Black Grandmothers Feed their Communities, and Pass on Food Traditions—Online

Through Portland's new Grandma's Hands program, grandmothers are reviving cultural connections, reducing food insecurity, and supporting farmers of color.

BY HANNAH WALLACE • OCTOBER 21, 2020

On a recent Saturday night in September, Mildred Braxton did something she never thought she'd do: she taught 20 or so others how to make succotash and steamed collard greens over Zoom.

With the confidence of a Food Network chef, Braxton, a parent of five and grandmother of three, put a skillet on the burner, poured some oil into the pan, and let it heat up before throwing in some chopped onion, frozen corn, frozen lima beans (called butter beans in the South), and black-eyed peas, narrating all the while. After covering the pan and letting it all heat up, she added stewed tomatoes, okra, and seasonings.

"Okra is the last vegetable I put in because it's easy for it to fall apart," said Braxton, who hails from Mississippi. "Okra has a bad rap. I'm standing up for okra!"

This virtual dinner party is part of a Portland, Oregon-based program called Grandma's Hands, a platform for Black grandmothers to share family recipes and food traditions with future generations. So far, the 12 grandmothers involved have prepared four monthly meals for 30 to 40 participants at a time. In addition to delivering the food they make along with a bag of fresh produce grown by farmers of color to the participants throughout the community, the program brings everyone together virtually to partake of the food while sharing recipes and tips.

Though the focus of Grandma's Hands is to facilitate community engagement and reconnect community members with culturally grounded natural foods and agricultural practices, the program may also help reduce food insecurity by teaching the younger generation the economic benefits of cooking at home for their families.

"Our [modern] life is not conducive to being healthy," says Chuck Smith, co-founder of the Black Food Sovereignty Coalition (BFSC), which helps run the program. "Cooking as a regular family activity has been squeezed out of people's schedules." And yet, he stressed the fact that connection with food is a pathway to stronger identity in the Black community. "When your [diet] is consciously connected to your cultural identity, then you can be more intentional in selecting what you eat and how you prepare it," adds Smith.

The idea for the series grew out of freewheeling conversations about sustainable food and food access that Willie Chambers and Lynn Ketch from the Rockwood Community

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Development Corporation (CDC) had with Lisa Cline and Katrina Ratzlaff, the CEO and advancement director at Wallace, a community health clinic.

Cline and Ratzlaff were eager to find out more about food access in Rockwood, a diverse neighborhood of the Portland suburb of Gresham, because many of their patients at Wallace are food insecure. Rockwood, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Multnomah County, has many fast food outlets but only one grocery store. And that lack of access to nutritious food has alarming health consequences for residents, who suffer from diet-related illness at a higher rate than residents of any other part of Oregon. According to Brad Ketch, president of the Rockwood CDC, life expectancy there is a full decade shorter than it is in the rest of Multnomah County.

At the meeting, Cline and Ratzlaff began reminiscing about their own food traditions. "I said something like, 'My memories of cooking and sharing food were standing by my grandma at the kitchen counter,'" Ratzlaff said. "'I think a lot of folks are like that. Grandmas are the anchor. In many communities, they take care of the kids and do the cooking.'" Chambers, in turn, reminisced about his wife, Vanessa, a grandmother of eight who loves being in the kitchen with their grandchildren. "She'd give them aprons, and they'd all have a tool," he said. "And they enjoy it!"

Chambers was reminded of the Bill Withers' song Grandma's Hands, and before he'd even nailed down the concept, they had the perfect name. The idea for the dinners took shape quickly.

Connecting Over Food

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Grandma's Hands started in June and takes place on the third Saturday of every month. It's funded by a specialty crop grant from the Oregon Department of Agriculture and run by the Rockwood CDC and BFSC. Originally, the plan had involved in-person dinner parties at Rockwood's Sunrise Center, which has a spacious commercial kitchen, but COVID-19 toppled that idea and they moved the gatherings online.

Every month, a group of six to 10 grandmothers, recruited through word of mouth, gets together in person at the Sunrise Center, dons masks, and cooks up meals for the participants. One grandma takes charge of each month's meal and also offers to answer questions about the recipe or culinary tradition. Some participants pick up their meals at the center, while others have volunteers deliver them.

"People really enjoy the interactions," says Vanessa Chambers, Willie's wife, and the lead chef for the June dinner, where she cooked sautéed cabbage, corn bread, black beans, and spare ribs. "It's a good connection with other family members and other grandmas. We sit and eat together."

Although eating with others on a Zoom call is stretching the definition of the word "together," there is a community spirit to these virtual dinner parties. The event is deftly emceed by Smith.

