





PHOTO BY PLUM & MULE COMMUNITY MARKET

# Bringing everyone to the table

**HOW A COALITION IS KEEPING CULTURE AT THE FOREFRONT OF LOCAL AGRICULTURE**

BY NORAH MACHIA

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utritious eating, which includes a variety of fruits and vegetables, is key to achieving better health and wellbeing. However, access to healthy foods is limited for disadvantaged communities, especially for individuals who don't own a car. About 32% of Syracuse residents live below the federal poverty line and a census report released last year identified Syracuse as having the highest child poverty rate in the country among cities with at least 100,000 people. Neighborhood grocery stores that carried fresh, affordable produce have disappeared and the stores within walking distance are dollar stores that don't sell fresh fruits and vegetables. This creates a food desert.

A diverse population like Syracuse's faces another type of food insecurity — a lack of options that match the cultural identities present. Finding familiar items or foods native to their home countries is a challenge refugees and immigrants settling in the United States encounter. Food that is culturally relevant is not just about what is eaten. For many, it includes the cultural practices that are part of the preparation and consumption of the food, reflecting their heritage, values and beliefs.

Community members, farmers, businesses and nonprofit organizations have been working together to change the narrative by growing more healthy and culturally relevant foods on Onondaga County farms and expanding access.

Organic seedlings grow in a tunnel at Wylie Fox Farm, a partner of Plum & Mule Community Market.



The Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance (SOFSA), founded in 2019, is a coalition promoting food sovereignty throughout Syracuse, Onondaga County and the Onondaga Nation. Food sovereignty means that access to healthy food is a basic human right, that food should be produced sustainably and that people involved in the production, distribution and consumption of food should have control over the systems of production and distribution.

The organization “works with everyone who is part of the food system” and has held many listening sessions to address the complex issues of food insecurity, says Director Maura Ackerman.

SOFSA has been a driving force in convening people around food insecurity concerns and how to solve them. Partnerships among government agencies, nonprofits, educators, public health advocates, individuals facing food insecurity and others are critical to addressing the causes

of inequitable food systems. “We’re all trying to fight a system that doesn’t work,” Ackerman says. “We want to make sure everyone has a voice at the table.”

SOFSA has helped secure more than \$5 million in government funding and private foundation support for the network and its partners by providing grant writing assistance, letters or support and making connections among participants. The funds support network building, farming, food access and food sovereignty projects. The organization has given 19% of money fundraised back to its partners.



The Food Bank of Central New York is a SOFSA marketing and distribution partner. The Food Bank is one of 10 established in New York state to support independent food pantries operating at churches, community centers and human service organizations. It serves more



The Food Bank of Central New York hosts Just Say Yes to Fruits & Vegetables demonstrations at the Syracuse Downtown Farmers Market in Clinton Square.

PHOTO BY FOOD BANK OF CENTRAL NEW YORK

than 400 emergency food programs, covering a 12,334-square-mile region encompassing urban and rural communities. For some of these pantries, the Food Bank is their main supplier, says Lynn Hy, chief development officer.

The Food Bank obtains food from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Commodities program, along with donations from manufacturers, distributors and retail partners.

The agency also purchases food directly, and the main source of fresh produce comes from regional farmers, a relationship that continues to expand. The Food Bank was awarded funding through the recently established Nourish New York program to purchase food grown in New York state. In the past three years, the Food Bank has purchased more than 3.3 million pounds of New York-grown produce.

Additionally, the Food Bank hosts Just Say Yes to Fruits & Vegetables workshops and recipe demonstrations to encourage healthy practices.



Rhonda Vesey is a strong believer that everyone, regardless of their income level, should have access to healthy foods. When the only South Side supermarket, a Tops store at Valley Plaza, closed in 2018, “that really hurt our community,” says Vesey. “We still don’t have a grocery store within walking distance, and many people don’t own a car.” Some people pay for a bus or rideshare to reach the closest supermarket several miles away, and that takes money out of their grocery budgets, says Vesey.

As a SOFSA community liaison, she has spoken with Syracuse city officials, nonprofits and farmers about bringing a supermarket back into the South Side and formed a grassroots advocacy group with her neighbors called Food Access Healthy Neighborhoods Now (FAHNN).

Vesey has spent countless hours reestablishing fresh produce in the community by organizing farmers markets at Valley Plaza. SOFSA helped FAHNN raise awareness and obtain grant funds. The Gifford Foundation provided financial assistance for a market last summer and the Central New York Community Foundation supported

an indoor market this past winter. Vesey hopes to eventually coordinate transportation to the market from nearby senior citizen housing and assisted-living facilities.

“Valley Plaza is located at the geographic center of the largest USDA-designated low-income, low-access area in all of Onondaga County,” says Ackerman. SOFSA also helped draft a coalition-wide letter jointly with FAHNN supporting the implementation of ReZone Syracuse to support the opening of a grocery store in that location.

