a farmer's produce. The shares, costing around \$400 for the season and enough to feed a family of four, provide the farmer with up-front money in the springtime for seeds, organic fertilizers, equipment, and labor. In return, the farmer delivers an assortment of fruits and vegetables weekly from June through November.

City dwellers and small farmers alike took to the program enthusiastically. Today, Just Food coordinates 37 CSA sites throughout New York City, with about 10,000 participants served by 17 regional farmers.

In 1997, Just Food initiated its City Farms program to show community gardeners how to produce more food and get it to their neighbors. Using a grant from Heifer International, City Farms began with a "training of trainers" project, instructing participants in intensive gardening techniques, nutrition, cooking, and home canning as well as teaching skills, then sending them out to other gardens and giving them a stipend for their work. Today, 30 community gardens participate.

To round out the circle of food distribution, City Farms then organized the farmers markets, which both give rural farmers another mode of access to urban consumers and give neighborhood gardeners a place to sell their produce. With a pending second grant from Heifer, City Farms hopes to provide startup funds for two new farmers markets per year for the next three years until the project becomes self-sustaining and can expand on its own. Further plans call for establishing beehives and raising chickens and rabbits in community gardens to increase the variety of locally-grown food products and enhance the urban ecosystem.

The result of these efforts is not just better food but better people.

"Our farmers market gives everybody in my neighborhood a sense of pride and dignity," said Washington. "It's our people bringing food to our people."

"Everybody participates in food every day but they never think about where it comes from or how it affects them," said McTigue. "American agribusiness may make food cheaper, but there are hidden costs in environmental damage and adverse long-term health problems from pesticides and biotechnology.

"Half of the word 'agriculture' is 'culture,'" she observed. "To eat well and live well, we've got to put the emphasis on the human side of food."

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