

# Community Roots Garden Volunteer Chef Program



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*The Volunteer Chef Program* brings Oxnard youth and older chef “mentors” together in two formative places: the kitchen and the garden, with the intent of nurturing skills and passions that help youth lead healthy lives.



**Introduction:** During the spring of 2011, two anonymous donors sat down with Katerina Friesen, the coordinator of Community Roots Garden, and shared their dream of investing in the lives of at-risk, inner-city area youth volunteers at the Garden. This sparked an idea – to formalize the nutritious lunches that volunteers Gloria Roman and Nancy Shuman would often cook for garden volunteers and youth on Saturday mornings. These lunches prepared by volunteers were a way of both thanking the youth for their work and addressing the reality that most of the youth who volunteer do not eat breakfast before coming to work at the Garden and come from food insecure areas of Oxnard.

Alyssa Jones, a nutrition student (pictured above) at San Jose State University, interned at Community Roots Garden during the summer of 2011 and helped to pilot the Volunteer Chef Program. Alyssa chose or created a recipe every week using vegetables from the garden. Each Saturday morning, she cooked alongside a different youth, many serving hours on probation or under a court order. The youth were connected to the Garden through Oxnard City Corps, a youth development organization and an ongoing partner of Community Roots Garden. The Volunteer Chef Program was such a hit with the youth assistants - not to mention the happily fed volunteers - that we decided to continue the program past her internship.

Currently, about five different volunteer chefs participate in the Volunteer Chef Program, and work with youth to prepare healthy, delicious lunches that feature vegetables and fruits from the garden's harvest. Aside from the indirect mentoring they receive, youth assistants are taught cooking basics, recipe development, kitchen safety, composting, and nutrition. The following pages tell the story of this transformative program through research, stories, pictures, and several favorite recipes. Bon Appetit!

Youth, Gardening, and Cooking



### The Stats

- Over 52% of Ventura County's residents 13 and older were overweight or obese (California Health Interview Survey, 2009)
- More than 43% of Ventura County children and adolescents, ages 5 to under 20 years, receiving CHDP screening exams were overweight or obese. (CHDP, 2009)
- Oxnard has among the highest overweight rates in Ventura County (37.6%). (Ventura County Public Health Report 2009)
- 15.1% of Oxnard residents were below the poverty line in 1999, compared with 8.7% in the rest of Ventura County (Census Data).
- 10 out of 22 schools in the Oxnard School District had 80-100% of their students eligible for free or reduced school meals (California Department of Education 2009).

*"Kids feel more invested when they know where the food comes from. They find that vegetables taste better if they grow them, pick them, cook them and eat them. Being more involved in processes makes them feel proud of themselves."*

*-Jaimie Davis, Keck School of Medicine of USC*

"Hey, this is *actually* good!" a City Corps volunteer exclaimed while trying a bite of salad greens that he helped to harvest. His surprise is common. Though agriculture in Ventura County is a multi-billion dollar industry, there is a huge gulf between the food grown outside the city and what gets consumed by inner-city youth.

Many of the youth we work with come from areas of Oxnard that provide easy access to unhealthy foods but do not offer much in terms of healthy alternatives. A study by Ventura County Public Health found that low-income Oxnard neighborhoods are suffering from inadequate nutrition and poor health. The study focused on La Colonia, and found the neighborhood to be characterized by limited access to affordable healthy foods, the inability to find stores that offer a variety of produce, dominated by stores where packaged, less healthy foods are readily available along with poor quality fruits and vegetables, challenged by access to fast food at convenience stores, and by children able to access unhealthy foods through street vendors, mini-markets and ice-cream carts (September 2009). Though the study does not take into account the backyard gardens that are common in La Colonia, it describes an environment that makes it difficult for families to choose healthy foods, and is part of a broader situation of food insecurity.

Food insecurity in Oxnard is not just an issue of hunger, though many of the youth who come to work at the Garden on Saturday mornings *are* hungry since they do not eat breakfast. We see food insecurity as a situation in which food that truly nourishes the whole person is not readily available, whether due to cost, location, choice, unfamiliarity, and/or lack of knowledge on food preparation or insufficient resources to prepare healthy meals. Our understanding of food security is set within the broader framework of food sovereignty, a community's right to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate food for all, their ability to control how that food is grown, and their access not only to food but to land where they can grow their own food. Our program uses the lens of food sovereignty to bring together both access to food and access to land, linking nutrition education with gardening.

