

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to The 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal

very young, cooking in the kitchen from a very young age. I was assigned Thanksgiving dinner, like side dishes, so I was always in the mixed cooking.

Essentially, in high school, I went to a vocational high school that had this vocational program, so They had a culinary arts program. And essentially, throughout my four years in high school, I participated in this program, was pretty set on becoming a pastry chef. I ended up, when I was 16, working for James Beard award-winning restaurant, interning for their pastry chef. I was like dead set on going to the CIA, for those that don't know the Culinary Institute of America. I was very much tunnel vision on this path towards becoming a chef.

But as we know, life never goes as we plan, and I think that's really just the theme of my story. Essentially, when I was in high school, as I was working at this super, super fancy, again, James Beard award-winning restaurant, I started to kind of just witness what it felt like just this weird nuance, something just feeling wrong or not right. And essentially, I was just like, "It's pretty cool that I'm working at this restaurant," right, "but no one in my family can afford to ever come and eat here. None of my friends, community members, even though it was nestled within our community, can afford to



buy. And from a lot of the work that I was doing, unfortunately a lot of the cultural vegetables or foods or grains, things like that were just not accessible for people. So a lot of the work that I did around policy was around promoting these programs to make this benefit more accessible to people.

And then we have the whole environmental aspect, right. And people can talk for hours about how different aspects of just the way that we approach policy as it relates to just the way we produce food, the way we properly disposed or waste food can impact our environment just terribly. So I think it's one of those issues that it's like it literally can touch every social impact issue we have going on. If we're thinking about education inequity, food ties to that. If we're thinking about environmental issues, food ties to that. If we're thinking about political issues, food ties to... It really is one of those intersectional pieces. And for me, it was just really important to be in an academic space that was using food as sort of the epicenter or the lens to then discuss all of these issues that we're dealing with as a country. And then, of course, beyond the food access, another piece that I really focused on was just food and identity, so food and race, how that impacts us in terms of the racial issues that we have going on in this country.

John Boccacino:

It's easy to think of food simply as a way to nourish your body.

Ashia Aubourg:

Exactly.

John Boccacino:

But it's so much more than that, and you hit on this with your most recent answer. How do you feel that food serves a really important role when it comes to justice, healing and our culture in this country?

Ashia Aubourg:

So I love that question because I think that's what I always go back to for my why, right? If people ask like, "Why do you do this work? Why are you interested in this work?" And I think literally the aspect of food at a base level, right, is nourishment for us, which is why we could talk about it later. I called my blog Nourished Palate because I really genuinely believe that food serves so many purposes.

But back to your question, food really ties people together, right? But also food can also be weaponized, right, like we see in plenty of countries in times of war, just like serious conflict. Typically, the first thing to just strip people's power away is removing their access to food. And, of course, we'd love to think about food, right, and that very dramatic way of being a way of stripping people's power, stripping people's dignity. But what I feel doesn't always get recognized is that that's happening so much across all of our communities. Not in a very blatant way, right, but because of all these societal factors that are kind of influencing different people and their life outcomes. It can be very difficult to gain access to food, which of course, if we think about our hierarchy of needs is definitely just one of the basic levels of needs, right?

So I would say food is definitely nourishment, but I also think it's a form of power for people. I think it's definitely one of those things that allows people to really have this dignified life. And with so many aspects of this getting stripped away from people, and not even just in the literal sense, but if we think about indigenous people. And literally their seed is getting like taken away from them or to be able to grow these cultural crops, things like that. If we think about a lot of immigrants that have to come to countries, literally cannot find certain ingredients that they used to cook with. I think these are all the

big conversations that come up for me when I think about food as nourishment, but also what it means to not have access to that nourishment.

John Boccacino:

With your current role, I want to get a little insight from you about, again, your current role as global culinary program lead for Asana.

Ashia Aubourg:

Yeah.

What is that job all about and how is this position helping to achieve those goals you talked about of combating food justice issues in our country?

