



Chanowk Yisrael

Changing the 'Hood for Good

Co-owner, Yisrael Family Farm

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Chanowk Yisrael, along with his wife Judith Yisrael, turned his Sacramento backyard into a thriving urban produce plot in response to family health concerns. Fast forward 10 years, and Yisrael Family Farm now flourishes as a community-oriented business. Yisrael left a longtime IT job to tend his farm, build backyard produce gardens for others, and deliver agricultural education to youth and adults throughout the city's underserved areas. Yisrael has served twice as Slow Food Sacramento's farm representative at the nonprofit's global conference in Italy, known as Terra Madre.



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Chanowk Yisrael and his family live in the heart of a city food desert. His community lacks access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food sources within a one-mile radius of home. Their Sacramento neighborhood, South Oak Park, is a historically working-class area now battling food insecurity, poverty, and gentrification.

It’s a familiar story in impoverished communities, particularly communities of color. But Yisrael and his wife, who are both African American, decided to turn that narrative on its head.

Over the course of a decade, these modern day urban homesteaders have converted their yard into a half-acre farm complete with chicken coop, an orchard of 40 trees producing fruit such as oranges, plums, and goji berries, and a produce plot boasting row crops like Ethiopian kale, Swiss chard, and collard greens. This self-taught farm family also composts, cultivates seeds, tends a beehive, and makes jams, soaps, salves, and tinctures from farm-sourced ingredients.

In 2008, the farm began as an exercise in improving the family’s own eating habits. Both of Yisrael’s parents are cancer survivors. The recession hit hard, and he wanted to

be able to feed his family—including nine children—well. He was drawn to a plant-based diet, but he figured eating well would be expensive. So he decided to learn to grow his own. “I wanted to take full control of my food,” says Yisrael, who eventually quit his corporate job to farm full time. Today, the Yisraels source up to 60 percent of their diet from home. The Yisrael Family Farm, formally founded in 2011, expanded to serve other Sacramento residents living with food insecurity. “Urban farming isn’t just for food production,” Yisrael says. “It’s a powerful weapon to build community.”

In 2015, the [Sacramento Urban Agriculture Coalition](#), which the Yisraels co-founded, helped pass a city ordinance allowing farmers with less than one acre to set up temporary stands to sell their produce. “This was the first time I’d ever done anything politically active,” Yisrael says. “I learned if you really want to get things done you have to step outside of your comfort zone. We wanted to make sure that farmers’ voices were heard. We didn’t want these ordinances passed without the people who do the actual work at the table”. A countywide ordinance followed, allowing the Yisraels, who lives outside the city limits, to sell jams, eggs, and fresh produce to their neighbors.



“This is a homegrown revolution. I started by wanting to feed my family and then I wanted to take it to the community,” says Yisrael. It’s also a mid-life career shift for the 43-year-old, who spent more than 20 years as a self-taught computer programmer in the IT department of a telecommunications company.

The family now supports itself through farm enterprises. “We’re able to keep the lights on,” says Yisrael, who still has three children at home. “One of the things I’ve learned is how much money it doesn’t take to grow food and how many classes you don’t need to take to start a farm. Nothing takes the place of working the land and learning from other farmers.”

Both Chanowk and Judith grew up in households where fried food and canned goods were the norm. For Chanowk Yisrael, teaching his children to grow their own food and cook from scratch was an important life skill.

And he wanted to share this knowledge beyond the family to help others—particularly people of color—who are struggling to eat nutritious food. “Usually when you have urban farms you mostly have people from outside the community coming into a community. They’re usually not brown. And it usually

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doesn’t work,” he says. “I mean it works from the aspect of growing food and the business side of selling it, but really having a deep connection with the community, that’s an onion that’s hard to crack,” he says.

“We have those community connections—I grew up here—and we’re urban farmers too. So that’s a good match and puts us in a position to be successful, not only growing and selling food but developing trust with people so we can show them something different. And they’re open to it.”

Yisrael has run culinary concerts at elementary schools, where students engaged in music also drink green smoothies.



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He’s built garden beds for budding urban growers, taught classes to children and adults, held harvest events, hosted farm-to-fork dinners, and otherwise spread the gospel of healthy food in his ‘hood.

He’s hit bumps along the way. Some question whether he’s really a farmer: “When I say I have a half acre, people say, ‘Oh you’ve just got a hobby garden,’ because I don’t have 10, 20, or 50 acres.” He begs to differ.

There are deeply held cultural assumptions and stereotypes to dispel. Yisrael says he encounters resistance among first-generation Latino parents who want to see their children go to college not farm fields. He also hears from fellow African Americans, young and old, that farm work is what slaves do. “Those are roadblocks,” he says, “but I tell them: Everybody has got to eat and if you’re growing food you are in a better position than most people.”

“I also tell people that agriculture is a multibillion dollar industry in California and most of that money is not being made by people of color. If we opt out of doing this work, who does that benefit at the end of the day?”

That’s not all: “When food doesn’t have value, we cheapen it and cheap food needs cheap workers, which means cheap lives,” he says. “We’ve lost the value of what food really is. It’s just something we buy to sustain ourselves, but it’s actually the seed to culture—and that’s ultimately going to bring us out of the dark age that we’re in with the food system.”

He’s not shy about bringing up structural inequities in the food movement, either. “You can’t have a conversation about global food systems without talking about racism,” he says. “People of color have been cut out of a lot of things, including land ownership. Sometimes those conversations are uncomfortable but we need to have them.”—Sarah Henry