

Becca Schnabel
 Arch 790 – Environmental Justice
 May 8, 2019

Food Justice & the Fertile Ground of Urban Milwaukee

A Brief Description of the Food Landscape of North Milwaukee

What is a Food Desert? A Food Desert is "a low-income tract with at least 500 people, or 33% of the population, living more than 1 mile (urban areas) or more than 20 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store."¹ Technically, neither Sherman Park nor Washington Park are Food Deserts due to a single Pick'n'Save supermarket in the area. Instead, people have taken to declaring the neighborhoods as Food Swamps. The idea of a Food Swamp being that there is indeed food available, but very little if any is wholesome or nutritious. Corner stores, whose primary sales go to tobacco, sell much of the available food on North Avenue between Kilbourn Reservoir Park and 51st Street on Milwaukee's North Side. A large portion of the remaining establishments includes fast food restaurants and other types of grab and go food options. There are groups in these neighborhoods petitioning for another grocery store like the Pick'n'Save, but this solution is not holistic. Supermarkets are stakeholders in the creation of Food Deserts/Food Swamps, too. They rely on constant sales throughout the month and volume to turn enough profit to remain. According to the Food Marketing Institute, supermarkets averaged less than 2% profit after taxes in 2015.² Revealing the bureaucratic and capitalistic aims behind super markets usually keep them out of impoverished areas. Even when grocery stores do manage to establish themselves in these areas they tend to emphasize premade, boxed, canned food items over stocking fresh produce regularly, assuming the community does not want it anyway.

Limited Food Access and its Lifetime Affects

Reoccurring, serious health issues from heart disease, diabetes, obesity, to reproductive concerns, and even mental health are all byproducts of repeatedly eating greasy, sugary, fried, or canned fast foods. Along with sever health issues, a lack of access to raw food material can keep community members from cooking homemade meals, and enjoying the sense of identity cooking and food can bring. Some may feel a loss of identity from the loss of cultural cooking practices because they cannot purchase the food necessary. However, Sherman Park and Washington Park residents have refused to accept starving in a urban desert, and are instead actively participating in strategies to redefine their neighborhood as no longer a Food Desert but a Food Destination.

A Brief History of Urban Gardening in Milwaukee

Farming is a concept as old as human civilization. However, the convenience of the modern age has separated urban dwellers from our agricultural roots. Urban Gardening is not a new concept, but is an under advertised practical solution to many common inner-

¹ Jessica Sherlock, *North Avenue Food Landscape*, "Food Access Research Documentation," USDA, last modified December 05, 2017.

² Jessica Sherlock, *North Avenue Food Landscape*, "Food Access Research Documentation," USDA, last modified December 05, 2017.

city issues. Environmental justice is not only about the spaces people live in, but also the access people have to things within these spaces. Food justice is not just about health or just about gardening; it is a complex topic encompassing all concepts of peoples' lives affected by the lack of access to food. This includes an array of issues from transportation, to health, self-agency, identity, and even power. Sherman Park and Washington Park are two prim examples of urban neighborhoods applying urban gardening strategies to navigate their way to surviving the food desert that is the North Side of Milwaukee.

Milwaukee's long history with public gardening practices reaching back to the 1800's illuminates the continued success of community gardens throughout the city today. Milwaukee Historian John Gurda suggests, "Southeastern Wisconsin grew up at the intersection of industry and agriculture."³ Even before Wisconsin official claimed statehood, agriculture was a means of livelihood in the area today called Milwaukee. Milwaukee's new inhabitant's, early European settlers, built up thriving markets such as in Haymarket Square near the new 19th century port established on Lake Michigan. By the 20th century industry began booming across the developing city. Natural resources and growing populations fuel industrialization, inspiring further gathering places and social markets to open across the city, including the Center Street Market. Even by the early 1900's, the concept of beautifying the city was appearing across the nation. In Milwaukee the City Beautiful movement partnered with another practical problem in the city, the need for further accessibility of food. A city farmer, Dr. S.D. Mischoff declared, "beautify the vacant lots of Milwaukee by amateur gardening," addressing both issues at once. Milwaukee's residents took to their citizen gardening like guardians serving and protecting the community as a whole.

