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KAT VON D

ON VEGANISM
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MY MISSION”

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PLANT POWER

HOW THE GROWING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY
MOVEMENT IS EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES.

BY JESSICA TURNER AND JULIE GUERASEVA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAYDE PERKIN

Amid a landscape of gas stations and an oil field, there are crops like swiss chard, snap peas and kale sprouting at Hohm Farm. “Being able to grow your own food is incredibly beautiful. It reconnects you with an innate love that I strongly believe we all share as humans,” says Loghan Call, 26-year-old vegan chef and founder of Planted Cuisine, who lives and works on this urban micro farm in the heart of Los Angeles. “It’s freedom, it’s empowerment, and it’s grounding in an increasingly ungrounded world.” Every few months, Call brings people together for his Dinner Experiences, sourcing many of the ingredients right from the farm. Call’s goal is a food revolution. “We have to step away from big agriculture and mono crops,” he says. “We have to get back to local farming feeding our immediate communities.” This idea is not new, he explains. Toward the end of World War II, as many as 50 percent of Americans had a “victory garden,” the result of a government campaign encouraging people to grow their own food. Only when farming adopted the technology developed during the war did big ag began to dominate the food system. Call belongs to a rapidly growing grassroots movement that is putting power back in the hands of the people.


The principles of food sovereignty were originated in 1996 by the international peasant movement La Via Campesina at the World Food Summit and officially defined in 2007’s “Declaration of Nyéléni,” which stated that, “Food sovereignty puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” The interests of corporations have monopolized global agriculture to the detriment of the environment, our health and all sentient beings. Three companies — DuPont, Monsanto and Syngenta — control half of the global commercial market for seed. Growing faster than any other agriculture sector, the livestock industry generates more greenhouse gas emissions than transportation, is responsible for up to 33 percent of the world’s water usage, and is a dominant source of deforestation. In

the US, slaughterhouse employees are paid poverty wages to perform dangerous work, routinely denied basic rights. “The current system sees human and nonhuman animals as disposable. Industry only cares about profit,” says Lauren Ornelas, founder of the Food Empowerment Project, an organization that has introduced the concept of veganism as an important part of the food justice discussion.

In its 2010 report, the United Nations Environment Programme outlined that a global shift to a vegan diet is necessary in combating world hunger, fuel instability and climate change. Community-centered, plant-based agriculture is one of our most promising means of building a truly sustainable, just and compassionate future. “We have alternatives that protect the Earth, protect our farmers, and protect our health and nutrition,” wrote Vandana Shiva, pioneering ecofeminist and founder of India-based food justice organization Navdanya, in her 2012 essay “Occupy Our Food Supply.” Research has shown that when total output is considered, small farms are more productive than their industrialized counterparts. Working together to break down the political stronghold of agribusiness on federal and state governments is more urgent than ever. “Agrarian reform would be imperative to allow people to grow all of their own food,” says Lauren Ornelas. “I believe a [viable] model would include no harm to any living creature, would not involve agricultural chemicals and would allow equity for everyone involved in the production and sales.” Here, we profile three farms that serve as inspiring models of food sovereignty and community agriculture in North America.

GREENS IN QUEENS

Tucked away on a half-acre plot of formerly abandoned Metropolitan Transit Authority property in Long Island City, Queens, is Smiling Hogshead Ranch, a volunteer- and member-run urban farm. Its well-cared-for beds, a stone’s throw from the screeching trains of the





breadfruit

papaya

pineapple

dragonfruit

Tangelo

lychee

sour soy

cauliflower

mango

longan

cacao

carrots

avocado

Tamarind

cherimoya

Radish

tomatoes

snakefruit

Broccoli

acai

eggplant

Sunnyside Rail Yards, are a testament to the dedication of the farm's members. Smiling Hogshead began when a group of neighborhood activists united to squat the local eyesore. "We started as just a guerrilla garden," says steering committee member Jennifer Plewka, "And now we are a fully functioning community urban farm." The "Hogs," as members call themselves, took possession of the derelict site without city approval and began growing vegetables and flowers there. In the fall of 2014, three years after starting their occupation of city property, they were given the official green light to operate.