“This endeavor runs deep, and I’m very passionate about it,” says Vesey.



Brady Farm, one of the FAHNN market vendors, is an organic urban farming operation one mile away from the plaza. It was started by the Brady Faith Center, a Catholic social justice organization, to improve food access in underserved communities and provide job opportunities, says Jessi Lyons, farm coordinator.

The organization had to obtain a zoning use variance to operate the nearly six-acre farm inside the city limits at 150 Ford Avenue. Brady Faith Center hopes to purchase the land, which is currently leased.

Their produce is sold at two neighborhood farm stands and through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, which provides a way for farms and communities to support each other, says Lyons. People sign up in advance to receive weekly boxes of farm-fresh produce, providing a source of income to the farm in the spring, Lyons says.

“In the early months of farming, the expenses are high, but you don’t see the products until later in the season. Through the CSA program, the community is really buying into the farm.” Grant funding and donations help keep the cost affordable for members and Brady Farm accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

“It’s expensive to operate, but a lot of people are buying from us to support our mission,” she says. “We are the urban vegetable farm in the neighborhood,” says Lyons.



A selection of fresh vegetables for a weekly Plum & Mule Community Market CSA order.



Charles Madlock is also working to overcome the challenges of urban farming in Syracuse. He learned much about the lifestyle and profession through a farmer training program focused on Black, Indigenous and People of Color at the Groundswell Center for Local Food and Farming in Ithaca. “There are 139 Black farmers in New York state,” he says. “I would like to become number 140.” Less than 2% of farmers nationwide are Black.

Madlock is hoping to help expand access to fresh and healthy food to low-income residents with urban agriculture and joined SOFSA to help accomplish his goal. Expanding farming in urban areas would help bring a more diverse group of people into the farming profession, and “supporting local farmers helps to improve the regional economy as well,” he adds. Madlock started a small backyard farm named Golden Carat Farms. It’s not yet enough to make a living (he works full-time as a painter and sandblaster), but it’s a starting point, he says. “There are not a lot of Black farmers out there, and I’m taking it slow,” he says. “I’m still trying to figure out my role in the farming field.”

The proposed 2023 Farm Bill could aid urban, younger and beginning farmers with land access, Madlock says. Many older farmers are retiring and don’t have family members interested in continuing the businesses. Some of that prime farmland is also being lost to development, he says.

Additional government funding for CSA programs would help significantly because they allow consumers to buy shares of a farm’s harvest in advance. Expanding the program would connect more people on limited incomes to culturally appropriate foods from local farmers, he adds.

For example, collard greens are a traditional staple vegetable in the South, but they are not grown on many farms in Upstate New York, Madlock says. If the federal government provided incentives for local municipalities to allocate land for urban agriculture, it would be a huge help to young farmers of color, he adds.



For several years, the Refugee & Immigrant Self-Empowerment (RISE) agency has been making it possible for former refugees to successfully grow and acquire culturally relevant foods.

The agency serves refugees and immigrants from numerous countries, especially from Africa and the Middle East. Its agricultural program helps to increase self-sustainability and decrease food insecurity, says Agricultural Program Director Anna Zoodsma. It also gives new Americans with extensive agriculture experience the opportunity to start growing their own food again, which has bolstered their physical and mental well-being.

RISE operates three community gardens in the Northside of Syracuse for clients to “grow culturally appropriate food for their families while working alongside other gardeners,” Zoodsma says. Many new Americans reside in apartments or rental properties, without land to start their own plots.



Charles Madlock is a burgeoning urban farmer in CNY and has spoken about agriculture and land access with state and federal leaders.

PHOTO BY CHARLES MADLOCK, RISE



Working with the Refugee & Immigrant Self-Empowerment agricultural program, Ahmed, originally from Somalia, harvests peppers to sell at the CNY Regional Market.

The agency also operates a recently acquired incubator farm in Oswego County for clients interested in growing larger quantities of food for their families, or to sell in their communities or at a market.

RISE partners with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County to offer an educational program in the classroom and in the fields to teach new ways of farming in the Central New York climate. The farming classes are taught in several different languages. Because farming practices in the U.S. can differ from other countries, Zoodsma says, “farmers and staff discuss what works in Central New York in terms of the different soil, climate, tools and plants.”

Last year, nearly 21,000 pounds of produce were grown on leased farmlands. The average grocery savings per farmer’s family was \$900 a year. About 25% of the produce was sold at the Central New York Regional Market, and along with harvest shares sold in their communities, the participating farmers earned a total of nearly \$7,000. “These programs equip farmers to in-

crease self-sufficiency through growing and marketing their own food,” Zoodsma says.

