



WHAT'S THE ANSWER? FOOD IS WHAT

Youth-focused nonprofit uses food and farming to foster change

Story by Matt Craggs • Photos by Richard Green

When Doron Comerchero looked around Santa Cruz in 2007, he saw a lot of need. As in most communities, the county had its share of at-risk youth who had suffered trauma, others who struggled in school. Some teens faced poor job prospects and limited opportunities. There were low-income teens who were less likely to have access to healthy food and more likely to develop diet-related disease later in life.

But Comerchero also saw what could be a solution to all these problems: agriculture.

Growing hope

As a former horticultural apprentice at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Farm and Garden program, and having served as an organizer for a community garden project in the South Bronx, Comerchero happened to know a lot about farming. He believed working the land could open the door to healing, empowerment and opportunity for struggling youth. So he started FoodWhat, a nonprofit that would do just that.

“The intended effect is to create a safe space where youth who have been through challenging times—economically, socially, emotionally or in school—can come and see their strengths, build their agency, see how resilient they actually are, experience their own success and choose their own path forward,” Comerchero said.

FoodWhat (styled FoodWhat?! in the organization’s logo) gives students hands-on experience in growing food at its two farms, incorporating job training elements and providing empowerment opportunities through food and farming.

“We don’t believe that you can empower anyone,” Comerchero said. “What we believe is that a person can choose their own empowerment. What we do is set up all the conditions, opportunities and programmatic elements for a young person to choose empowerment for themselves.”

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Uriel Reyes, who works for the youth-focused farming nonprofit FoodWhat, instructs participant Fatima before the Swiss chard harvest at the organization’s farm in Watsonville.

The program has grown from its first five participants to include close to 70 young people every year. Unlike similar programs that follow the school year, FoodWhat follows the agricultural season, allowing the students to trace their hard work from seed to market.

During spring internships, a three-hour day will be split among farming, cooking and eating, and workshops—which cover topics such as health, public speaking and financial literacy.

Participants may then move on to the summer job training program. Splitting their time between Santa Cruz and Watsonville, they autonomously manage a 1-acre farm at UC Santa Cruz and work at Live Earth Farm—a 60-acre farm in Watsonville, where they might harvest potatoes or transplant lettuce.

In the fall, FoodWhat focuses on management as participants traditionally operate farm stands in their community, while winter sees some chosen as peer-to-peer community educators to visit classrooms and discuss food systems, health and empowerment.

Additional FoodWhat projects, such as revitalizing and upgrading school gardens in Watsonville, serve thousands throughout Santa Cruz County.

Better diet, better future

For many participants, the experience has been a powerful one.

Chardonay Coates, who took part in this year's FoodWhat summer program, said that at the beginning of spring, it was difficult for her to talk about her feelings because of trust issues.

"During the program, we did lots of workshops not only about farming, but about self-care, what we can do to be relaxed and how to just be out there with the community—that we can make a change," she said.

This helped Coates—who now wants to attend Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and eventually work as an agricultural educator—open herself up to new possibilities.

"Now that I've done the workshops, I feel more confident," she said.

Coates also credits FoodWhat with helping her change her diet, as she now incorporates more leafy greens such as chard into her meals.

"We see young people come into the program eating and drinking what a lot of teenagers typically do—soda, Cheetos, fast food—and leaving the program with an incredible love of healthy food and having changed their diet toward a healthy direction," Comerchero said.

One popular workshop is Trace Your Taco, which breaks down a fast food taco and examines its ingredients and their sources.

Participants then prepare their own tacos with tomatoes grown on the farm, local rice and tortillas they hand-make with masa. Comerchero said the workshop helps participants identify the differences in taste and what to look for when walking into a restaurant—whether or not the establishment uses fresh produce, for example.