Nearly every night of the week a Hog can be found working diligently to maintain the farm, which now grows blueberries, mulberries, raspberries, various fruit trees, squashes, melons and various leafy greens. None of the Hogs have designated beds at the Ranch — each member participates in overall upkeep of the farm, and is able to partake in the abundance of what is produced from the land. There are no fences at Smiling Hogshead either. Occasionally, a row of peppers or a few peaches go missing. But members shrug it off and insist on keeping the lot open to encourage local residents to experience the farm. "We have a community and collaborative ethos here," explains Plewka.

Studies have shown that spending time in nature significantly decreases depression and anxiety — mental health issues that acutely affect urban dwellers. In one of the United States' most densely-populated cities, Smiling Hogshead helps people who are seeking communion with the Earth, an important aspect of food sovereignty. "What we do is help connect people to nature, help them get back to what they know, inherently," Plewka says. She describes the joy volunteers and members derive from the opportunity to put their hands in soil, taking refuge from their hectic lives to tend the farm's strawberry patch or weed a raised bed. The need for experiences with the natural world is in the human DNA, yet city denizens so infrequently have an opportunity to engage in them. Recognizing food, and the Earth on which it is produced, as sacred, allows us to honor its true value — one that exceeds any price tag placed upon it.

Smiling Hogshead encourages its members to regularly organize workshops and events at the Ranch. One such gathering, dubbed the "post-work work party," has become a weekly ritual of volunteers and members meeting up after their day jobs to tidy up the farm, afterward relaxing with a late candle-lit potluck dinner. This chance to slow down, connect with neighbors and work the land exemplifies how plum the fruits of the food sovereignty movement can be in the urban jungle.

FARMED WITH KNOWLEDGE

The Isle of Borikén, originally inhabited by the Taíno people, who migrated to the Antilles from the Orinoco Delta in present-day Venezuela, has received no respite from colonial rule since Spanish vessels first landed there in the 15th century. Now a territory of the United States, Puerto Rico — as it's known to most of us — faces an uncertain economic future, grappling with a \$70-billion debt. Because of its unique legal status as neither a sovereign nation-state nor a U.S. state, Puerto Rico lacks the ability to declare bankruptcy. Importing nearly 85 percent of its food, the island's food future is wrapped up in its colonial legacy. With a median income that is half that of Mississippi, our nation's poorest state, and with more than 40 percent of its population living below the poverty line, issues around food loom large.

"For us, food sovereignty is about economic empowerment," says Ana Elisa Pérez Quintero, who co-runs the seven-acre agro-ecological farm cooperative Finca Conciencia with Jorge Cora Peña in Vieques, a small Puerto Rican island eight miles east of the mainland. In Vieques, where few industries operate save tourism, Conciencia's work is aimed at building small, family-owned farms that will give poor Puerto Ricans a sense of pride and skills with which to grow food for their families. "The skills are important, but so is land. We need land," Pérez Quintero stresses. By building Viequenses' access to land and income, by providing technical training and the opportunity to participate in democracy in action, Finca Conciencia hopes to develop a regenerative framework that other parts of Puerto Rico can then replicate.

The nature of the United States' relationship with Puerto Rico plays a critical role in restricting the island from prospering from its own agriculture, as Pérez Quintero explains. The Jones Act of 1920 mandates that all agricultural products produced in Puerto Rico must, before being sent to other countries, first stop in the United States where they are subject to import tax, inspection, and restrictive labeling requirements. The law also requires that all goods sent to Puerto Rico have a port of origin in the mainland United States. These requirements are devastating to small farmers who want to sell their goods on the world market, and raise the prices of food imported by Puerto Rico.

The residents of Vieques face extreme marginalization. After 35 years of using Vieques as a bombing range, the U.S. Navy left the island in 2003, but continues to occupy two-thirds of some of Vieques' most valuable property. Viequense cancer rates are 30 percent higher than mainland Puerto Rico, yet the island lacks qualified doctors—or even a real hospital.

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“Puerto Rico is facing a debt crisis, but there was always a crisis here,” says Pérez Quintero. “Puerto Rico is a colony in the most blunt way.”