The produce offers “more culturally appropriate vegetables for those of various ethnic backgrounds who may not have the time or desire to farm in the United States,” she says. Some of the items grown last year included daikon (winter radish), long beans, mustard greens and African eggplant and corn. “You can grind African corn” rather than consume it like corn-on-the-cob, Zoodsma says.

The RISE program also offers access to goat meat, which is considered both a staple and delicacy in many countries. An arrangement with a goat farmer in Tully allows clients and other community members to purchase a goat for their own consumption. Several years ago, RISE obtained grant funding to build a barn and a self-slaughterhouse on site. “There are cultural and religious practices involved in slaughtering for meat,” Zoodsma explains. This arrangement allows people to continue their own traditions in procuring fresh goat meat for their families.



SOFSA community liaisons represent the group at a community event.

PHOTO BY SOFSA



Food studies graduate student and founder of AlterNative Project Ethan Tyo shows the ingredients and results of his Three Sisters Bean Patties with Raspberry Aioli recipe featured in the New York Times.



Ethan Tyo is a Syracuse University graduate student with a passion for educating others about the traditional healthy foods of his Indigenous community. He is a member of the Akwesasne Mohawk Tribe in a rural area of St. Lawrence County, where the closest grocery store is a half-hour drive, and “there is no access to bulk food purchases” which could help people stretch their food budgets, he says.

He joined the SOFSA advisory board to help raise awareness about the lack of access to healthy foods experienced by people of all backgrounds. “I didn’t just want to write a paper, I wanted to do something about it,” he says.

Tyo, who is finishing his master’s degree in food studies, has already taken steps to introduce people to the Indigenous Three Sisters planting method by starting a garden on the SU campus. The agricultural practice involves

planting squash, beans and corn together in a specific circular pattern, a method he has demonstrated at other universities as well. “Some students told me this was the first time they had been able to connect with others from an Indigenous community,” he says.

His initiative to raise awareness about Indigenous culture, particularly around food, led him to start the AlterNative Project. He has made connections with the Onondaga Nation, which proved to be self-reliant during the COVID-19 pandemic as their reservation gardens are designed to sustain those living there for years, he says.

Tyo is interested in collaborating with other Haudenosaunee communities on meaningful projects and in building partnerships with universities, museums and communities to bring traditional foodways to a wider audience. “I work in two different economic, political and cultural worlds,” he says. “I’m working to break down the divide and share my cultural knowledge.”





Making connections is part of the mission of The Plum & Mule Community Market (formerly known as Eden Fresh Network). It operates as a food network by partnering with local farmers and purveyors, the majority within 65 miles of downtown Syracuse, to bring fresh produce to Onondaga County residents. “We have been overwhelmingly pleased with the amount of food grown in our own backyard,” says co-founder Mark Pawliw.

Fresh produce and local products — including cheeses, eggs, meat, specialty items and gourmet and foraged mushrooms — are sold through their online farmers market, created to offer a cost-effective and convenient way for people to access locally sourced healthy foods. Customers pick up their weekly CSA orders or have the food delivered for an extra fee. Plum & Mule sells at area markets including FAHNN’s and is planning to open an on-site market this year in the historic Gere Block building at 1970 W. Fayette Street.

By the end of the year, the founders are hoping to obtain nonprofit status that would enable them to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assis-

tance Program (SNAP) benefits and find ways to further increase access to people who cannot afford to pay for healthy foods on their own, says co-founder Leah de Rosa. The nonprofit status could potentially allow the company to start working with the Syracuse City School District to provide more locally sourced fresh produce to the schools, says de Rosa.

They also sponsor educational programs, partnering with local farmers and chefs to offer people an opportunity to “know where their food is coming from and how it can be prepared,” says de Rosa. “We’re always looking to offer different ways to connect people with food,” she says. “Strengthening our food system means strengthening our communities.”

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » **Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance**, [syrfoodalliance.org](http://syrfoodalliance.org)
- » **Food Bank of Central New York**, [foodbankcny.org](http://foodbankcny.org)
- » **Food Access Healthy Neighborhoods Now**, [facebook.com/fahnnysyracuse](https://facebook.com/fahnnysyracuse)
- » **Brady Farm**, [bradyfarm.org](http://bradyfarm.org)
- » **Charles Madlock**, [instagram.com/goldencaratfarms](https://instagram.com/goldencaratfarms)
- » **Refugee & Immigrant Self-Empowerment (RISE)**, [refugeeandimmigrant.org](http://refugeeandimmigrant.org) and [syraporg.wordpress.com](http://syraporg.wordpress.com)
- » **Plum & Mule Community Market**, [plumandmulemarket.com](http://plumandmulemarket.com)



Paddy Pan squashes from Freedom Rains Farm for Plum & Mule Community Market.

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