"Because youth have their hands in every aspect of the food system—they're growing the food, they're harvesting, cooking and eating together; they're taking food home, doing workshops on the food system and engaging in the community by operating farm stands and dealing with food insecurity—there are infinite points for them to develop a relationship with fresh, healthy food," Comerchero said.

This approach, he said, is one of the reasons young people can make such dietary changes in the limited time they're with FoodWhat.

Connections to career and beyond

Many participants also benefit from the program's job training elements, such as work experience, resume writing and learning their economic worth—starting with receiving an hourly wage for their work on the farms.

"We see incredibly significant job training outcomes, where this is often a young person's first job, and they leave FoodWhat prepared for any position and, certainly, get



Doron Comerchero, FoodWhat executive director

Photo courtesy of FoodWhat



Above, Abigail Camarillo-Cruz of FoodWhat harvests carrots. Above right, FoodWhat staffer Lupita Sanchez holds lettuce seedlings for participant Chardonay. Below, participants Dom and Roger help guest chef Cesario Ruiz prepare lunch. Below right, from left, Irene Juarez O'Connell of FoodWhat returns from flower harvest with participant Coco, staffer Natasha Valdez and participant Angel.





PRESCRIPTION FOR CHANGE

Traditionally, in summer and fall, youth participating in FoodWhat run farm stands in Santa Cruz County to receive managerial training and experience. However, the organization recently took on a new farm stand operation, one that directly addresses health concerns within the community.

"For the past 10 years, we've run low-income farm stands at summer schools and at schools once the fall begins," said Doron Comerchero, founder and executive director of FoodWhat. "Just this year, we're partnering with the health nonprofit Salud Para La Gente, working with their diabetes patients to do a prescriptive farm stand in downtown Watsonville."

Comerchero said patients receive vouchers through their care providers to exchange for produce to help transform the patient's diet.

"This will be a bridge between what they're learning in their classes and the work they're doing with their doctors, creating some long-term, sustainable, behavioral changes around the choices they're making around produce," Comerchero said.

As part of the pilot program—funded by Central California Alliance for Health—Lakeside Organic Gardens provides the produce for the farm stand, which FoodWhat participants operate. Comerchero said the youth receive job training and customer service skills and the patients benefit from engaging with someone outside the health-care system.

"They're from the community, they're speaking the same language, they share a culture," Comerchero said. "They're very relevant in this interaction and they're very trusted in that way. On top of that, FoodWhat youth have their own dietary change stories."

Sharing their experiences, Comerchero believes, not only empowers the youth but makes for a healthier community.

great experience in sustainable agriculture and culinary arts," Comerchero said.

FoodWhat days always include preparing a shared meal, and the program often brings in local chefs to speak and cook with the youth. More than a few participants have secured jobs with the training and connections received through FoodWhat, and Comerchero said most leave the program with a new perspective on agriculture.

"Inasmuch as these youth are working the land," Comerchero said, "they also develop a very healthy acknowledgment of the dignity of working in agriculture, the difficulties of working in agriculture and the incredible gift it is to work in agriculture and provide for your community and the nation."

It's this connection to agriculture and its traditions that drew Abigail Camarillo-Cruz, a former participant and now junior staff member, to the program.

"I'm from Mexico," Camarillo-Cruz said. "My grandparents have a plot of land there and, basically to survive, we farmed our own food. But I was too young to help, so I don't have those memories."

Some of Camarillo-Cruz's older siblings participated in FoodWhat and she saw it as a way to connect to her grandparents and parents, who work on a Santa Cruz farm.

"I wanted to have conversations with my parents that both of us could understand," Camarillo-Cruz said.

Comerchero said he sees this interest in agriculture and its tradition as directly beneficial to California's farming community.

"It's helping a generation that's so divorced from understanding where food comes from to not only understand that cerebrally, but to actually be building a lifelong relationship with fresh, healthy produce," Comerchero said. 🌿

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Watch FoodWhat participants and staff in action and hear firsthand about the program's impacts on young people at www.californiabountiful.com.