Finca Conciencia is working to overturn these colonial legacies, by enabling Viequeses to grow food that will feed their communities, creating pathways for much-needed economic opportunity. The farm grows jobsos, sorghum, ginger, turmeric, arugula, broccoli, corn, okra, taro, sweet potatoes, ginger, passion fruit, bananas, plantain, mangoes and a host of other fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants. The bounty is representative of the potentialities of an ecologically diverse Puerto Rican food future. Conciencia’s organizing model is based on “horizontalidad”, a practice of self-governance that took shape during Argentina’s 2001 economic crisis. “In Vieques, this means bringing about the empowerment of campesinos [peasant farmers] through farmer-to-farmer training and worker education,” Pérez Quintero says. The farm teaches a series of weekly classes at a Vieques’ health center, bringing much-needed knowledge about farming methods, as well as medicinal plants growing on the island that can be used to treat the prevalent health problems here.

Pérez Quintero and Cora Peña are incorporating Finca Conciencia as a worker cooperative so that it will be owned by a community of Viequesse farmers, rather than the farm’s founders. “We see strength in numbers and in community,” Pérez Quintero says. “We want to go beyond the non-profit model, and the structures that typically go with it, to one that is truly participatory.” Focused on feeding the communities who are growing food, rather than consumers in distant countries, Finca Conciencia’s model is a shining example of people-sustaining agriculture.

CROPS OF KINDNESS

Sherry Milford and Yan Roberts run Piebird Farm Stay and Sanctuary, an eight-acre vegan farm, animal sanctuary, bed and breakfast and open-pollinated organic seed library in Nipissing, Ontario, about three and a half hours north of Toronto. Currently providing sanctuary to 23 non-human animals, they have found that their residents—and visiting guests alike—are best wooed with homemade vegan pie. Food sovereignty is an embodied ethos here. “We don’t use manure, blood-meal, and other animal-based products. This is another way of educating people about veganism and not exploiting animals in any way,” says Milford.

One of Piebird’s ongoing projects is re-naming the open-pollinated heirloom vegetable varieties in their seed library, from



historic titles which often glorify violence and animal suffering, to those toying with characteristics unique to Piebird plant and animal residents. “Bull’s Blood Beet” was renamed “Kissing Booth Beet.” Its packaging features an illustration of MommaBill, an elderly goat, prepared to dish out beet-stained kisses at a kissing booth. Their “Peas for Peace” seed package explains that the legume pulls nitrogen out of the air and stores it in nodules in peas’ roots, making the element available to be utilized by other plants. This, the package says, is a much better way to utilize nitrogen: to help sustain life, rather than build life-destroying nuclear bombs. In this way, Piebird facilitates humans forming a deeper connection to the natural world, and looking critically at structures within the human world.

Piebird has endeavored to make itself sustainable for its human and non-human residents. Despite accepting donations, the farm’s economic viability does not rely exclusively on the generosity of donors. Piebird has created multiple income streams to ensure its self-sufficiency. The bed and breakfast, heirloom seeds, and educational workshops are all a part of this. But Milford and Roberts always come back to the importance of teaching people to grow food themselves, and form their own connections to what they eat. “The vegan movement is in many ways a

consumer movement. While we appreciate the parallel economy that has been established and is being established, since we are creating a new food system, why not do it differently?” explains Roberts. “A garden is one place where people practice and experience not being a consumer. In any relationship we must participate well-roundedly. Forming a relationship with one’s food means contributing, not just taking or consuming.”

While both can thank their ancestors for pie-baking prowess, Milford and Roberts do not come from long lines of farmers. They began Piebird with an ideal and have continued building from there. The success of their project, the happy non-human animals they have enabled to live out their lives in peace, and the stories of personal transformation from people who have planted Piebird’s seeds all attest to the power of making changes for the sake of the Earth. “Even if it’s a small step of a small plot or a balcony garden, just making an effort to understand what food is, understand the value of food and how it has been devalued— is a huge obstacle to overcome in building the new model,” Roberts says. “All these things can only change when people have an intimate relationship with their food. Not one in which they are just taking, but in which there is some give as well.” ■