# THE ROOT OF HEALING

Crisis and black vegan chefs in Dallas showed me a way forward—but it still includes meat and dairy.

BY KAREN M. THOMAS

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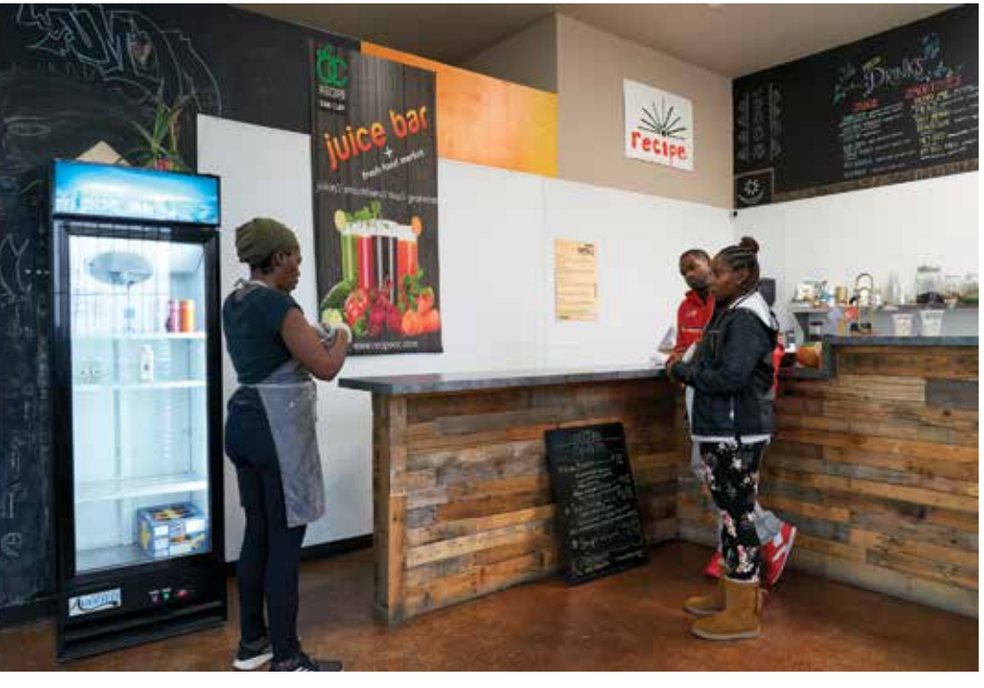
BELOW: Recipe Oak Cliff in Dallas.




Photographs by Cooper Neill

FOR THE LAST DECADE, LIFE SPUN me hard. My two daughters left the nest. My marriage of twenty-five years turned to dust. I bore witness as my mother drew her last breath, after Alzheimer's disease ravaged her fine mind and body. As I moved from space to space, my once-cherished books, clothes, art, and furniture became albatrosses. I heaved them overboard to make room for a smaller life. Even my beloved Rosie, the fourteen-year-old, seventy-five-pound shelter dog who sat by my side as my world turned upside down, told me it was time. I let her go last fall.

I ate through the grief. Ice cream soothed my aching soul. Chocolate flooded me with comfort. A slice of three-layer cake slid down my throat like heavenly balm. Weight crept on slowly at first and then exploded. My curves burst through my pants. My feet hurt. I avoided mirrors. Trapped in a bloated body, I slogged through the world, exhausted.

Somewhere down deep, a desire to heal took root. As a middle-aged African

American woman with a family history of high cholesterol and heart disease, I knew I was playing with fire. At the YMCA, a young black woman who looked like my girls became my trainer. I laughed and moved again. The healing that began in the gym extended to my kitchen. Sugar lost its hypnotic pull. I sautéed spinach. I baked salmon. I tossed salads.

As I focused on my nutrition, I looked past the barbecue and Tex-Mex that dominated my Dallas landscape. A growing tide of black vegan chefs came into view. Arugula and bok choy and sugar snap peas were becoming my new staples, but I never entertained the idea of becoming vegan. It seemed too extreme, too restrictive. How could the flavors in a vegan dish have the depth I needed to draw me in and keep me for the long haul? But I was curious about the discipline it takes to be vegan.

The chefs I met taught me that veganism isn't just about taste. It's about the power to change lives and change communities. Across the nation, chefs are using their power to drive political activism and healing. Tapping a rich history of African plant-based diets, these chefs argue that food offers a physical and spiritual connection to African American traditions and family. They wage war against a food culture that holds personal responsibility supreme and doesn't acknowledge systemic racism, which they say is at the root of poor diets, ravaged black bodies, and decimated black communities. They want to teach people of color to be healthy. They also want them to be free.

