Meeting Maya

Wednesday, 05 December 2012
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Santa Cruz’s Maya Salsedo planted the seed for Food Justice and wound up harvesting an award-winning manifesto to boot. Now, her story is inspiring other youth nationwide to create changes within their own communities.

If there ever was a time to be reminded that there is youth out there occupying their time with more than just Wii, X-Box, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, iTunes, texting, consuming fast-food, texting more, gaming even more and texting even more beyond that, this is it.

But maybe it’s best to use today’s butchered vernacular and be all-inclusive here before moving on: R U READY 4 SOMETHING COOL?

Enter: The Brower Youth Awards (BYA). Launched by the New Leaders Initiative (NLI), a forward-thinking entity that keeps the legacy of environmentalist/ Earth Island Institute founder David Brower alive, in part, by shining the creative klieg lights on young emerging environmental leaders in North America, BYA recognizes six young people annually for their commanding activism and achievements in the fields of environmental and environmental justice advocacy. The awards came into fruition in 2000 and since that time, it has recognized 61 indelible innovators.

Maya Salsedo is one of those innovators.

The Santa Cruz-born food justice advocate, now 20 and pursuing a double major (Ethnic Studies and Political Legal Economic Analysis) at Mills College in the East Bay, nabbed Brower gold stars last month for her work creating the first-ever Youth Food Bill of Rights (YFBR).

Food Justice advocates may have heard of YFBR. But for the rest of us, think of it as an eager yet focused offspring of the Food Justice movement—that national forward-thinking, pro-
ag/positive-health militia bent on increasing the awareness and actions taken around many food and farm issues in the hopes of advancing policies for a successful local food system. The Youth Food Bill of Rights came about in an effort to reshape what has long been considered “a broken food system.” Salsedo, intent on making a difference, worked with other youth leaders in the nation to “name their rights.”

If that sounds like some of the feverish cheering and protest-sign waving that came out of the late ’60s and early ’70s, that’s because, in a way, it is.

As a result, 17 rights were birthed in the summer of 2011 and what an indispensible bunch they are, ranging from having the right to sustainable food to demanding government funding to educate youth and parents about nutrition. “I have been driven to make changes in our food system because of my own family history of food insecurity and dependence on federal nutrition programs,” Salsedo wrote in her Brower application.

Obviously, her words struck a chord.

Salsedo is in good company, too. The other recipients were supercharged go-getters in their own right. Twenty-one-year-old Martin Figueroa of Los Angeles won accolades for inspiring campus-wide water conservation in the arid Central Valley. Jacob Glass (21) of Glastonbury, Conn., documented grassroots wilderness protection efforts in Montana’s Scotchman Peaks. Ryland King (22) of Goleta, Calif., generated creative environmental engagement amongst elementary school students in his community. Asa Needle (16) of Worcester, Mass., shed impressive light on toxic waste through neighborhood-led remediation efforts. And Brittany Stallworth (21) of Washington D.C., inspired student activism for health and well-being in her Howard University community.

Salsedo’s mission came to fruition in 2011. She was working as a youth organizer with the Earth Island Institute-sponsored project Rooted in Community when she proposed creating a Youth Food Bill of Rights. That declaration came out of her own vision for a food system that is, as the Brower Youth Awards point out, “good for consumers, producers and the planet, and which gives local communities more control over the food they eat.” As a result, Salsedo has since motivated many of her peers to spread the word across the nation about YFBR, and those efforts have generated a positive ripple effect which is now offering unique (and new) opportunities for a more open dialogue about what food justice means—and can mean—to today’s youth.

Awards and accolades are nice, but often, it’s the backstory behind receiving them that tends to be even more inspiring. For it’s behind the scenes where you can find a kaleidoscope that offers a more colorful glimpse of the human spirit—not only where it can take the individual possessing it, sometimes against all odds, but also where it can take the masses, creating a sea change unlike any other. Flashback a few years: Before the 2008 election, there was an African American politician from Illinois whose belief in himself and the nation at large eventually created one of the biggest cultural and racial shifts the country has ever seen. Before American Idol fame, there was James Durbin, passionately singing in Santa Cruz, rising beyond his own personal and challenging limitations with Tourette’s and Asperger’s syndromes. And for Salsedo? Well, before she helped craft the nation’s first-ever youth food manifesto designed to
spark changes in local food systems, she would have to endure years of silent hardship and shame—not having access to healthy and affordable food.