After initial introductions, Smith shows a short video of the featured grandma preparing her meal. If the chef is on the Zoom call, as Braxton was the night she made succotash, she will answer questions about the meal.

"How else do you like to prepare okra?" Shantae Johnson, one of the owners of the nearby organic farm Mudbone Grown, asked Braxton during her lesson. She responded with a time-tested tip: "I like to cut it up into little pieces, coat it with flour or cornmeal, and fry it."

Because the recipes are posted on the Grandma's Hands' website ahead of time, participants can prepare the meals themselves—or just enjoy the food the grandmas have cooked and attempt to replicate it at another point.

Later in the evening, during breakout sessions of four to five families each, participants discuss the food. "What did you think about the meal?" Smith will ask, to get things started. Or, "How did you learn to cook?"

Terry Wattley, a Gresham resident who attended the September event, says he has been doing more cooking since he and his wife had their second son. He has found that the dinners provide an excellent way to get his four-year-old interested with cooking. "It's a great family thing for us," Wattley said. "It's really easy to do as an activity." He also appreciates the breakout session, where he quizzes others for recipe ideas so he can expand his culinary repertoire.

A young woman named Jassmine, who said she'd recently moved to Beaverton from San Diego, heard about the dinners from community development corporation Beyond Black's Facebook group. "I don't know how to cook, so I thought this would be a good place to learn," she said.

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Fresh Produce and an Emphasis on Nutrition

One of the best parts of the Oregon Department of Agriculture grant is that it allows the Rockwood CDC to purchase produce for the meals from Black- and Indigenous-run farms in the Portland area, including Mudbone Grown and the Black Futures Farm. In addition to the prepared meal, the money helps provide all participants with a bag of produce from these and other farms—much like a mini community supported agriculture (CSA) subscription would. Each bag of produce also includes a flyer that lists all the BIPOC farmers in the Portland area, so participants know how to support these farms in the future.

Chuck Smith with Laurie Palmer preparing for a Grandma's Hands class.

"We try to [provide] the ingredients that are in the featured recipe," Smith said. When that's not possible, however, the BFSC will turn to other organic farms in the area for the necessary produce.

Though modern soul food can involve a lot of fried foods, the Portland grandmas are placing an emphasis on nutrition in their recipes. For instance, Braxton's menu included fried chicken, but the other three parts—succotash, collard greens, and candied yams—were all cooked with minimal fat and salt.

"Even though we're passing down our culture, we want to be sure we prepare it with a healthy twist," said Vanessa Chambers. "We want people to stay healthy and live long."

To that end, the meals have helped some adult participants learn to appreciate vegetables that they'd spent a lifetime avoiding. Chambers, for instance, would have sworn she didn't like Brussels sprouts. But then, she tried grandmother Rhonda Combs' Brussels sprouts at the July dinner.

"She caramelized them with balsamic vinegar and served them with red peppers, onions, and avocado oil," said Chambers. The result was transformational. "It was like, 'Wow! I would probably fix this myself.'"

Top photo: Laurie Palmer (left) and Vanessa Chambers. All photos by Robin Franzen Parker.

Hannah Wallace writes about food politics, regenerative agriculture, wine, cannabis, and travel for a wide variety of publications including Bloomberg, Conde Nast Traveler, Inc., Food & Wine, The New York Times, Reasons to be Cheerful, Portland Monthly, Vogue, and Wired. She has been a regular contributor to Civil Eats since its founding in 2009. Read more >

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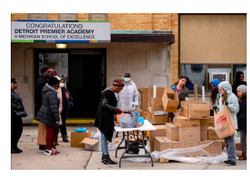

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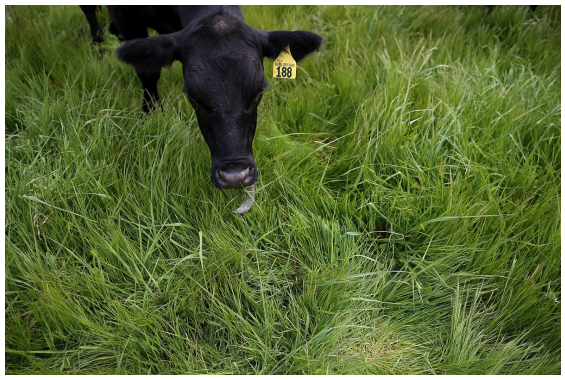

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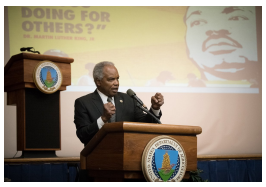

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