A Life in Service

By: Virginie Boone
Duskie Estes and her husband, John Stewart, were pioneers of Sonoma County’s farm-to-table movement without the need to label it as such. Their restaurant ZAZU Kitchen + Farm opened in an old roadhouse in the Russian River Valley in 2001, where they cooked and served amazing food, much of it grown themselves, and supported local farmers, ranchers and wineries, believing 100% in the philosophy that you should know the face that feeds you.
Thousands of meals later, the restaurant’s word-of-mouth sense of community was enough to launch Estes into food television, first as a contestant on Food Network’s *The Next Iron Chef*, where she competed twice, and later as a judge on both Food Network’s *Guy’s Grocery Games* and the famous *Diners, Drive-Ins & Dives*.

She became a regular and beloved fixture on TV for years, her hair often in pigtails, symbolic of a wide approachability that split into a no-bullshit sense of fun and an equally no-bullshit sense of mission.
“I find my power in how I choose to spend my money,” she said when we met at her house recently.

“We purchased directly from farmers that care for their animals and the earth. On my television appearances, I share this loudly and often. Sometimes, some of it makes the cut.”
Gleaning

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ZAZU GOES BIG

Estes’ cooking chops were as impressive as her charisma, and they soon outgrew their roadhouse. In 2013, she and Stewart moved ZAZU into a promising development in Sebastopol called The Barlow. With a larger and more modern kitchen and dining room, ZAZU was the crucial anchor to The Barlow, a major draw to bring people in.

Things moved along as they were supposed to, and the restaurant was often packed, while other surrounding businesses came and went. Estes’ presence and influence grew inside and outside of Sonoma. When the 2017 fires hit, sixteen years after ZAZU had opened, she was on the front lines, feeding first responders and the displaced. The community had a tacit commitment among its business owners – if you could help, you did. So she did.

Devastation of the Coffey Park neighborhood in Santa Rosa, CA in 2017
Photo Credit: Marcio Jose Sanchez / AP
And so it was all the more unjust when, in the winter of 2019, The Barlow flooded from heavy rains. At ZAZU, 22 inches of water contaminated with gasoline and other industrial and agricultural runoff permeated the 3,600-square-foot space. Two months after the flood, Estes and Stewart, overwhelmed by the cleanup, moved out pizza ovens, refrigerators and ranges.
With simply no way to pay the $8,000-a-month rent for a hugely water-damaged space, not to mention help 35 displaced employees out of the sudden watershed, Estes and Stewart walked away. They never returned; ZAZU closed in April 2019, a victim of climate change, a developer’s faulty planning, and insufficient mitigation efforts against the well-known possibility of flood. A lawsuit remains pending.

Everyone hoped ZAZU would simply find a new home. The community rallied and a GoFundMe was set up, but it wasn’t enough.
As we all waited for ZAZU’s next act, Estes was quietly getting involved in something she has always cared about: ethical sourcing and advocacy for small farmers.

“Of everyone I know, she is the most difficult to describe without writing volumes,” said Guy Davis of Davis Family Vineyards in Healdsburg. “I don’t know another person with the heartfelt virtues of integrity, hard work, selfless nature and enthusiasm she brings to every moment of the day. When you work side by side with her it feels like a blessing. Her aura and energy are infectious and uplifting.”

What many don’t know about Estes’ career is that, prior to ZAZU, she led a service program for chefs dedicated to hunger relief through Share Our Strength; José Andrés was one of its first volunteers. She also ran the kitchen at GLIDE Memorial Church in San Francisco, a mecca for positive vibes and resurrected lives, serving thousands of hungry people every day. A graduate of Brown University with a degree in American History, she also worked at the Clinton White House on Hillary’s Clinton’s healthcare bill. A sense of mission was always on her path.
With the flooding of ZAZU, Estes got a new chance to integrate all of her passions.
“During the pandemic, going into a kitchen wasn’t an option for me,” she told me in July. “I was afraid – the close quarters, a lot of bodies bumping into each other, my parents who I help care for. A friend of mine suggested I go out and glean. I had never heard of that before.”

Gleaning is the act of collecting leftover crops from farmers’ fields and orchards after they have been commercially harvested or in non-commercial spaces, including backyards, where it is not economically profitable to harvest.