In Santa Cruz … of all places.

**Finding Food Justice**

Salsedo’s family tree is abundant. Her great-grandfather emigrated from Puerto Rico to Hawaii in an effort to work in the sugar cane fields there. Eventually, the family hit the mainland and Salsedo’s mother, Kim, who was born Utah, would make Santa Cruz home. Salsedo was born and raised on the Westside but as idyllic as the coastal little hamlet is, she says her family always had difficulty accessing healthy food.

“We ate a lot of fast food, junk food or frozen dinners; that kind of stuff,” Salsedo says, recalling how she, her single, working mother and younger brother often dined on McDonalds, Burger King, or microwave food, Top Ramen and food from other fast food joints. “Growing up in Santa Cruz, with so many people putting down eating unhealthy—junk food and such—I think a lot of people here think of it as a choice. You can either choose to eat healthy or choose to eat unhealthy. But for my family, it wasn’t necessarily a choice. I felt shameful eating fast food. I knew that it wasn’t necessarily good, but I don’t think I realized that it was bad for my body. I knew it was socially bad.”
There was also a bitter irony she could not escape. Her mother, who had worked hard to get through Cabrillo’s culinary program, was a chef at the White Magnolia in Aptos’ historic Bayview Hotel—a farm-to-table restaurant. Salsedo would often help out refilling salt and pepper shakers there. Even though it was her mother’s job to prepare healthy food, due to economic and other reasons it wasn’t feasible for those kinds of meals to transfer onto the family’s own dinner table.

As a result, Salsedo admits that she felt “food insecure” in Santa Cruz.

“It doesn’t fit around the traditional storylines you hear about food insecurities,” she adds. “You hear of food-insecure people, like in West Oakland, where there are no grocery stores within walking distance—there are only corner stores; no markets—now they are starting to get better. But in Santa Cruz, it was hard to imagine. I remember at school I would be like, ‘Oh, I had Taco Bell for dinner last night,’ and I had a friend who said, ‘Oh, I never had Taco Bell.’”

Her family did not have consistent access to healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, even though Safeway and New Leaf Community Market were nearby. “A lot of time we just ended up eating unhealthy stuff because there was not quick, affordable food that was healthy for you.”

The Salsedos weren’t alone. About 20,000 children in Santa Cruz County go hungry (according to Second Harvest Food Bank), so it is clear to see why, for some families, the only affordable food options were—and for many still are—predominantly unhealthy ones.

But something shifted dramatically for Salsedo when she was 15 (in 2007). She was attending a job fair at the local teen center when she came across a table with a sign that read, “Sustainable Youth Garden.” And on the table—a bowl of fresh chips and salsa. The food may have been enough to lure her in, but it would be Doron Comerchero that would seal a whole new kind of deal for her and her life. Comerchero was manning the station and at the time, his Food, What?! initiative—which is now a part of UC Santa Cruz’s Life Lab, a nonprofit that resides on the UCSC Farm—had not fully bloomed into the teen-empowering passion test it would eventually become; a place that would allow local youth to grow, cook, eat and distribute healthy sustainably raised food, and also realize their full potential as leaders.

(Wii, Twitter, Facebook and Smart Phones et al have yet to really do that, but one can hope …)

“I walked right over to the table and started talking to him,” Salsedo recalls of that day. “And he threw out all these words I knew, like ‘sustainability.’ I talked about how I was in an environmental sustainability class in school and I was interested in that kind of stuff.”

They exchanged contact information, eventually spoke in more detail, and, later that year, Salsedo was hired on as one of the first five youths within the first Food, What?! program. She says she immediately found it to be dynamic and somewhat mind-altering.
“I always loved to eat,” she admits with a laugh, “so it was cool for me to learn how food was actually grown and how you could make a meal out of things you’ve completely grown out of the ground; that you didn’t even have to go to the store. Whoa—who knew?