Exciting new research is just now emerging on the health impacts of the integration of gardening and cooking. A study done by researchers at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and the UCLA School of Public Health found that a L.A. nutrition and gardening program had measurable effects on the health of low-income Latino children (Journal of the American Dietetic Association, August 2011). Researchers followed students at L.A. Sprouts, a 12-week interventional gardening, nutrition and cooking program at the Milagro Allegro Community Garden, and found that students' blood pressure and body mass index dropped significantly compared to their peers.

In addition to improving diet and nutrition, our program aims to cultivate deeper life skills through mentoring and the development of job skills. Participants learn cooking basics, kitchen safety, recipe reading and development, time management, and team work. For Oxnard youth involved at the Garden, these skills are vital as an alternative to gang involvement. In addition, they form friendships with role models who truly care about youth participants. One young woman returned to the Garden a week after working with Gloria, a volunteer chef. She asked where Gloria was, saying that she wanted to work with her again because, "she called me 'mija' [my daughter]." These intergenerational relationships are incredibly important for young people, and the kitchen provides a safe, nurturing space for them to feel seen and heard as daughters and sons of our community.

# A Sampling of the Volunteer Chefs



## **Roberto Garcia**

is a professional chef in Goleta, CA at the Goodland Kitchen. He is also a permaculturalist and loves gardening. Roberto brings a sense of professionalism and enjoys teaching young people new cooking techniques and recipes, like pastel de choclo, Chilean shepherd's pie.



## **Alise Echele**

is a dietician at the Ventura Unified School District, bringing nutrition education to the classroom and cafeteria. She brings a sense of healthy innovation to favorite recipes. Examples include the popular cob oven baked pizza with homemade whole wheat crust, sauce, and garden veggies.



## **Leticia Sandoval**

**is a contractor for organizations including the Network for a Healthy California. She helps coordinate the Volunteer Chef Program and brings lots of new ideas and energy. Leticia loves healthy eating and exercise, and learning traditional dishes from her elders, such as Nogada de Zapayo, or Bolivian squash stew.**



## **Gloria Roman**

**(pictured above with Nancy Shuman, the original Garden Chef) has volunteered at Community Roots since the beginning. She is a local community activist and is a strong advocate for Oxnard youth, encouraging them to serve their community and live meaningful lives. Her famous nopales smoothie recipe is below.**

## Volunteer Chef Responsibilities:

*Cooking is a vital part of our volunteer days. We end the Saturday work day with a shared lunch because eating together builds community, restores our bodies after hard work, introduces us to new foods, and re-connects us with life's most basic task: nourishing ourselves. As a volunteer chef, your responsibility will be to prepare a nutritious lunch for 15-20 volunteers. Part of our cooking program involves working alongside Oxnard youth to share healthy cooking skills, provide mentorship through positive experiences in the kitchen, and to further community health, from the garden to the table.*



### Cooking guidelines

- 1. Find or create a recipe for the lunch you will serve.** You can cook one main dish, a main and a side, or choose a variety of side dishes to serve, as long as there is enough food for 15-20 people. We ask that your meal highlights vegetables harvested from Community Roots. Also, since some volunteers are vegetarians, we ask that you cook without meat. Past favorites include: Rice and beans with swiss chard and pico de gallo, curried lentils, vegetarian enchiladas, bread and garden salad.<sup>1</sup>
- 2. Call or email Katerina, Garden Coordinator, by Wednesday with a list of cooking supplies and ingredients needed, including the quantity.** The budget for each week is between \$25-\$35. If you are able to purchase the supplies, great! Please save all receipts used to be reimbursed. If not, Katerina will purchase what is needed. We have most of the basics available, including oils, vinegars, salt, flour, sugar, honey, and some spices.
- 3. Arrive between 8:30 a.m. and 9 a.m. on Saturday morning to start preparing the meal.** Supervise harvest of vegetables needed, and supervise kitchen clean-up after meal is over. Maintain a safe kitchen environment, including a dry floor and clean counters. Space is limited, so heightened awareness in the kitchen is a must.
- 4. Work with 1-2 City Corps youth in the kitchen every Saturday.** Involve the youth in the cooking process, answering questions, teaching proper cooking techniques and safety, clarifying steps, asking them to harvest needed vegetables/ fruits from the garden, and asking their input in the recipes. It is so important to us that you show the youth who help at the garden healthy cooking practices - thank you!
- 5. Please have the meal ready to serve between 11 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.** Ask the youth to help you set out needed plates, cutlery, and tablecloths (located in cloth picnic bag inside church office) before bringing out food.
- 6. Supervise clean-up.** Have volunteers help wash, dry, and put dishes, cups and cutlery back in cloth picnic bag. We try to always leave the church better than we found it. Thank you for your help!