In April of 2020, Estes took a position as executive director of a gleaning operation in Sonoma County called Farm to Pantry that is devoted to fighting food insecurity by gleaning from local farms and backyard gardens that would otherwise not have a market, or the labor, to harvest perfectly edible food.

“I get the same immediate gratification I craved as a chef,” Estes said. “In our restaurant, in the same day, we cook the food and ideally make people happy. With gleaning, we harvest in the morning and deliver in the afternoon. You get to see the difference you make; you see people’s faces change when they receive the gorgeous produce to feed their families.”
Farm to Pantry Volunteer
Photo Credit: Steven Krause
Since its founding in 2008, Farm to Pantry has rescued over 3 million servings of produce. It gleaned an estimated 100,000 pounds of produce in 2020 alone, an estimated 400,000 servings of immunity-boosting fruits and vegetables.

Through her restaurant connections and innate drive, Estes is responsible for a huge amount of the nonprofit’s growth, bumping the volunteer force from 30 to more than 300, the number of properties gleaned from 30 to more than 225, and the amount harvested up to 13,000 pounds a week.

“Taking on this new directorship in the beginning of the pandemic,” said Davis, “putting aside her own career as a chef and television celebrity chef and judge to do good for others, it shows her amazing commitment. She is really making a difference in so many families’ lives. She is changing and saving the world.”
Local food pantries and community groups like Corazón Healdsburg, which serves the undocumented, Redwood Empire Food Bank, Reach for Home and Alliance Medical Center, receive much of the food, a total of 85 community partners in all.

“Duskie has been such an important partner for Corazón over the last year,” said Glaydon de Freitas, the CEO of Corazón Healdsburg. “She is tenacious about finding ways to get more of Sonoma County’s beautiful bounty into the bellies of our community members. It’s an opportunity for neighbors to get to know each other, share what’s going on in their lives, pass on information. The boxes are a great way to start a conversation and we’re building trust with the community and learning from them.”
As in so many communities across the world, the demand for donated food soared during COVID-19, with many in the restaurant industry most hard-hit. At the same time, many farms lost restaurant accounts as the pandemic dragged on.

And fires, that ever-present demon here, affected the wine grape harvest, lowering the ability of many vineyard workers to make enough money to feed their families.

“Witnessing both the urgent need for food, with unemployment numbers hitting those we saw in 1940, and farmers in a harvesting and distribution pickle, I see the Farm to Pantry nonprofit model as a remarkable way to arrest food waste,” Estes said. “Farm to Pantry is about food justice.”

The Sonoma County Hunger Index, which is created by a coalition of food assistance agencies along with the Sonoma County Human Services Department and Department of Health Services, estimates that one in three people in Sonoma County face food insecurity, in a population of nearly 500,000. In enraging tandem, in the United States, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that nearly 40% of the food supply is wasted.
Of her transition from chef to nonprofit leader, Estes explained, “Everyone wins — the gleaners, the property owners, the families facing food insecurity and our planet. I get to feel like Robin Hood every day.”
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Gleaning

Haystack Farm, Sonoma, CA
Photo Credit: Steven Krause
Food waste is responsible for 10% of the nation’s greenhouse gas emissions, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Farm to Pantry is helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by rescuing food that would otherwise be wasted (food waste breaks down and emits greenhouse gases like CO2 and methane when dumped in landfills) and sequestering carbon while they’re at it.
“We tackle so much at the same time — food waste, hunger and climate change, while building community,” Estes said.

“When we waste food, we waste all the energy and water it took to grow, harvest, transport and package it. If food goes into the landfill and rots, it produces methane, a greenhouse gas even more potent than carbon dioxide.”

The organization figures in 2020 alone it spared the air of 200 metric tons of CO2, the equivalent of an average passenger vehicle driving around the world 17 times. An organization with this kind of ability for impact in just a year can make an enormous impact in the long run.

Questions for the future include expanding Farm to Pantry beyond Sonoma County, perhaps even beyond California, as well as diving deeper into the root causes of food insecurity, including racial injustice.
“It drives me crazy to know there are oranges, greens and other produce being abandoned out there when there are hungry mouths to feed,” Estes said. “Food security is within our reach. We may be living in an uncertain world right now, but Mother Earth continues to provide, and it is our job to ensure the gift of food is not wasted.”