“That was where I began to take a critical lens to the food system. I did not know what the food system even was before that. I did not know about how money travels through the food system. I did not know how, every time I spend, I am voting with my money on what I think should be in this world. All of those concepts were new to me.”

Food Movement champion and bestselling author Michael Pollan discusses this topic at length in many of his works, particularly in his book, “The Omnivore’s Dilemma.” The book found Pollan chronicling each of the food chains that sustain humans—from industrial, organic or alternative foods—from their actual source to the meal’s destination.

In any event, these new concepts triggered something deep within Salsedo and she was eager to learn more. “I was like, ‘Wow … one of the reasons my family did not have many choices in the food we ate had a lot to do the corporations’ control of the food system.’ Suddenly, that was really clear to me. I just started thinking about it—why some people have abundant access to healthy food and why some people don’t. Why some communities have high-risk of diabetes and obesity, and others don’t. I had no idea about the impact of food. I thought you just eat it and that’s it.”

But that was far from it.

Salsedo’s participation in Food, What?! fed something deeper inside of her. Suddenly, she, and others like her in the program, were able to look at the food system in ways they had never been able to do before—from the impacts of such things as The Farm Bill to the access to—limited as it may be in some cases—organic foods.

“That’s what really inspired me; what made me realize that my personal story reflected a broken part of our food system,” she quickly points out. “And that was when I went, ‘Oh, that’s what I want to change.’”

The following year, in 2008, she became a junior staff member at Food, What?!, assisting with the new youth coming into the program, which was beginning to grow. In 2009, she worked on the organization’s Harvest and Strawberry festivals, as well as many other things, and received mentoring from Comerchero.

“You meet these young people, these children protégés that can play Mozart at age 4, and that was Maya’s equivalent in the food justice world,” Comerchero says. “She was just so far ahead of the curve. She had such a strong grasp of the language, understood the complexities of the systems and had a personal investment in it all. And then, at one point, she said, ‘This is not enough. I’ve done an intro course in Food, What?! And I did the peer-to-peer work … now I want to do something on a national scale.’”

Finding Her Roots In Community
Salsedo’s drive to generate change on a broader level forced Comerchero to consider what direction he could next lead her. His first stop: Rooted in Community. He was a board member of the grassroots entity, which has now become a national posse of youth working within their own local communities to provide access to healthy food and who also network nationally to reshape the food system. The organization had been hoping to create a position for one national youth organizer; someone who could do everything from social media to rallying youth at conferences, speaking to them in youth-only spaces. An open-hire followed and Salsedo was chosen.

Later, in the summer of 2011, Salsedo, with the help of another youth organizer, Joaquin Martinez, plunged into the Rooted in Community conference in Philadelphia—Land of Liberty and all that—to lead a crew of 100 youth from all across the nation to pen a National Youth Food Bill of Rights. Their hopes were clear—to use the bill as a tool for peer-to-peer education and advocacy.

“It was daunting,” Salsedo admits of being the project’s visionary, leader, facilitator and collaborator. “I thought, ‘We’re outlining all of our rights along the food system; this is huge.’ The food system doesn’t just go from one farm to our house—it’s the entire globe. It’s figuring out where our bananas are coming from in Ecuador to making sure pigs on industrial farms are being treated right. It was such a broad series of rights that it did feel like we were taking on a lot.”

But what a statement the youth made.

**YFBR No. 4:** *We have the right to healthy food at school—We, the youth, demand more healthy food choices in our schools, and in schools all over the world. We want vending machines out of schools unless they have healthy choices. We need healthier school lunches that are implemented by schools with the ingredients decided on by the Youth. We demand composting in schools and in our neighborhoods.*

**YFBR No. 5:** *We have the right to genetic diversity and GMO-free food—We, the youth, call for the labeling of genetically modified seeds, plants, and produce. We demand a policy from the government that labels all GMOs.*

And so it goes. But can the manifesto create the kinds of changes the youth hope to spark within their own communities?