<sup>1</sup> See USDA's "My Plate" for resources on creating balanced meals: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>



The Recipes!





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### **Cob Oven Pizza**

In August, 2011, we hosted a series of workshops on how to build an outdoor oven at Community Roots Garden.

Through these workshops, we built our own outdoor cob oven near the eating area. Cob is a mixture of clay, sand, and straw. When made into an oven, the material retains heat so well that it can cook breads and pizzas in a matter of minutes. We've used the oven at least twice a month since building it, since the food that comes out of it tastes especially delicious. Baking with the cob oven is one of our most popular activities with kids. We love baking pizza together with kids, since they can all be involved in the process, whether by kneading the dough, making the sauce, or harvesting their own vegetable toppings. Below is our favorite pizza recipe.

#### **Pizza ingredients:**

- 6 pizza doughs
- 6 cups pizza sauce
- 2 onions
- 12 cups mozerella cheese
- 3 green bell pepper
- tomatoes, zucchinis, spinach, kale, or other available garden veggies
- corn meal

#### **Pizza sauce:**

*adapted by Alise Eschele*

- 1 can tomato paste
- 1 tsp. minced garlic
- ½ tsp. each of herbs, such as:
  - basil
  - oregano
  - thyme
  - marjoram

Mix the above ingredients together. Makes sauce for 1 pizza.

#### **Pizza dough:**

*from Allrecipes.com*

- 1 (.25 ounce) package active dry yeast
- 1 cup warm water (110 degrees F/45 degrees C)
- 2 cups bread flour
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons white sugar

1. In a small bowl, dissolve yeast in warm water. Let stand until creamy, about 10 minutes.
2. In a large bowl, combine 2 cups bread flour, olive oil, salt, white sugar and the yeast mixture; stir well to combine. Beat well until a stiff dough has formed. Cover and rise until doubled in volume, about 30 minutes.
3. Turn dough out onto a well floured surface. Form dough into a round and roll out into a pizza crust shape.

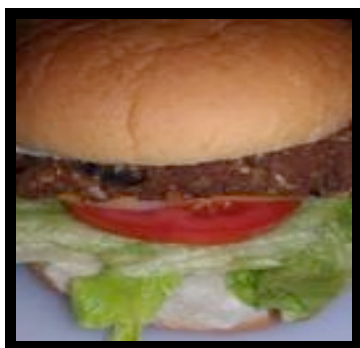
Yield: 1 pizza dough.

#### **Directions:**

1. Two-three hours before baking pizza, make a fire in the cob oven to start heating it.
2. Make 6 pizza doughs (or buy Trader Joe's pre-made doughs, depending on time).
3. Sprinkle corn meal over pizza pans, and place rolled dough onto pans.
4. Make pizza sauce and top dough with pizza sauce.
5. Top pizza with garden veggies available
6. Cover each pizza with 2 cups of mozerella cheese
7. Carefully withdraw coals and burning wood from inside the oven, and insert the pizza.
8. Bake in cob oven for about 3 minutes. Presto!

## Black Bean Burgers

*Adapted from All Recipes*



### Ingredients:

4 cups of black beans  
1 onion  
1 green bell pepper  
2 garlic cloves  
1 small zucchini  
1/2 cup fresh corn or frozen corn  
1/2 cup bread crumbs  
1 tablespoon chili powder  
1 tablespoon ground cumin  
1 egg

**Directions:** Preheat your oven for 375 degrees. Using a food processor pulse onions, bell pepper, garlic, and zucchini. Using a paper towel or cheese cloth strain the excess water from the vegetable. Once excess water is strained, place vegetable mixture in a bowl. Next, strain black beans and mash in a bowl. Then add the processed vegetable mixture, frozen corn, bread crumbs, chili powder, cumin, and eggs in the black bean mixture. Stir the mixture until everything is combined.

Line your pan with foil and grease with oil. Form black bean mixture into patties and place on the pan. Place the black bean patties into the oven for 10 minutes on each side.

Serve with cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, ketchup, and mustard. Enjoy!

## Pico de Gallo Salsa

*by Gloria Roman*

### Ingredients:

6 tomatoes diced  
1/2 cup onion diced  
1/3 cup cilantro chopped  
1 jalapeno chopped  
Salt to taste



Combine tomatoes, onions, cilantro, jalapeno, and salt. Then serve.