Eating and listening, I learned that jackfruit barbecue and meatless tacos can be freedom foods. My introduction came in the one-room shop where I get my short afro trimmed. My stylist, Roz Spady-Holmes, a warm, bubbly chocolate sister in her mid-sixties, is a vegetarian who dabbles in veganism. On days when I have to wait for her to finish a client, Roz sometimes offers me a bite of something she cooked or picked up. Novices like me immediately think veganism is all salads. Roz does occasionally offer me spring greens glistening with homemade dressing. But a meatless taco, seasoned so well I didn't realize the meat was missing, got my attention. I'm not sure what the ingredients were, exactly. Roz doesn't remember. What I remember is that the dish was delicious.

Eager to learn more, I asked about a Dallas-area vegan chef who was getting a lot of attention. "Him? Girl, please. His jackfruit barbecue sandwich is too spicy," she told me one day, speaking of the unripe fruit from a tropical tree which, when cooked, takes on a stringy, meaty texture. At that point, the only barbecue I'd eaten with regularity was chicken. I was ready to explore.

Sunlight spills through the windows at Tisha Crear's Recipe Oak Cliff, a South Dallas plant-based food restaurant in the middle of what the U.S. Department of Agriculture labels a food desert. A long bench hugs a wall, and a customer stands at the wood-planked counters. A blackboard displays the menu of berry smoothies, walnut "meat" tacos, jackfruit barbecue sandwiches, and desserts. Her food attracts vegans from as far away as California. Tisha welcomes all. But she focuses on her neighbors, saying, "If I'm not serving the folks right here, I'm not doing a good job."

Her customers include, she says, young black men in their twenties, their front teeth encased with shiny grills. There is the stooped-over senior who needs help walking. And the young Latino family who comes for the familiar taste of hibiscus tea. Erykah Badu, the Dallas-based Grammy-winning singer, is a friend and customer. She has long advocated for plant-based diets, using her platform to talk to young fans, most of them African

Photographs by Cooper Neill


Barbecued jackfruit tacos at Recipe Oak Cliff, (restaurant pictured, above).

American. Her message to eat more plants now resonates.

In a January Gallup poll on American meat-eating habits, people of color reported that they are eating thirty-one percent less meat than a year ago. Their white counterparts reported eating ten percent less in the same time period. If I'd started my journey back to health earlier, I might have recognized the trend like Tisha had. She knows that she must first reach people like me through our palates. Only then can her larger message of empowerment take hold. She got me with the promise of smoky barbecue-flavored jackfruit and the taste of her vegan cheesecake. I had thought cheesecake might be in my past. Her texture and flavors are right. Hers tasted healthy. I wanted more, but I also wanted to explore the work of another vegan chef.

I cannot imagine Thanksgiving without making my mother's macaroni and cheese. I don't like kale. I think it should have remained a garnish for platters.

Several miles away from Recipe, the collard, mustard, and turnip greens planted in James McGee's community garden droop from the cold. The vegan chef is hopeful the sun will work its magic. Here on Belt Line Road, a main thoroughfare through the predominantly African American suburb of DeSoto, he hopes that his small garden can play a key role in his quiet war against fast foods and moldy, bruised grocery store produce. "We plan to have local black farmers come and teach people how to garden at home," he says of the community space. "If we can just start to grow two percent of our own food, that's a lot."

James is twenty-eight and owns Peace. Love. & Eatz Smoothie Bar. He says poor diets have left many in his community sick with hypertension and diabetes before the age of thirty. I have not reached the point where the sugar in my diet is killing me. But I hear something familiar when James tells me that older African Americans are "sick of being sick" and in need of plant-based foods.

Statistics support his claim. According to a 2016 Dallas Community Health Needs assessment, DeSoto and nearby Lancaster have the highest population of African American residents in Dallas County. DeSoto residents, whose median age is thirty-nine, suffer the second highest mortality rates for heart disease in Dallas County. James believes the garden might help the community seek and demand better food options. He now teaches neighbors to cultivate the soil, showing them how to coax homegrown bounty out of a small space.

He also hopes to inspire residents to be better consumers. "I think we get the last pick, the end of the delivery truck," he says. "A lot goes into keeping us where we are, but we can force them to step up their game and bring milk and eggs that doesn't expire within three days." The father of three young children, James also works with his school district's high school culinary department to teach youngsters how to cook vegetables. This work is tough. But he is undaunted, for the stakes are high.

