



LOCAL
ENVIRONMENTAL
AGRICULTURE
PROJECT



Notes from the Roanoke Change Academy's Fourth Discussion of *The Cooking Gene*

Recipe: Kelly Key, of LEAP, discussed making My Mother's Apple Crisp (page 295). Twitty's recipe has a story and a meaning because his mother made it for Thanksgiving. When considering the layers to this recipe, we must also remember the complex history of sugar and remember how hard people in the past had to work to prepare each recipe. Kelly also discussed LEAP's community markets, which aim to increase affordability of fresh, local produce for people who use SNAP and WIC. Local food is a social justice issue.

Conversation with Cam Terry: Christina Nifong then spoke with local urban farmer Cam Terry about his work running Garden Variety Harvests. Mr. Terry is in his fourth year of farming at GVH, and it is a one-man operation with some support from family members. GVH operates via yard gardening, in which Cam plants crops in portions of people's yards. The homeowners are then paid their rent in vegetables (similar to CSA shares).

- Mr. Terry is currently gardening 5 small plots throughout the city, totaling 1/3 of an acre. He has to be selective about what he grows to maximize profits relative to space. Besides selling salad mixes to restaurants, he sells exclusively at the Grandin Village Farmers Market, which begins this Saturday, 4/17 from 8-12. Currently, Cam is growing salad mixes, root crops (including radishes, turnips, carrots, beets), tomatoes, cucumber, and okra.

Lessons from Urban Farming:

- 1) Small spaces can be productive. You will be amazed how much food you can produce in a small yard.
- 2) The plants want to grow. Setup and observation are key.
- 3) Food insecurity cannot be solved by capitalism alone. We have to stop expecting corporations to save us and look towards grassroots solutions that involve people.
- 4) Growing food is a specialized skill, but you can learn it!
- 5) Food is tragically undervalued in our society. If we attached more value to food and nutrition, our food system would improve in many ways.

Mr. Terry didn't think about his heritage and history when deciding to start this farm. He is the descendant of sharecroppers who farmed peanuts, pecans, and sugarcane in Sylvester GA, the peanut capitol of the world. His grandfather decided to raise his family in Colorado, where he always had a garden. Cam thinks he would be happy to see his grandson farming on his own terms.

A final thought: We cannot own the land. We should instead consider the phrase "land stewardship:" you have to care about and care for the land. Mr. Terry aims to steward the land in a way that is responsible to the community and the ecology. His goal is to have a small farm that can feed 100 local families.

Discussion Questions: The group split into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions. We then returned to the large group to have a brief discussion about each

- 1) Michael Twitty writes (on page 279): “One of the more devastating losses in the transmission of African foodways to the New World was eating as a form of healing.” The idea of “food as medicine” is making a comeback. How does *The Cooking Gene* enter this conversation? What do our elders’ foodways have to teach us about health?
 - Enslaved people had the knowledge as herbalists and about the benefits of food, but this knowledge was hidden somewhat.
 - Eating for wellness is impacted by how you are raised. Do you have access to elders with knowledge, to nature, to agriculture?
 - Distance from family has a role in access to knowledge. Much family knowledge could have been lost during times of migration and family separation.
 - “Food, racism, power, and justice are all linked...the next wave of human rights abuse is in the form of nutrition and justice...change the plates, you change the palates, then you will change the future” (page 280).
- 2) On page 293, Twitty tells us: “As I traveled more, I noticed kinship with strangers based on knowledge of the old plants. Sour faces turned to smiles at the mere mention of a pawpaw or discussion of techniques for breaking black walnuts and the like. I felt as if I was among a family of people keeping a flame alive -- a university of volumes written in the understory and canopy and marsh and streamside that could not be relinquished, but desired, and for our survival sake, to be savored.” What can the natural world tell us about our past? How can knowledge of its secrets unite us?
 - In the moment of this quote, Twitty was with white confederate reenactors. This speaks to how powerful food can be as a base on which to start a relationship.
 - Paw-paws: people either love them or have no idea what they are. Certain foods can create connections within a region. We get disconnected from cultivated foods, and foraged foods (paw-paws, persimmons, morel mushrooms, etc.) are even another layer removed.
- 3) “The loss of access to the countryside, rivers, and coastline, and our migration North and to the Southern cities, meant a steady loss of connection not only to the earth but to its creatures,” Twitty writes on page 301. What does it mean in particular for African Americans to have lost so much land and ownership of farms over the last hundred years? Can the efforts being made today reverse the loss? What else can be done?
 - The knowledge, foodways, prestige, history, and sense of community were also big losses when black farmers were no longer farming.
 - The promise of urban farms: they can connect communities, make vacant lots productive, and are an opportunity to reconnect people with land, whether they own it or don’t.
 - Working the land can be about more than just the food—it can build a sense of community and a connection to nature.

- 4) Twitty's recounting of the domestic slave trade in the chapter: The Devil's Half Acre (p.321) is heart-breaking. What do we do with this knowledge now that we have it or are reminded of it? How can we make amends for past wrongs? Agriculture in America was founded in racism. Today the effects of commodifying not only agricultural products but the people that grow these products and the land they are grown on are still visible. What are some examples of the exploitative nature of our food system today? What are some ways to fight against the exploitation present in our current day food system?
- 2 books that are reminiscent of page 321: Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*
 - Farmers markets are increasing access by allowing SNAP, EBT, etc. to be used, but it isn't always about access—just because we give someone food doesn't mean they have the tools with which to prepare it. Consider the opportunity of teaching people how to cook fresh foods in simple ways (ex: Happy Healthy Cooks)

Resources:

<https://agrariantrust.org/agrariancommons/>
<https://www.bu.edu/antiracism-center/narrative/national-antiracist-book-festival/>
<http://carilionclinic.org/farm>
<https://comfortfarmsmovie.com/>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/opinion/black-farmers-covid-relief.html?searchResultPosition=3>

Upcoming Events:

April 14, 2 PM, UVA Democracy Initiative, online

Memorializing Racial Trauma: What Americans Can Learn From the Germans

Join the [Memory Project](#) of the UVA Democracy Initiative for its virtual launch event, an exploration of German strategies for the redress of trauma after World War II and lessons for how America remembers its own history of racial oppression.

https://virginia.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_iEXjewmcTNqWj5ysxkbwWQ

April 15, 7 PM, Salem Museum, online

Dr. Kelley Fanto Deetz, author of *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine*

<https://sailemmuseum.org/events-activities/>

April 18, 4 PM, Ann Arbor District Library, online

Adrian Miller, author of *Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue*

<https://aadl.org/node/577631>

May 6, 6:30-7:30 PM, Roanoke County Public Library, online

Authors Lucinda Robb and Rebecca Boggs Roberts will join us via Zoom to discuss their book, *The Suffragist Playbook*, drawing on lessons learned from this important movement, and how to apply them to our passions & desire to impact the world around us.

<https://roanokecountyva.libcal.com/calendar/rcpl/howtochangetheworld>