## veggie Quesadillas

*adapted by Alyssa Jones*

### Ingredients:

3 tablespoon olive oil  
1 cup onion diced  
1 cup corn, fresh or frozen  
1 cup black beans  
1 cup zucchini diced  
2 cup swiss chard chopped  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/2 teaspoon black pepper  
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin  
Shredded jack cheese  
Whole wheat flour tortillas

### Directions:

Heat olive oil in a pan on medium heat and add the vegetables. Cook until the vegetables are tender and add the salt, black pepper, and cumin. Once the vegetables are tender, set aside. Take your tortilla and sprinkle about 1/4 of cheese on top and layer 1/3 cup of the vegetable mixture. Then sprinkle as small amount of cheese on the veggie mixture and top with the second tortilla. Spray your cooking pan with oil. Cook the quesadilla on both sides until the tortilla is golden and the cheese is melted. Remove the quesadillas from the pan and repeat the process with remaining tortillas.

Cut the quesadilla into triangles and serve.

## Gloria's Nopales Smoothie



### Ingredients:

10 nopales (cactus) cleaned and chopped  
Half a green apple or other available fruit  
3 medium carrots chopped  
Small bunch of mint  
Pineapple and juice

### Directions:

Clean and remove the spikes using a knife. In a blender add the nopales, apple, carrots, mint, pineapple and juice. Blend and serve.

## Nogada de Zapallo

(a Bolivian stew by Margot Palacios' mom, Gloria)



### Ingredients:

3 butternut or acorn squash  
1 orange or yellow bell pepper  
1 medium onion, chopped  
1 tablespoons butter  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
1 teaspoon cumin  
1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro  
1 tablespoon finely minced fresh chile pepper  
2-3 cups chicken or vegetable broth  
Salt and pepper to taste  
Fresh cilantro leaves and cotija cheese for garnish.

### Preparation:

1. Slice the squash crosswise into 1/4 inch thick slices.
2. Melt the butter with the olive oil over medium heat in a large saucepan or soup pot. Add the onion, squash, bell pepper, and cumin, and sauté until soft and golden, about 8 minutes.
3. Add 2 cups of chicken broth and the cilantro and simmer vegetables until completely tender, about 25 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool slightly. Season soup to taste with salt and pepper, and add garnish.

**Yield: 5 servings**

## Cabbage, Carrot, Zucchini, and Beet Slaw



### Ingredients:

1 Large cabbage shredded  
2 Large zucchini cut into small strips  
4 carrots cut into small strips  
3 large beets cut into small strips  
½ cup apple cider vinegar  
1/3 cup olive oil  
4 tablespoon honey  
Salt and black pepper to taste

### Directions:

In a bowl, combine apple cider vinegar, olive oil, honey, salt and pepper. Then add cabbage, zucchini, carrots, and beets. Mix together until the veggie mixture is coated with the dressing.

## Program Outcomes

In November 2011, we realized the need for a program evaluation that could help us tell the story of the Volunteer Chef program and its impacts on youth involved. We created a written evaluation form for both volunteer chefs and youth, and will administer the evaluations beginning in January, 2012. Below are a few quotes that several middle schoolers (pictured below) wrote in a preliminary evaluation after a day of gardening and cooking pizza in the outdoor oven:



“My favorite part is when I was making pizza because you get to put anything you got from the garden and put it in the pizza.” - Allan, age 12

“I learned about how the worms poop in the ground and they make soil richer. I also learned that they don't use pesticides. Working in the garden was difficult but it all payed off after we made and ate our own pizza.” - Mario, age 11

“I would like to come back to the garden with my mom and show her that work that we did. Then tell my mom about the fruits that there are in the garden.” - Freddy, age 11

I learned that by gardening, you can get your favorite plant(s) and vegetables and composting is helping you get the rich nutrients in your vegetables.” - Yasmin, age 11

“My favorite part about the project was when we were picking habaneros, strawberries, and raspberries. I would like to go back because I would like to put even more ingredients on my pizza that I did not put before.” - Mario, age 11



**Community Roots Garden** is a one acre garden at the North Oxnard United Methodist Church. We are dedicated to growing a community of gardens that build food security and empower our community to grow their own food. Our garden is open to volunteers who want to share land, labor, and harvest with one another and those in need. **Want to join us as a volunteer gardener or chef?** See [www.communityrootsgarden.org](http://www.communityrootsgarden.org) for more information, or contact us at [communityrootsgarden@gmail.com](mailto:communityrootsgarden@gmail.com) or 805-616-2326.  
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