**Food Oasis in the Concrete Desert**

Detroit was once a thriving city, riding the economic horsepower of the American auto industry while Motown music represented a glorious blossoming of African-American culture. The bright future began dimming in the 1970s, when fissures in the American auto industry triggered an economic decline, which triggered a white flight, which left Detroit the blackest city in the nation, with a population barely a third of what it once was, and one of the poorest.

Today, almost 20 percent of the population now qualifies as food-insecure, according to Feeding America research in 2017. More than a third of Detroit lives a mile or further from a grocery store, earning those neighborhoods the inglorious distinction of being “food deserts,” usually devoid of fresh vegetables, and fed by convenience stores, gas stations and snacks from liquor stores.

Against this backdrop, Detroit’s D-Town Farm is a food oasis. Its seven acres produce not only food but a pathway to make the surrounding desert bloom. The farm’s parent organization, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, has been working for change at the ground level in Detroit since 2006. Along with allied organizations, such as Keep Growing Detroit, these collaborators have put thousands of Detroit residents to work in their own neighborhoods, turning vacant lots into gardens while lobbying the city to allow, if not encourage urban agriculture.

In September, D-Town Farm held its annual Harvest Celebration, a two-day event where the DBCFSN community gathers to celebrate urban agriculture, food security and the fertile green cracks in this over-paved city.

I showed up about an hour before the party. I could hear some drummers warming up, bright licks of West African djembe and its bass cousin the dundun, the notes drifting in spurts from the nearby stage, as volunteers hung signs, chopped wood for an earthen pizza oven, pushed produce carts toward a farm stand, and set up a reception table in the shade of a large oak tree, where I asked for Malik Yakini, who was expecting me.

“Malik is an African brother with long locks. He has a scholarly look,” replied the volunteer, pointing toward the drum beats. I walked past long rows of onions, squash, beans and kale, past a windmill and a small pond, following a path into a grove where I found Yakini, grey-bearded and bespectacled, wearing a green shirt with a pattern that resembled dancing bike chain links. We ambled toward the drums.

In the 1970s, while at Eastern Michigan University, Yakini started a food-buying club. He didn’t consider himself a food activist, but rather a black empowerment activist. After a career as a teacher and school principal, Yakini started DBCFSN, which aims to keep the means of food production and distribution in the hands of the community.

“We grow about 36 different crops over the course of the year,” Yakini explained, in between hugs with a sister in a yellow shirt that said “Register to Vote with Me” and an academic Caucasian brother from out of town. “Solar energy station. Beekeeping. Composting. Rainwater collecting. Children’s area. This party is the culmination of our year. We are expecting 500 to 1,000 people to come celebrate and get exposed to urban agriculture and fresh food.”

At a brochure-laden table, Yakini introduced me to Peggy Harp. She told me about the planned building that will house a food co-op, community space and stainless steel-clad incubator kitchen space, where fledgling food start-ups can safely prepare food for legal sale.

“There are so many people making great food in Detroit. But if you want to sell it, you can’t be cooking out of your kitchen,” Harp said. “We are at around 400 member owners, and need to get to 1,000. That would show our investors and the community that there is support behind this project and that it will be a viable grocery store.”

When complete, that 34,000-square-foot structure would represent the linchpin between food production and distribution, and the manifestation of the cooperative economic principles Yakini has been working toward for decades.

When I turned around, Yakini had settled into a folding chair in front of the stage, where the drums had switched from casual, lilting groove to a crisp barrage of djembe notes, a call to order. I had a plane to catch, so I said goodbye to Malik. As I left, a woman in a headscarf opened the festivities with prayers to far-flung ancestors. Each called-out line ended with the response of “ase*”* (“ah-shay”) from the crowd, a West African word that translates loosely as “the power to make change happen.”

**Kings’ and Queens’ Kale**

After I left, Yakini emailed me a recipe from the old days, when Detroit’s population was double what it is today and Yakini was already eating kale, long before it was cool.

The name, he says, is from “... a couple decades ago as part of the effort of ‘conscious’ black people to reframe how we see ourselves. I no longer use that terminology, but the recipe was already named.”

Tomatoes and kale is a lovely combination. The tomatoes and onions simmer down into a tart sauce that flavors the kale. Any amount of kale added to this pan, it seems, will cook down into a manageable portion and quickly get eaten. I like to use a pile of this kale as a substrate beneath a big greasy breakfast of bacon, eggs and cheese, in place of toast.

The recipe calls for Spike, a seasoning powder. If Spike isn’t in your pantry, you can replace it with normal salt. It calls for Bragg Liquid Aminos, too, but you can use soy sauce.

*Serves 4*

2 lbs curly kale

1 large red onion

2 medium sized tomatoes

Cooking oil

Powdered cayenne pepper

Spike

Bragg Liquid Aminos or soy sauce

Remove the kale leaves from the ribs, and chop the leaves. Dice the onion and tomatoes. Add a small amount of oil to a skillet and turn heat to medium. Add onions and tomatoes; let sauté for 5 minutes.

Add chopped kale and thoroughly mix with onions and tomatoes. Season to taste with cayenne, Spike and Bragg’s. Sauté for 5 to 7 minutes, until kale is tender but still light green.