Doron Comerchero

THE FOOD, WHAT?! FOUNDER HELPS HARVEST CONFIDENT TEENS

In my twenties, I didn’t know how to grow a tomato. That’s a surprising admission coming from Doron Comerchero, someone who now spends most of his time on a half-acre farm teaching local teens how to harvest organic fare. What Comerchero did have in those years after graduating from the University of Michigan was community organizing skills. Having collaborated with urban community gardens in the Bronx at a time when “Mayor Giuliani was trying to bulldoze them,” the 30-year-old founder of Food, What?! knew early on that he wanted to use gardens to plant seeds of teen leadership.

“Food is universal, everybody says,” he says. “There’s something so old school and so basic about breaking bread together. It has proved to be the perfect tool to be the backbone of a youth empowerment program. And I love to eat, so why not?”

First things first, in order to start his own program, he had to conquer that whole farming thing. And that’s how he ended up schlepping across the country to Santa Cruz. Moving from his “teeny apartment in the East Village to a scrubland on the farm in UCSC,” Comerchero joined UC Santa Cruz’s Farm and Garden Apprenticeship program to gain the necessary “farm schooling” over a span of two years.

Then, in 2006, ready to put his comprehensive skills into action, he called Santa Cruz’s garden-based nonprofit, Life Lab, about his idea to start a new youth food justice project. He would choose the name Food, What?! after a friend suggested it at a dinner party and he saw how it instantly created dialogue.

Now operating under the Life Lab umbrella, with a farm located on UCSC land, Food, What?! trains teen crews how to plant, harvest, cook, eat and distribute produce in a sustainable manner—all as a means of nurturing their “skill and leadership development.”

Like Nature, the program undergoes four cycles each year. Working mostly with at-risk teens enrolled in the alternative education school system, Comerchero leads selected participants through seasonal internships, jobs, workshops and community service. Kids explore the topics of nutrition, justice, finance, professionalism and self-advocacy. Comerchero can be found giving these lessons both out in the soil and inside local classrooms.

During the first six months when he was piloting the program with very little funding and a small number of students, he held on to six different jobs around town. It’s four years later and things have changed. He’s still busy, but his focus is all in one place. “Now I get to be 16 jobs but they’re all within Food, What?!”

In its first year, Food, What?! had five youths on its crew. Last year, Comerchero worked with 50 kids on six crew; 30 kids in schools, and another 1,000 kids through various programming. Nearly 200 teen applicants seek for the 30 crew spots.

“Youth programming is not only needed in Santa Cruz County,” Comerchero says. “But kids are clamoring for the bit for these types of opportunities.

People from around the country and Canada have looked to Comerchero for inspiration and information on how to do the same kind of work in their regions. To fill the need, he hopes to create and disseminate a Food, What?! manual that can be used by anyone to implement his curriculum anywhere. This, in addition to his efforts to expand the Food, What?! farm acreage so that the program can better accommodate the demand, take on more teens, and supply more fresh produce to local-income families benefiting from the Food, What?! Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) that operates through the Beach Flats Community Center.

Comerchero says that regardless of what a student’s background or struggles may be when they enter Food, What?! “when they leave—whatever their story of personal growth, they feel they can do something important in the world.”

It’s easy to see why the program has been so successful. Comerchero is the kind of personable, street-wise teacher that highlives his students and takes interest in their lives. More importantly, he’s the kind of teacher that students want to hang. A respected mentor, he maintains a “one-of-a-kind vibe, wearing cotton T-shirts with the Food, What?! logo splattered across in an urban style font,” and he talks with teens in a caring, warm tone to match. He doesn’t take his mission lightly.

“It’s not just about spreading the good ‘organic gospel,’ he emphasizes. ‘The heart of the program is that we’re using food as a vehicle to grow strong young people.”

Still, how are the tomato-growing skills these days? Comerchero laughs. “Oh, I could wow you!”

With his NEXTIE award serving as proof, there’s no doubt—we are wowed.

Learn more about Food, What?! at foodwhat.org or 408-292-2003.