

Black Farmers and Savannah Foodies Join Forces for Healthy Food

By Mark Winne

The outstretched limbs of Savannah's live oaks sent dappled sunlight along a wide promenade separating two rows of farm stalls in Forsyth Park. The Saturday morning farmers market was in full swing, with boxes heaped high with red peppers, collard greens, and bright orange carrots.

Hilton Graham was doing a brisk business in just-picked organic produce from his nearby Telfair County farm. Dressed in an old polo shirt and well-worn jeans, Graham was assisted by two sheepish teenage boys whose baggy shorts and designer sweatshirts gave them a decidedly un-farmer like appearance. While one hand was fluffing up bunches of greens and the other pointing his helpers in the direction of a waiting customer, he told me with a big wide grin that, "It's a great day for a market, and as crazy as this place gets, it still gives me peace of mind being here."

But the experience of Graham and other African-Americans farmers selling organic produce in this park at this time is not just another farmers' market story. Excluded for decades after World War Two from public funds that helped white farmers prosper, black farmers have also been left out of the growing ranks of organic farming, a movement that is giving small farmers across the country a chance at success. Fortunately, that is now changing. By taking matters into their own hands, black farmers formed the Southeast African American Organic Network (SAAFON). And at the same time that they were converting more of their members to organic agriculture, black farmers, with partners in local multiracial organizations, were organizing a farmers' market in a public space previously denied to them.

Forsyth Park is an idyllic place – Spanish moss drips from the trees; the park's open space is filled with Frisbee-chasing dogs and laughing children. But as recently as 1963, segregation still ruled the South, and Forsyth Park was for whites only.

Today, the park's weekly farmers' market is evidence of a slow reversal of history. "When black kids were all grown up they left the farms for the cities to get jobs," Graham said. That is part of the reason, he explains, why there are only 29,000 African-American farmers left in the United States, down

from nearly 1 million in the 1920s. Another reason, which Graham is more reticent to discuss, is the legacy of discrimination and neglect from government agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Graham, now 61, stayed behind to secure the heritage of black-owned farmland in the American South. Continuing the work of several generations of Grahams, Hilton raises timber, cattle, and collard greens for wholesale commercial markets, and several acres of organic vegetables for sale at farmers' markets.

Though nothing comes easily to any farmer, black farmers must add racism to the list of battles they wage, along with droughts, floods, and pests. That's why Hilton snarls when he thinks about events of the recent past, "We had a Republican world whose mission it was to kill the small farmer. The big farmers were getting \$8 a bushel for their soybeans but I was only getting \$4. It doesn't take one long to figure that out."

While there is no single path to prosperity for farmers today, an increasing number of farmers are going organic. Between 2002 and 2007, the USDA Agricultural Census noted a national increase from 12,000 organic farms to 18,000, by far the most significant growth in any farming category. The USDA organic seal is no guarantee that a farmer will become profitable, but it does give its bearer access to markets that often earn the farmer a premium price, whether it's from Whole Foods or the neighborhood farmers' market.

"Customers told us they wanted organic food," said Cynthia Hayes, who co-founded SAAFON. But she also knew that black farmers were not fully participating in the organic marketplace, and, in an effort to change that, she teamed up with Southern University agriculture professor Owusu Bandele. Out of their shared passion for change was born what is by most accounts the nation's first black farmer-controlled organic organization. In addition to its advocacy for organic and sustainable farming, SAAFON has also worked hard to develop direct marketing programs for their 120 members.

In the opinion of Hayes, the circumstances facing black farmers were different enough to warrant the development of their own program. This conclusion was fed by the perception that African American farmers couldn't get culturally sensitive assistance from organic programs because all of those programs were white-led. "We weren't comfortable with the way

that private groups were addressing the need. And this feeling was reinforced by the public sector whose agricultural extension agents were telling black farmers they couldn't afford to go organic."

While there is much in the nuance of words relating to the topic of race that perplexes well-intentioned white people, there was another factor that was just as dominant in SAAFON's decision to go it alone. "Our farmers have a lot of pride," said Hayes, "and they wanted a chance to do it their way."

So under the auspices of SAAFON, Hayes and Bandele established a four-day training program. It is designed to teach farmers how to complete the USDA organic producer application, thus helping to transition them from conventional to organic growing methods. For example, teaching farmers to substitute animal manures and approved biological insect control for petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides is one part of the curriculum. And in an ironic twist, SAAFON's trainees are given a historical review of African-American farming in the South that reminds them that "organic" was the form of farming they embraced long ago.

