East Coast Mutt Becomes West Coast Ag Enthusiast

Interview for Doron Comerchero, Founder & Executive Director, “Food, What?!?”

By Jess Brown

Jess: Where were you born and raised?
Doron: I’m an East Coast mutt. I was born in Israel but all my family is from Queens, NY. We moved back to the States when I was about a year old, to Buffalo. I then moved with my Mom outside of New York City—to New Jersey, then Connecticut, with the family center always being in Queens. At the same time, my Dad moved to Arizona, then Holland, then Boston. I had moved nine times by the start of middle school.

Jess: Were you interested in agriculture and food when you were growing up?
Doron: Hah! Not in the least. Lots of love to my mom, as she’s one of my most favorite people in the world, but she was a single working mother with late hours, so dinner wasn’t exactly prepared by Julia Child. If I think about it though, I was always intrigued by my paternal grandmother’s cooking. She made all these dishes that seemed super foreign to me—bamya, desayuno, buñeulos. These were traditional Sephardic (Spanish Jewish) dishes that had been passed down in my family over hundreds of years. My great grandparents on that side emigrated from Turkey but still cooked traditional Sephardic dishes from when we must have been in Spain, and they spoke our indigenous language from Spain, Ladino. My maternal grandparents had a few potted herbs, if I remember correctly, on their terrace of their 5th floor apartment in Queens. I suppose I looked at them once or twice, but certainly did not have any connection to ag or even gardening growing up. It wasn’t until college, to be honest, that ag entered my life (besides the fact that I ate food every day). This amazing guy, Aaron DeLong, one of the first people I met at orientation and who later became one of my closest friends (still is to this day) was from outside of Philly. He worked at a farm named Pete’s. I think it was a conventional vegetable operation. Anyhow, the stories he told sparked something in me and I found a local farm to start volunteering on. I got really into compost, and ironically my grandfather with the plants on his terrace in New York City had an early edition of Rodale’s Book of Composting that he gave me. The love affair with ag and composting blossomed and I created and taught a composting class for undergrads at the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan where I was studying. From that time to where I am now is a long, wonderful adventure and plants, ag, food, justice and community have been a part of it every step of the way.

Jess: How did you get experience in agriculture?
Doron: Back in 1999, when I was working for New York City’s Community Gardening program, I was invited to bring some youth from the Bronx to a brand new national youth empowerment and food justice conference called Rooted in Community. It was the second year of this incredible gathering of youth from around the country who were working with local non-profits on the intersections of youth empowerment, food justice, and community health. I was in my early
20’s and was blown away. I was hooked. I joined the leadership team of Rooted in Community and over the next many years got to know phenomenal community-based programs working with youth, food, and justice in every corner of this nation. Five years later I applied to the UCSC Farm and Garden Apprenticeship to get my hands dirty in farming. After two years there, I realized there was infinitely more to learn in farming, and given that food and farming would be our vehicle at FoodWhat?! I decided to move back East to do a year on a 65-acre production farm. That was probably the hardest year of work in my life, yet incredibly rewarding. It was tractor work and maintenance, irrigation, weed management, pest management, harvest, post-harvest handling, Quickbooks, CSA, customers…5am starts and 7pm wrap ups…and I loved it!

Jess: When did you start FoodWhat?!
Doron: At the end of that farming year, mentioned previously, I was eager to get this youth non-profit off the ground. I had two communities that I was deeply connected to, Santa Cruz and New York City—which couldn’t be more different. A few of us put a proposal together to get a piece of land in New York City and to our great surprise we were approved—but we couldn’t break ground for three more years. Simultaneously I reached out to folks on the UCSC Farm and at Life Lab to see if there was a piece of land there that could serve youth, and I got green-lighted all the way. I called Robert Acosta, an incredible man who led and still leads the SC Youth Center, shared with him the vision, asked him if it was something that he thought was needed and would serve youth, and listened to everything he had to say. He was super supportive, said it was a unique approach, and gave an emphatic, YES! It was clear that more youth programming was needed. After having the great fortune of reconnecting with a friend from Santa Cruz, the magical Abby Bell, we decided to launch this youth non-profit together. And in early 2007, Food What?! was born!

