

Food, Food Everywhere, and Not a Bite to Eat

By Erica Stahl Wiggins

It's a hot July afternoon in Austin. The cupboards are bare and the dinner hour is approaching quickly. Times are tough, and the car sits broken down in the driveway. The grocery store is over a mile away, but just down the street are three fast food restaurants and a convenience store. What would you do?

If this scenario sounds familiar, you just might live in a "food desert," an urban or rural area in which access to fresh, nutritious food is limited, usually by distance to a supermarket combined with a lack of access to transportation. Food deserts in urban areas are often found in minority and low income neighborhoods and affect these populations disproportionately. The elderly and disabled are also vulnerable to the effects of food deserts. These areas are not necessarily devoid of food altogether, rather, the choices in these areas are often limited to fast food and convenience store fare.

THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

In January 2009, the United States Department of Agriculture released a report to Congress entitled "Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences." The report was the result of a year-long study conducted by the USDA which aimed to assess these areas, identify characteristics and causes, consider how local populations are affected and make recommendations to resolve the problem of food deserts in the United States.

**"We have to eliminate food deserts in this country, and we have to do it now."
—Michelle Obama**

The report found that limited access to nutritious food and easy access to less healthy food choices, such as fast food, may be linked to poor diets, obesity and diet-related diseases. The report further stated that access to affordable and nutritious food depends on both availability and consumer demand, and indicates that a combination of consumer behavior, together with higher costs to retailers of developing stores in underserved areas, may be two contributing factors to these areas of nutritional blight. Two recommendations of the report address these issues, the first suggesting that subsidy programs or restructured zoning policies might convince grocers to move into these areas. To address the consumer demand issue, public health campaigns can educate residents on nutrition with the aim of changing buying habits.

In the spirit of education, First Lady Michelle Obama and the non-profit organization Let's Move are addressing the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States, along with the correlation between access to healthy and fresh foods and health problems in children. "We have to eliminate food deserts in this country, and we have to do it now," Mrs. Obama stated in a promotional video for the organization, which also focuses on public school food programs and physical exercise. The First Lady was also present to promote a partnership between the Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services and the Treasury as they released details of their Healthy Food Financing Initiative in February, which aspires to end food deserts in the United States within seven years. The Initiative will attack the issue on many fronts, funding community development projects, construction or expansion of grocery stores and installing refrigerated units for produce in convenience stores being just a few examples.

AUSTIN IS NO OASIS

Austin has its share of food deserts. Similar to national trends, they are found mostly in the lower income areas of the city, and not surprisingly, clustered east of I-35. City planners are in the preliminary stages of addressing the problem in Travis County, and have hard data to back up their assertions that this is a major public health crisis affecting the most vulnerable citizens of the city. "There are not enough grocery stores [east of I-35] that sell basic foods (quality fruit and vegetables, cereal, dairy and meats). Instead, there are a few corner stores where you will find expensive, overpriced packaged food with high calorie content and low nutrition value. Therefore, it is not surprising to find more diet-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity in these urban food deserts," said Adriana Botello de Prioleau of The Happy Kitchen, a cooking and nutrition program affiliated with the Sustainable Food Center.

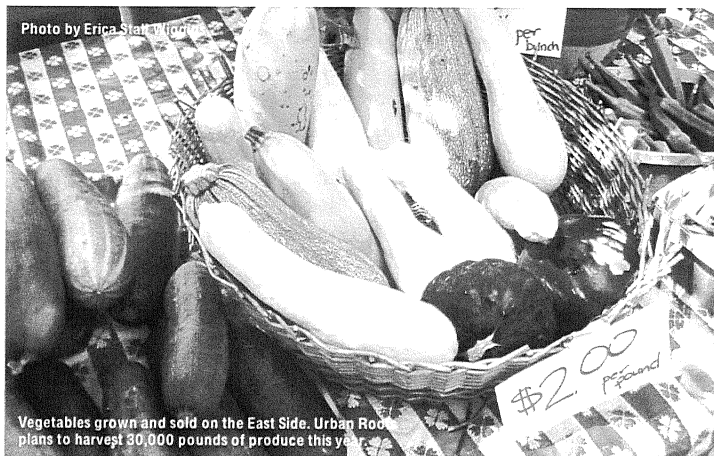


Photo by Erica Stahl Wiggins
Vegetables grown and sold on the East Side. Urban Roots plans to harvest 30,000 pounds of produce this year.