“Yes it’s a living document and we are constantly making changes,” Salsedo points out. “But it is creating change. It’s engaging peers. It’s a real jump-off point for youth to, for instance, talk to somebody in their school who doesn’t know anything about Food Justice. It’s creating an opportunity for education—broad education—among youth to educate each other.”
“From our perspective, youth are such a critical part of the conversation around social change, community building and community power,” says Brooke Smith, director of the Grassroots Action Network (GAN). Smith, who met Salsedo through GAN’s mutual connection with Rooted in Community and Food, What?!, is responsible for guiding a team in designing, building, innovating and implementing various GAN programs, many of which are designed to share knowledge, mobilize resources and link a variety of grassroots organizations to “building healthy communities and local economies where there is equitable access to nutritious food.”

“We are excited about the Youth Food Bill of Rights particularly because it’s an incredible way to access the youth voice in the larger Food Justice conversation,” she adds. “It also reflects the genuine contribution, power and food at the table that youth deserve.”
But Salsedo’s work stands out for another, more apparent, reason: a growing number of today’s youth, are suddenly facing more health concerns. Her work is helping draw attention to that.

“One thing we are looking at is that this generation of youth is going to have a shorter life span than the parents’ generation,” Comerchero points out. “Part of this work is to raise the level of awareness about access to healthy food but I really think it’s a cultural shift more than an awareness builder. Awareness building is part of the process but if you look at obesity and diabetes epidemics around the country, people are living less healthy, shorter lives with greater health care costs. I think, in relation to poverty, which is the second piece, a third element addressing fundamental worth and poverty is really critical. There are these huge systems—systems of oppression, systems of discrimination. The right to food seems like one of the most basic elements to start with—the right to good, healthy, affordable food, specifically.”

Now that the Youth Food Bill of Rights has been outlined, Salsedo says rallying people together is key. She wants to help other youth hold establishments—from corporations to school boards—and families and friends accountable to the rights.

It may be working.

Just last summer, Salsedo was part of a teenage Food Justice troop that declared a violation of youth rights from field to table. The group rallied in Ames, Iowa, and called for a transition to a food economy that upholds their rights to fair, healthy and sustainable food from field to table. A national network of teen leaders representing more than 50 organizations was on hand.

“We are using this within communities to advocate policy shifts, whether it’s at school or after-school programs,” Salsedo adds. “I think that’s an immediate way for youths to make a change in their lives—to use the Youth Food Bill of Rights to really advocate for change in institutions that immediately surround them.”

Other matters linger on the political periphery, too, including the Farm Bill, which remains in a state of limbo in Congress, among them.

Salsedo is well informed on that meaty issue, too.

“My biggest thought about the Farm Bill is that we can’t cut SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program),” she says. “Without that, I would not have been able to eat organic food. I was really lucky. For some people it’s not enough for them to eat organic food; whatever their benefits are through the SNAP program, but still, those programs are so needed, and I just don’t understand why those would be first on the chopping block, so that scares me.”

SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps, is a federal nutrition program that assists individuals and families meet their food budgets and, in many cases, buy healthy food. The benefits are given monthly via Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards.

“I think the Farm Bill is weird because so many people don’t understand it, can’t be engaged with it,” Salsedo goes on. “Even the most in-tune policy folks who I have had the privilege to
work with at conferences, half the time could not tell you if Congress was going to pass the Farm Bill or whether we are going to revert to farm policy from 1940. People can’t really speculate. As far as making changes in the Farm Bill is concerned, one really big thing that stands in our way now, is Citizens United.”

Citizens United, often criticized for its conservative positioning, describes its mission as “being dedicated to restoring the United States government to ‘citizens’ control’ and to asserting American values of limited government, freedom of enterprise, strong families, and national sovereignty and security.” To which a sassy Joe Biden might say: “Malarky.” There’s a big push at the moment from many advocacy groups to overturn Citizens United—the big backlash came after the Citizens United 2010 ruling that paved the way for unlimited, unregulated, and secret corporate contributions into political campaigns.

