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WHY I FARM

As I dug deep into organics and the food movement, I discovered I was missing the point.

Natasha Bowens

When I first decided I wanted to farm, it was because I wanted to find a way of growing food that worked with the earth instead of against it. I wanted to grow food that would rejuvenate my body instead of slowing it down. Like so many others, I was looking for answers in the “good food” movement sweeping the nation. I thought that to be a good steward, all I had to do was follow sustainable agricultural practices and grow healthy food. Now, after six years and stepping foot on more than 75 farms for *The Color of Food*, I’ve learned that I was missing the point completely.

Sitting at the table with so many farmers doing revolutionary work taught me that farming isn’t only about stewarding the land; it’s also about stewarding community and tending the soul. The land beneath our feet carries our history and carries freedom. It is healing and empowering and can be a commons that binds us together. My history traces back to the moment my ancestors’ shackled feet hit this soil, when the African farmer became the American slave. Today, continued racism makes healing crucial. In our gardening plots and on our farms, we can reclaim a connection with the land that was there long before the oppression. We can liberate ourselves by having sovereignty over our square of soil, over our food, and over our bodies.

As soon as I finished the book, I was

eager to become a steward of my community. Today, I work as a community garden coordinator, managing two community gardens and food programming in a few of my local neighborhoods. The communities in these neighborhoods are predominantly low-income, black, and Latino. We garden and cook food together, but in my experience, healthy food access is a secondary goal of our program. The gardens are important, but it's the community that makes the garden. When we work together, share meals together, and laugh together, we're repairing relationships to the soil as a community.

Recently, we had a traumatic event in one of our garden communities: A shooting by a nonresident took place right in front of the garden and was witnessed by several children. A young man from a neighboring community died that day, leaving residents hurt and angry. The media rubbed salt in the wound by painting the picture often painted when violence occurs in communities of color: that this was typical, even expected, in that neighborhood. The community's response was powerful. Instead of accepting the negative narrative, instead of hiding indoors from the violence, residents decided that the only way to fight back was to come together, to heal, and to show what the community is really about. Just a few days later, we gathered together in the garden. With the sunset at our backs casting golden light across the plants and trees, we celebrated our first harvest. We dug our hands into the soil for its healing touch as we pulled up lettuce, cabbage, and carrots. And after, we sat around the picnic table together laughing, sharing food, and listening to the birds sing a resilient song.

This, to me, is what true stewardship is all about. It's these stories that cause me to dig deeper than I ever thought I would when I first picked up that garden shovel six years ago. It's what drives me to cultivate spaces and opportunities for people to unite and bite into their own self-empowerment, tasting the beauty of their soul. For me, there is no richer bounty than that.

"WE KNOW HOW TO WORK WITH THE NATURAL THINGS OF LIFE."



Sará works on the farm.

A story about Sará and Bill Reynolds-Green
Gullah/Geechee Nation

from *Natasha Bowens' The Color of Food:*

The Gullah/Geechee Nation, led by Queen Quet, is a nation of Gullah Geechee people whose roots in West and Central Africa have been tightly preserved since their ancestors arrived here as slaves. The Sea Islands and what's known as the Low Country along the coast from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida, is home to the Gullah/Geechee Nation. The lowlands and marsh of these areas served as the primary grounds for rice production in the 17th and 18th century, and Africans from the traditional rice-growing regions of West Africa were brought to perform the arduous work. Isolated on the Gullah Islands, Gullah Geechee people developed a strong sense of community and were able to preserve more of their African cultural heritage than other groups of African Americans. Gullah people developed

CULTURE SHIFT

a separate Creole language similar to the Krio of Sierra Leone, and they continue distinct cultural patterns in their language, arts, crafts, religious beliefs, folklore, rituals, and foodways, in which rice, fishing and hunting play a big role.

"The history of this island is based on communal survival," says Sará. "We were cut off out here on a rural island. Before they built the bridge, you had to take a boat across, into town. So people learned to be self-sufficient and make with their hands the things they needed to survive. This was the epicenter, with Penn School teaching everybody on the island how to farm and create an environment where you didn't need to go to Beaufort for a lot, only those things we couldn't make ourselves. Most of what we had right here in this community was enough to survive.

"We made it like that, by growing and sharing and selling our own food. I grew up in a family of two brothers and four sisters. We all grew up farming and helping my mother on the farm. As we were coming up, every person just about had a little garden and grew something. My mother was known for growing her peanuts, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. Everyone knew when it was peanut harvest time and okra time, and they would be calling her to buy a bushel of peanuts, okra or both. I would deliver the orders, and I didn't mind 'cause I'd get to drive the car. I was about 13 or 14 and the rule for us was if you sat up tall behind the wheel, nobody would bother you. I would deliver all over the island driving on the dirt roads. Morna was also known for her yeast rolls, and every time she baked a few pans of them I'd be delivering them to neighbors who were sick or who called her up wanting her rolls. Food was at the center of our community.