While expert trainers and a strong curriculum are essential to the program's success, Hayes likes to reinforce the importance of peer support and the shared cultural experience of black farming. "It is common for most of the participants from previous trainings to mentor and support the new trainees. A real bond of solidarity develops among all the farmers."

At their first training session three years ago, 15 farmers showed up—three times the turnout they expected. That training went so well that they were soon invited to South Carolina, where they trained another 15 farmers. Today, 41 SAAFON members are USDA-certified organic, and another 10 will join their ranks shortly after the next training class in March 2010.

Farmers' markets have become critical for small farmers who need the higher return that comes from retail venues. This is because it doesn't do a farmer much good to be certified organic without having access to a market that can command a higher price. "The first two years as a certified organic farmer I had no outlets, which meant I had to sell at a conventional price," Graham said. So SAAFON decided to reach out to Savannah residents of all races, joining forces with others in the city's "foodie" community. Together, they set their sights on Forsyth Park as a prime site for a farmers' market.

Teri Schnell, a homeless advocate and founding member of the farmers' market, said the park "is the place where everyone feels comfortable. It's our 'melting pot.'" As Savannah's geographic center, Forsyth Park is the city's most accessible physical location, a strong selling point for people like Schell who wanted the farmers' market to serve everybody, not just elite shoppers.

Though the city is well known for its parks and meticulously restored anti-bellum mansions, Savannah also has a dark side. Like hundreds of urban areas across the country, gentrification has pushed up the city's housing costs and put a severe crimp in the lives of the city's low-income community. With a poverty rate that is 23 percent, and more than 28 percent of the city's children enrolled in the food stamp program, Savannah's lush Southern veneer has a less visible tattered core.

"SAAFON wants to assure access to local, organic food for everyone," Hayes said. To that end, she joined forces with Schell and several local food organizations to form the Savannah Food Collaborative. This multiracial coalition set out on a five-month trek to secure approval from the City of Savannah to open the market in Forsyth Park.

Initially, city officials were wary of allowing farmers to sell their fresh produce beneath the shade of the venerable oaks. In their eyes, a farmers' market was not in keeping with their pristine image of the park. Even though Savannah's population is over 50 percent black, SAAFON alone was not sufficient to instantly change the city's mind. But with the intervention of the broad-based food coalition, aided in no small part by Savannah's Mayor Otis Johnson who has distinguished himself by his promotion of health policies, permission to open the market was eventually granted.

The Wholesome Wave Foundation, a recent creation of celebrity chef Michel Nischan, whose business partner was the late Paul Newman, gave the market a grant to double the amount of fresh produce purchased by lower income families when using food stamps. This healthy eating incentive has boosted sales for farmers while increasing consumption of fresh produce.

The market's goal of serving the healthy food needs of the community was further supported by the establishment of the "Health Pavilion." This bi-weekly event is a creation of the county's health department and provides a

much needed educational complement to the market's robust offering of fruits and vegetables.

But the heart of the matter still revolves around the revitalization of black agriculture. "What gets me up in the morning," Hayes said, "is knowing that farmers are returning to their land in the South." Hayes is of course referring to the farmers who make up the membership of SAAFON, people who left their ancestral lands for jobs as teachers or social workers in the North. Other "returning farmers" are former conventional farmers who had given up because they couldn't make a living in agriculture. "They are returning," says Hayes, "because organic farming is allowing them to make money."

Her long-term challenge, however, is making farming attractive to young African Americans. Hayes and others are working with the 1890 Land Grants Institutions, better known as Historical Black Colleges and Universities, to provide training and resources to nurture a new generation of African-American farmers. Through the work of one of SAAFON's partner organizations, the Southeastern Green Network, students at these institutions are learning how they can make their campuses, including their dining halls, more sustainable. Hayes's hope is that this broader interest in the environment and health will lead young people into farming. "Youth find organic food a little more 'jazzy' than conventional food. It just might be the way that more of our young people find their way back to the land."

At a recent Saturday market, Mary Curley sat at her table, displaying at least two dozen varieties of herbs, fruits, and vegetables. At 70, Mary is the oldest, and her quarter-acre farm the smallest, of these African-American farmers. She grew up in Savannah in the 1940s and '50s but left for a long teaching stint on the West coast. The city she returned to in the 1990s was vastly different from the one she left. A beatific smile lights up her face as she ticks off the names of her organic offerings, urging customers to sniff and taste each one: Japanese orange, Thai basil, lemon grass, Cuban oregano, pineapple sage, and Serrano, habanera, and banana peppers. It's in this delicious present where she prefers to dwell even though the past is only a flicker away. "I grew up during segregation when I wasn't allowed in this park. Now I'm here and I think that's wonderful."