



Michael Banner

Urban Farmer & Chairperson of Winston-Salem's Urban Food Policy Council



One of the Local Food Champions of 2019 by the NC Local Food Council.

Michael Banner envisions a future where the residents of the East Winston neighborhood of Winston-Salem can come to the local city park in the morning and sign up for a day's work in urban farming in their own community. Currently, he says, people seeking work travel across town to make minimum wage holding signs at shovel-ready Department of Transportation projects.

"They say when you jump off the porch you jump into the streets and the street activity," Banner explains. "We want to be able to jump of the porch and into farming activity."

"They say when you jump off the porch you jump into the streets and the street activity," Banner explains. "We want to be able to jump of the porch and into farming activity."

Banner is the chairperson of Winston-Salem's Urban Food Policy Council and has become the representative for his community in the city and beyond.

"People don't have time to leave their jobs or their stands so they'll say, 'it sounds interesting, but you go,'" Banner describes. He attends meetings and brings information back to the community, trying to help people engage in the work or find a way it can benefit them.

Banner tells a powerful story about how he began growing food. He was incarcerated for seven years and only began cooking when he was around 30 years old, after he was released to his mother's house.

Following the homebirth delivery of his daughter, he was struck by the feeling that his family was going to need more food. He went outside and under a three-quarter moon he put his hands in the dirt.

"People say I'm a master gardener; I'm just a consistent gardener," Banner muses.

"It wasn't a formal prayer," he says, "but I made a connection with the earth. I've been growing food ever since." When Banner began gardening, he did not have any training. He broke tools by using them incorrectly and did not know how deep to plant or how much sunlight and water was required. Banner explains that this is an important part of what people find inspiring about the narrative of his community. He and other activists do not have an agricultural background, but have created an urban farming movement in Winston-Salem.

"People say I'm a master gardener; I'm just a consistent gardener," Banner muses. Gardening has become his form of meditation. He likes "the care that you have to take of the plant and then taking it to the table, eating it and sharing it."

As Banner gained a reputation as a gardener, he was pulled into many volunteer projects. He describes finding it financially unsustainable to lend his body and truck to a multitude of community gardens that are focused on giving food away rather than selling it. These days, Banner prefers “a mindset that you might could make some money with this operation.”

“It wasn’t a formal prayer,” he says, “but I made a connection with the earth. I’ve been growing food ever since.”

Banner also finds the lens of racial equity to be limiting. Rather than having a finite jar of resources and distributing them equitably, he says, “I want it to be more of an infinite type of situation where the seeds are very prolific and [the impact is] a million-fold.” In his role on the Urban Food Policy Council, Banner advocates for urban agriculture-friendly zoning policies and consolidating processes for citizens to acquire vacant lots for urban agriculture purposes. The Council is championing an organic protocol which would transform a local city park into a pesticide-free edible landscape with pollinators like bees.

Banner is also interested in a Good Food Purchasing Policy for institutions to buy food from hyper-local growers within a several mile radius. He supports increased benefits for EBT and SNAP dollars that are spent on healthy food. Banner’s vision is an agricultural neighborhood with home ownership and healthy eaters. He describes a local corner store which has been run by a 78-year-old community elder, Herb *, for over 30 years. * would prefer to sell healthy food rather than chips, candy and soda. He and Banner are working together to plant a garden behind the store. “We’re trying to open up minds right there and do something different for our children’s future.”

Learn more about NC Local Food Councils’ champions and their work at nclocalfoodcouncil.org.

Yaad Collards

Michael Banner says of his Yaad Collard recipe, “It is done mostly from the heart and not the head, so who feels it knows it.”

I pick fresh greens from the garden and wash them properly, with some salt water and ah splash of vinegar. I take these cleaned greens (about a paper bag full) and put them in my cast iron pot with ah quart of water, 2 tbsp of Himalayan salt and long sip (about 2 tbsp) of apple cider vinegar. I turn this pot up to medium-high to where the water begins to coalesce and as soon as I get to smelling the greens I go ahead and turn it down to simmer and place the lid on.

I then slice my large zucchini and dice 2 yellow onions while I pour enough olive oil in my cast iron skillet to cover the bottom healthily. I turn the eye on to medium-high and just as it forms bubbles in the heating oil, I drop the veggies into the skillet allowing the onions to caramelize and the zucchini to cook down to where it produces an aroma that is indicative of it’s being cooked.

From here, I scoop the sautéed veggies from the skillet and put them in the cast iron pot with the collards. I then dice up the 2 eggplants and dash cayenne powder on the cubes, and strip a handful of sprigs of both thyme and oregano; tossing the mix of it all inside of the skillet so that the seasoning is infused in the eggplant and the oil, then add this to the pot of collards as well to be simmered over the remaining 30 minutes. I add enough water to keep the greens good and juicy, while I await the deliciousness that will soon come.

I add some cumin to enhance the flavor, and wallah! Dinner is served!



Ingredients:

- Fresh picked collards
- 1 large zucchini
- 2 eggplants
- 2 yellow onions
- Handful of fresh thyme and oregano sprigs
- Himalayan salt
- Apple cider vinegar
- 2 quarts of water