All of that trickles down into the food system—from farmers to market manipulation.

In the meantime, holding true to YFBR’s vision, Salsedo continues to take her message to the masses. She is one of the first guests in the new monthly KZSC (88.1) radio program, “FoodSpeaks: Voices of the Santa Cruz Food Movement”—Comerchero will be featured regularly. The first show revolves around youth and the Food Justice movement. It airs from 7-7:45 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 12.

Elsewhere, the words Salsedo used in her Brower Youth Awards application may sum up her current raison d’être: “When I realized my story was one of many it became clear that for me and the youth that wrote the Youth Food Bill of Rights, the personal is political.”

**Youth Food Bill of Rights**

| **We have the right to culturally affirming food.** We demand the preservation, protection and reconstruction of traditional farming, cultural history and significance of food and agriculture. We demand that indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own autonomous food systems should they choose. |
| **We have the right to sustainable food.** We demand an end to the mistreatment of animals and the environment, that is caused by our current food system. |
| **We have the right to nutritional education.** We demand government funding to educate and inform youth and parents about nutrition. |
| **We have the right to good food subsidies.** We demand an end to the subsidy of cash crops, including corn and soybeans. Rather than our tax dollars going to subsidies for industrial farming, we demand financial support for small-organic farmers. |
| **We have the right to organic food and organic farmers.** We demand a restructuring of the process of being certified organic and fair trade to improve the thoroughness and accessibility of these programs. |
| **We have the right to cultivate unused land.** We demand that a policy be enacted allowing for unused land to be made available for... |
Education on things such as seasonal eating, organic farming, sustainability, and diet-related illness should be provided so that people can make better informed decisions. b. We recommend that schools recognize youth-led fitness programs as tools for success.

We have the right to healthy food at school. We, the youth, demand more healthy food choices in our schools, and in schools all over the world. We want vending machines out of schools unless they have healthy choices. We need healthier school lunches that are implemented by schools with the ingredients decided on by the youth. We demand composting in schools and in our neighborhoods.

We have the right to genetic diversity and GMO-free food. We, the youth, call for the labeling of genetically modified seeds, plants and produce. We demand a policy from the government that labels all GMOs.

We have the right to poison-free food. We, the youth, absolutely don't want any chemical pesticides in our food!

We have the right to beverages and foods that don't harm us. We, the youth, demand a ban on high fructose corn syrup and other additives, and preservatives that are a detriment to our communities’ health. This must be implemented by our government, and governments around the world.

We have the right to local food. We demand food to be grown and consumed by region to cut the use of fossil fuels and reduce the globalization of our food system.

We have the right to fair food. We, the youth, demand that everyone working in the food communities to farm and garden organically and sustainably.

We have the right to save our seed. We believe farmers and all people should have the freedom to save their seed. Any law that prevents this should be reversed; no law shall ever be made to prevent seed saving.

We have the right to an ozone layer. We, the youth, demand a 20 percent decrease of industrial farms every five years, to decrease the high levels of greenhouse gas emissions associated with industrial farming.

We have the right to support our farmers through direct market transactions. We demand that the number of farmers’ markets be increased every year until there are more farmers’ markets than corporate supermarkets.

We have the right to convenient food that is healthy. We want healthy options in corner stores while empowering the community to make better food choices. We demand more jobs for youth to work with our communities to make this happen and help them control their food systems.

We have the right to leadership education. We, the youth, demand that there be more school assemblies to inform and empower more youth with the knowledge of food justice. The continuation of the movement for Food Justice, Food Sovereignty and cultivation of future leaders is necessary for feeding our youth, our nation and our world.
System must be treated with respect, treated fairly, and earn at the minimum, a just living wage. For all those that are working in the food system we demand a model like the Domestic Fair Trade Association to be implemented.

Photos by Jeremey Bot.

Learn more about the Youth Food Bill of Rights at youthfoodbillofrights.com.

Dive into Food, What?! at foodwhat.org.

Discover the roots of Rooted in Community at rootedincommunity.org.