Many chefs, especially those women and men who aim to do good as well as cook good food, struggle to achieve their lofty goals. Tisha knows that struggle. She mops floors. She sorts refuse and recycling. She does whatever it takes. She uses her space as a co-op for other chefs. She'd love to literally raise the roof, creating a second floor with classrooms, a yoga space, and room to manufacture food products. For now, that will have to wait. She has to keep pushing. "This isn't about 'How will I make a million dollars off this trend?'" she says. "I have a social obligation to my community."

As a black woman, I share that obligation. I'm working to make myself spiritually, emotionally, and physically well so I can help my daughters and my community. A plant-based diet might not work for me. I love seafood. I still savor a rare bowl of ice cream. I cannot imagine Thanksgiving without making my mother's macaroni and cheese. I don't like kale. I think it should have remained a garnish for platters.

Yet this spring I dream of planting a small backyard garden at my new home.

My great-grandmother, who could make dead things bloom, grew up on Baxter's Mountain in Jamaica. Her father's banana crops fed the family. In Mount Vernon, New York, Nana and my grandmother planted a garden behind their home. Roses, zinnias, and vegetables sprang from the urban soil, a private botanical garden that nourished us. My mother created her own oasis. First in the Bronx and then in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, she grew roses and lilies for the table and tomatoes for salads.

Inspired by my forebears, I think of planting tomatoes. Possibly some rosemary, thyme, and basil. I might learn to grow and cook collards. Tisha and James have taught me that the cure for a low spirit can spring up from garden dirt. A well-nourished body can fight. And a well-rooted garden can connect me to my ancestors and that place down deep where healing begins.

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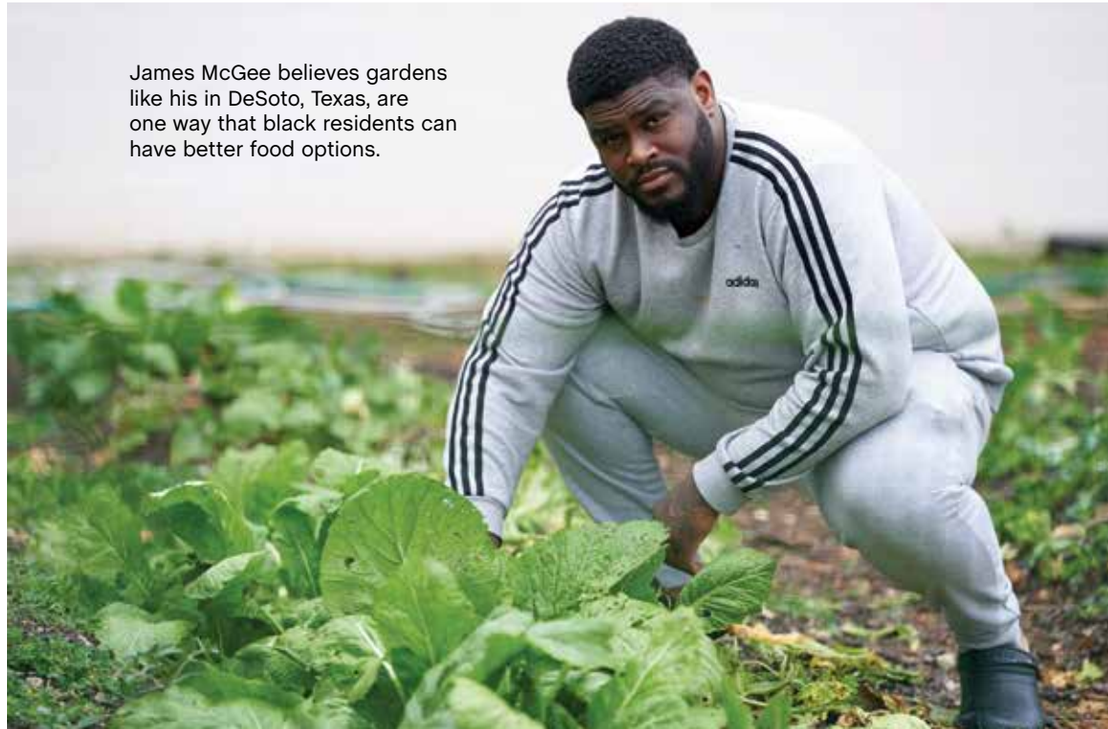

James McGee believes gardens like his in DeSoto, Texas, are one way that black residents can have better food options.