So I recently joined Asana, which is a tech company, as their global culinary program lead. And essentially, my role is to work to establish these culinary programs across the company globally. So I'm working currently with programs that are getting set up in the US, in Canada, Japan, Australia, Europe, Singapore, like a bunch of different places. Essentially, this role wasn't meant to be this food justice oriented role, which was actually a piece of my career that I was worried about. Because for so long all of the programs and projects that I've worked on in terms of working with different organizations have been heavily focused on it. But what I love to say is that, again, food is so intersectional. So you can essentially enter any food career path and essentially make it what you want in terms of being able to tackle justice.

And another aspect of food justice that's very important to me is economic empowerment, especially for BIPOC-owned businesses and things like that that are operating in the food space. So essentially, what I've been working on in this role is really trying to help and mobilize small BIPOC-owned businesses to be able to get these high profile contracts with tech companies. So essentially, I'm working with different BIPOC-owned food businesses to be able to help train them, but also help get them set up with working as vendors to support the culinary programs for this tech company across the globe.

What that typically looks like, right, is really I feel like the first thing is typically their empowerment piece. Typically, I'll do a lot of research of different BIPOC-owned food businesses that do corporate catering and things like that. And the first thing I'll do is just reach out and be like, "Hey, I think that what you're doing is great. Would you be interested in taking on bigger contracts," which of course yields more revenue for these companies, well, not these companies, but these BIPOC-owned companies. And I feel typically the first response I get is I don't have capacity to do it. I would love to do it, but I just can't right now.

And I think what my role in this role has really been is like, "What can we do to help you get there? Is it training that you need? Is it funding for additional staff? Is it help with developing menus for the programs? What can I do in my role to help you get on board with being one of these vendors for our tech company?" And I feel like for me, that's been pretty rewarding because a lot of the spaces in the food justice field that I've worked at have been on the, I feel like I think of different levels of the food justice field, but I feel a lot of the work that I've done in my previous roles has been around food access, right, so ensuring that people have access to food on just like a granular level. But then also food waste, ensuring that we're not wasting food and things like that.

But I also think a really important piece of this is also just economic stability. I feel like for a lot of BIPOC communities that start businesses, it's tremendously hard for a lot of reasons, right? And for me, I think that being able to put a lot of these BIPOC food companies in a position to gain these contracts.



black BIPOC in general like people to really get to the space to start a business, all the barriers that come with it, all of just like second guessing because of a lot of reasons that are aligned with it.

But essentially, I started Nourished Palate as a blog. This was during COVID where I think a lot of people had a little bit of downtime. I had been laid off from a role unfortunately, and it definitely was just a time of insecurity. And I was just like, "What can I do? How can I continue this path that I'm on?"

So I first just started with posting recipes, right? Because again, going back to food is love, I was like, "But not everybody can cook. So how can I make this thing that I love so much accessible to different people?" So I was like, "Okay, recipes. Let's connect it to social media. Let's meet people where they are." So I made an Instagram page. So I'm posting. First, I'm like I need to capture people, right? So I'm posting all of these mouthwatering pictures of food and I'm like, "If you want to make this, head to the blog for the recipe."

So it started off just very base level. But I think for me, I was like, "I just want to build a community," right. Like, "How many people have this connection to food and want to kind of bond over it during this time of crisis," right, when COVID was peaking. Essentially, a lot of people were getting laid off. Unfortunately, it's just a really difficult time of insecurity and also just like, "Oh, what's going on in the world?"

So I started doing that. It started to receive a lot of attention just because I think everyone was in this space where I was like, "Okay, food is so baseline," right? I always say like, "If you want to connect with someone, take them out to eat. Cook them a meal." Because I think that's one of the best ways to show your culture or receive someone else's culture and kind of understand who they are as people. So again, started it as doing the recipes, doing the blog.

But then I was like, "Okay, this is really cool." Starting to







John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of The 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for The 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.