Jess: What is your motto?
Doron: We always talk at FoodWhat?! about “finishing strong.” This is particularly useful working with youth on the farm. Every Friday during our Summer Job Training Program we jump in at Live Earth’s production fields and bust out big harvest, transplants, or weeding projects. Most of those Friday mornings for the past few years, we would spend an hour or two harvesting a few thousand pounds of potatoes. It’s hard work and easy to be “over” it, but we talk about finishing strong, and we all do, youth and staff alike. In a way those days become metaphors, showing us the great reserve of strength and determination we each have. If we can keep pushing through in the potatoes, and we have that experience in our minds and in our bodies, then we can do the same when called to in other difficult situations in our lives. And they will come, so it’s an incredible tool.

We believe that empowerment comes from within and when done in that way, it is lasting and real and most powerful.
Jess: Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

Doron: Language is very important to me and in the work we do at FoodWhat?! I pay careful attention to how we communicate. I don’t believe there is a word or phrase that I overuse. I can share this though… Often funders or the press or partners will ask me how we “empower youth.” I share very honestly that we don’t. That often causes confusion, as you might imagine, given that we call ourselves a youth empowerment organization. What we actually do with great intentionality is to create all the conditions—a safe space, meaningful work, a supportive and loving community of adults and peer-youth, connections to the land and food production, delicious, nourishing food, and the like—for the young people we work with to choose to step into the fire and grow. To choose their own empowerment. We believe that empowerment comes from within and when done in that way, it is lasting and real and most powerful.

Jess: When and where are you the happiest?

Doron: That’s an easy one: when I’m with the youth crew; when my four-year old son’s eyes sparkle with joy; when I’m on the dance floor and fully in my body; and when I’m deep in a snowy mountain range on my backcountry skis.

Jess: What is something about Doron that most people don’t know?

Doron: I’d like to DJ dance parties. Last summer, for the UCSC Farm and Garden’s 50th anniversary, I was invited to DJ their dance party in the barn for around 500 people. My wife, who is an amazing farmer and the co-manager of the UCSC Farm, was talking to a friend hanging by the door when Tom Broz (Live Earth Farm and recent President of the Farm Bureau) walks in. He leans in and asks her “Where’s Doron?” She points to the guy behind the DJ booth through the crowd of people getting down, and Tom pauses, then says to her, “Now I get him!”

Jess: Which talent would you most like to have?

Doron: I’d like to know how to play upright bass or cello.

Jess: How do you balance your family life while running such a busy organization?

Doron: It’s really hard. Especially with my wife working full time as a farmer and educator. But it’s a priority. Simple as that. It’s still a growth area for me. Over the past decade we have moved from a two-person operation to a full staff of seven, plus a handful of youth junior staff and interns. Our permanent staff at FoodWhat?! are notably high caliber and phenomenally gifted folks in each part of the operation they steward. I really attribute my ability, in my role, to be as connected and present to my family as I am, to our staff.

Jess: If you could have dinner with three people (alive or deceased), who would you invite?

Doron:
- Marvin Gaye. His music moved and inspired so many to look closely at ourselves, the politics around us, and the environment. His lyrics invite us to sit with the love and pain and beauty and ugliness of the world and hold that full spectrum of what is.
- Reverend Deb from Inner Light Ministries in Soquel. Every time I have the privilege to be in a space where she is leading or speaking, I feel inspired, energized, and hopeful. To me, she embodies the intersection of truth telling, love, power and passion.
- Irving Busman (Poppa). He’s my grandfather who helped raise me and who was one of the funniest people on the planet. I miss him. I would love to catch him up on life since he passed and get to spend time with him again. As he was dying, I shared with him that I was leaving New York City and heading to California to learn how to farm. I think he would be proud.

Jess: Where will we see Doron in 10 years?

Doron: Probably in a long row of potatoes smiling and working to “finish strong” with an incredible group of resilient and powerful young people…