Gardening would continue to be a strategy successfully implemented by the people of Milwaukee through both World Wars. As the agriculture industry suffered due to a loss of workers and a need for war rations, growing one's own food or extra food became an invaluable skill. Milwaukee's residents were known for their successful war gardens during WWI, as well as their string participation in the Victory gardens movement of WWII, which continues strong today across the city. These Victory Gardens, maintained by everyday citizens were typically 20-30 feet large. At this time households growing their own sustainable food grew from 30.2% to 54.8%, over half the city's population assisted in the supplying food at this crucial time in history.⁴

After the end of the wars, the urgent need to garden one's own food ebbed. Gardening around Milwaukee transformed into a mere hobby instead of an obligation or a commitment to one's community. By the 1960's gardening became a luxury for those with extra time and the extra resources to join social clubs such as the Milwaukee Urban League, 4-H Clubs, or the University of Wisconsin-Extension program based in Wauwatosa. Although these clubs may not have been accessible to all people, they did strive to continue community gardening for those in less developed portions of the city. Specifically the large African-American population on Milwaukee's north side who were feeling the loss of deindustrialization the hardest. Community gardening would once again be implemented

³ Michael Carriere, *Growing Place: A Visual Study of Urban Farming*, Grohmann Museum, 2019.

⁴ Carriere, *Growing Place: A Visual Study of Urban Farming*, Grohmann Museum, 2019.

to “teach city dwellers valuable skills and provide the with a tangible, useful product – healthy food.”⁵

Surviving the Desert, Cultivating the Swamp: Milwaukee's Urban Gardeners

Guarding not only the health of the people and of the land, Urban Gardeners also protect the identity and culture local foods bring to communities, neighborhoods, families, and individuals. Who can be these guardian gardeners? Who can make this nutritious food? The answer is Gardeners, Cooks, anyone and everyone can be producers of nutritious, wholesome food. There are many community members on Milwaukee's North Side who strive to cultivate both small individual gardens and large community gardens, reclaiming vacant lots and other abandoned land.

Obtaining Substance without Transportation

"...it doesn't affect us personally because I have a car and I can get to where I need to go. But a lot of people in this neighborhood do not and it is a real negative thing."

Judith Howden, Washington Park Resident

Many residents in this area do not own their own vehicles, which is a major factor in restricting food accessibility. However, these neighborhoods are transforming themselves from Food Deserts into Food Destinations through specific strategies such as Urban Gardens, Community Restaurants, shared Community Kitchens, local cooking classes, backyard barbecues with neighbors, and family dinners. By growing their own food through gardens, and rescuing food usually destined for the waste pile, these communities are redefining their identity, no longer as one of neglect, but as hard working and deeply caring individuals.

What does food mean to you? What can food mean to a community?

Food is a substance to fuel a healthy, hardy physical body, but it is also a window to varying cultures from different families to different nationalities food is a part of a person's identity. Flavor preferences and cook tactics are honored traditions to be cherished and rejoiced. Cooking is a social events as well as a self-reflective tool to honor yourself, your heritage, and your current community. Food can both demonstrate human variation as well as serving as a contact zone bringing diverse neighbors together over breaking bread. For example, *Tables Across Borders* and other various programs sponsored by local restaurants are aiding new immigrant chefs, supporting both individuals and their families, as well as the larger community as a whole through community food and community kitchens.

⁵ Carriere, *Growing Place: A Visual Study of Urban Farming*, Grohmann Museum, 2019.

Where to find and buy healthy, wholesome food options?

Local Restaurants:

- Amaranth Bakery & Café
- Tricklebee Café
- Sherman Park Phoenix
 - Shindig
 - Sauce & Spice
 - Funky Fresh Spring rolls

Community Gardens:

- Unity Orchard
- Victory Gardens
- Marcus Garvey Community Garden
- Program the Parks & Peace Garden
- Hadley Terrace
- St Catherines's Farm to Hospital & Garden
- Sherman Park Community Garden
- Former Jackie Robinson School Garden

Local Delis:

- Kosher Meat Club
- Jake's Deli North
- Bill the Butcher
- Hinnawi Meats & Deli

Coffeeshops:

- Sherman Perk Coffee Shop
- Bus Stop Coffee
- Sharehouse Coffee
- Pete's Pops

Farmers Markets:

- Market Next to Amaranth Bakery & Café
- Market hosted by Tricklebee Café

People are growing their own food in their own backyards with Victory Gardens, in planter boxes and burlap sacks, there are many different ways to grow and cultivate the inner city landscape.

Works Cited

- Carriere, Michael. *Growing Place: A Visual Study of Urban Farming*. January 2019. Grohmann Museum. MSOE University. Milwaukee, WI. <<https://www.msoe.edu/about-msoe/news/details/new-grohmann-museum-exhibit-will-focus-on-urban-farming/>>
- Sherlock, Jessica. *North Avenue Food Landscape*. "Food Access Research Documentation." USDA. Last modified December 05, 2017. <<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/>>