Mortality data collected by the City of Austin overlaid with maps of major grocery stores show clearly that diseases related to poor nutrition, such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer are much higher in areas devoid of stores which sell fresh foods and larger selections of healthy choices. The City is beginning to investigate programs and ask questions. "Can we incentivize the retailers to consider locating in these areas?" Public Health and Community Services Assistant Director Shannon Jones III asks. Jones and his team have identified a handful of food deserts along major population corridors, some of which have the added problem of inadequate public transportation. As they move forward, they will meet with retailers, county and health officials to create a comprehensive campaign.

COMMUNITY EFFORTS

As the City begins to organize around the issue, grassroots organizations are already on the ground and changing lives in east side communities, with education and youth programs creating a groundswell of nutrition awareness and demand for better access to affordable, nutritious foods.

With balanced nutrition for underserved populations as their end goal, The Happy Kitchen/La Cocina Alegre (THK) is a nationally recognized cooking and nutrition education program nurturing skills in food selection and preparation. Advice on how to shop within a budget, and free cooking classes for low-income and minority neighborhoods are just two of their offerings. With the Sustainable Food Center, they will continue to work to improve the nutrition profile in underserved areas through the incorporation of a Food Policy Council and food system planning into neighborhood revitalization efforts. Financial and technical assistance programs targeted to food stores in low-income communities, shopper shuttles, reduced fares and other transportation solutions will aim to help people get to stores.

Urban Roots is a youth development program which uses sustainable agriculture to effect lasting change for youth participants, and to nourish East Austin residents who currently have limited access to healthy foods. Now in its third year, the program offers paid internships to teens aged 14-17, who work a three-acre lot in

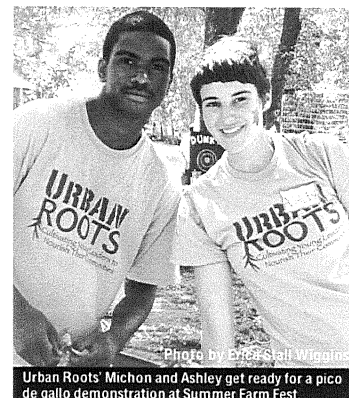


Photo by Erica Stahl Wiggins
Urban Roots' Michon and Ashley get ready for a pico de gallo demonstration at Summer Farm Fest.

East Austin, producing vegetables which are sold at local farmers markets and donated to food pantries. The farm offers a safe, comfortable space for the youth, many of whom live in food deserts themselves, to learn about sustainable food practices and nutrition, and gives them hands on experience in helping those in need through work with organizations like Meals on Wheels. Opportunities for public speaking and leadership present themselves to the young farmers by way of speaking engagements at local schools and tours of the farm, two key ways in which program messages of nutrition and community involvement are communicated to the surrounding neighborhoods.

To more directly address the issue of food deserts in Austin, Urban Roots has organized the CAFE (Community Action for Food Equality) Project; working directly with communities to find out what the real barriers are to accessing healthy foods. With assistance from nutrition experts at Texas State University, along with teachers and organizations such as PODER (People Organized in Defense of the Earth and her Resources), the organization will assess neighborhood needs as reported by residents of those areas. "We're targeting folks who haven't been asked these questions before," said Max Elliott, Program Coordinator of Urban Roots. "It's a collaboration," he continued. At the Urban Roots Summer Farm Fest held on June 26, CAFE Project Organizer Shirene Garcia expressed her excitement: "The process is just as important as the result," she said of the grassroots nature of the work and the input they will request of neighborhood residents. They plan to present an action plan to the Sustainable Food Policy Board, and follow up with a full assessment of the issue in 2011.

With the local organization and support of fresh food production and education programs, residents of Austin's food deserts may soon join to form a collective voice for nutrition equality. As advocates in Austin and beyond band together to fight this issue, a future where everyone can afford healthy, fresh food begins to look less like a mirage and more like reality.

RESOURCES:

www.youthlaunch.org/programs/seeds
www.sustainablefoodcenter.org
www.thefoodtrust.org
www.ers.usda.gov/FoodAtlas/
www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AP/AP036