"The main crops that helped sustain us were the cash crops we grew which helped us go to college. My mother grew tomatoes and cucumbers. Those were the two crops that helped really build the island, back when we had packing houses where distributors and large farmers came and bought what local farmers would bring in to sell from their farms. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that during the summer months between June, July, and a little of August, all you'd be doing is picking cucumbers and tomatoes and taking them to the packing house. That's what helped my mother to support our college tuition. The farm yielded a lot of tomatoes and Morna had big, beautiful tomatoes, and that was her income; we were the farmhands and we helped her. We'd be out there picking and hoeing all summer long.

"My other great-grandfather was a country extension agent who helped the farmers and everyone in the area to farm and utilize their land to be profitable and self-sufficient. He also helped the farms on the proper way to raise farm animals. And everyone helped each other in that way. If one person was a farmer and they farmed a lot of sweet potatoes, then they would share that. If someone else grew cucumbers or squash or greens, they shared. If this person was raising cattle, whenever he killed a cow or hog then

he'd share a piece of that. It was communal. And everyone knew when someone was killing a hog, it was a celebration, and they would go to that person's house early in the morning to help, and they all had their favorite pieces of meat to take home, so everyone's family was fed. That's how my mother and father's house was built. Everyone came every Saturday, and piece by piece they put the house together. That made life worth living for everyone without much hardship on one person. I love that concept, and I try to live it and try to pass that on."

"The culture of the Gullah man is based on loving kindness," Bill adds in his gentle voice and patois accent, rich with hints of the Gullah language. "The average Gullah person will do for you quicker than any other, and they don't mind helping. It's a very spiritual thing. Going out in the creek catching fish, bringing it back in, sharing it with everybody. Loving kindness. We work with our whole community, our environment too. We love the natural, and we know how to work with the natural things of life. We work with the 'poppers' [porpoises or dolphins], we get out on the boat, 'poppers' run the fish up the creek and we follow them. We bang on the boat so the 'poppers' come back out and chase the fish up to the boat. Gullah people learn how to work with animals and nature; we learn how to respect our whole community.

"We farmed together, we always looked out for one another. I grew up on James Island across the water from here and by the time I was a teenager I already had farming in my blood. I grew up close to the farm, and we all worked on the farm for a living, coming out after school and going to pick beans for the farmers. I made \$13.50 a week, and that was enough to get by. We could go to the store and buy a bag of rice for 50 cents and harvest food in the garden and cook for the whole family."

Cooking is something else Bill has been doing his whole life. He's a chef and owner of the restaurant Gullah Grub, which serves up Gullah dishes on the island, drawing hungry patrons from all over the country including chef personalities like Anthony Bourdain and Martha Stewart. Much of the food they cook with is grown on Marshview or fished locally.



SARÁ AND BILL, or Mr. Bill as the kids call him, run a youth program on their farm and in the Gullah Grub restaurant. With Sará's passion for working with children as St. Helena Elementary's guidance counselor and Mr. Bill's passion for cooking and passing on Gullah culture, they found a perfect opportunity to teach farming, cooking, and food culture to the island's youth. They work with children from 4 to 18 years old and pay them stipends for working and learning skills on the farm, taking cooking classes with Mr. Bill, and learning the entire process of farm to table. Some of the teenagers end up working in Mr. Bill's restaurant,

TOOTHPASTE

Excerpt from *The Color of Food*

by Natasha Bowers

“THE CULTURE OF THE GULLAH MAN IS BASED ON LOVING KINDNESS,” BILL ADDS IN HIS GENTLE VOICE AND PATOIS ACCENT, RICH WITH HINTS OF THE GULLAH LANGUAGE.

Bill Reynolds-Green

learning the job skills of cooking and serving, while others work at the farmers market, learning the process of harvesting and selling their crops. Sará started a garden at the school and incorporates food and agriculture and community into her guidance curriculum. She brings many of her students to the farm after school, and more keep signing up as they hear about it from classmates. The youth have called themselves Young Farmers of the Low Country, and I had the pleasure of farming alongside them during my stay on Marshview Farm.



AFTER WE FINISH IN THE FIELDS, the kids harvest food to take home to their families, and I drive to the Gullah Grub to bite into Mr. Bill's red rice and shrimp gumbo. There are two women sitting on the front porch of the restaurant weaving baskets. As I sit in the rocking chair next to them and savor the delicious Gullah grub, I think about the youth, the community, and the rich stories tied to each bite. I can literally taste the love of this Gullah island that Sará and Bill hold and work so hard to pass on. 🍌



Natasha Bowers spent the past five years gathering stories and portraits of farmers and food activists of color for her book *The Color of Food: Stories of Race, Resilience & Farming*. Bowers started *The Color of Food* in 2020 after exploring race and agriculture on her blog *Brown Girl Farming*. At home, she works as a beginning farmer, garden educator, and community activist.

The Color of Food: Stories of Race, Resilience & Farming is published by New Society Publishers.