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How Malik Yakini Might Save Detroit With An Unusual Weapon: Food

Malik Yakini is fighting to empower his hometown neighbors with an unusual weapon: food.



Malik Yakini stands at the gate of the seven-acre D-Town Farm he helped found in Detroit's Rouge Park. (Photo: Courtesy DBCFSN)



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Clare Leschin-Hoar's stories on seafood and food politics have appeared in *Scientific American*, *Eating Well* and elsewhere.

Malik Yakini can still remember what businesses once thrived in the Detroit neighborhoods where he grew up: dry cleaners, grocery stores, and restaurants. Most are abandoned storefronts now, or have been halfheartedly remade into “party stores” –what New Yorkers call bodegas–selling booze and cigarettes. Block after block of stark city landscape has become part of his hometown’s DNA–the graffiti, buildings charred by fire, gaping empty lots that were once filled with homes and families.

Yakini is fighting the blight with an unusual weapon: food. As the executive director of the [Detroit Black Community Food Security Network](#) (DBCFSN), he’s trying to eliminate food insecurity among the city’s African-American community. DBCFSN has a diverse network of initiatives: a seven-acre urban

farm that sells directly to residents at city farmers markets; a network of nutrition education programs in local schools; and an innovative buying co-op that helps make whole foods and natural cleaners available at reduced prices.

Admittedly, it's a struggle. Detroit is a textbook example of poverty, food insecurity, and obesity, with many residents struggling with health problems related to poor nutrition. And DBCFSN is trying to address food justice, racism, and nutrition in an urban area that is the very definition of a food desert.

That may explain why Malik Yakini's work has caught the national spotlight, including coverage from the likes of [Mark Bittman](#), and earned him a James Beard Foundation [Leadership Award](#) this past fall—because it's all so very urgent.

Malik Yakini, 57, wears his hair in soft dreadlocks that flow over his shoulders, His glasses frame slightly down-turned eyes that can make him seem serious. Or maybe weary.

On a tour of his neighborhood, Yakini points out a solid two-story brown-brick home. A child's merry-go-round still sits rusted in the front yard. This is where he attended preschool. Directly across the boulevard is what was once Motown Records. While Malik Yakini played as a child on that merry-go-round, a constant flow of R&B royalty—Smokey Robinson, The Supremes, The Temptations—were creating music history just yards away. It was the epicenter of the city's black pride, before the great white flight, the 1967 riots, and the decline of the city's auto industry, all of which left a deep mark.

“I try not to get used to the blight,” he says. “I still try to see it with fresh eyes. It's not something I ever want to get used to.”

In 2006, the same year Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* launched a food revolution that's still unfolding today, Yakini traveled to the other side

of Lake Michigan to see [what former basketball-legend-turned-urban-farmer Will Allen was doing](#) in Milwaukee's north side. Allen understood that farming in the city was an effective tool for social change among communities that often had few tools left.

Yakini came back from that trip, gathered together a group of 40 people committed to changing the city's food landscape, and formed the DBCFSN. The group started by growing food on a small plot of land that was soon lost to a developer, but became the seed for today's version of D-Town Farm—a lush seven-acre plot located in the city's Meyers' Tree Nursery in Rouge Park.

D-Town Farm staff and volunteers nurture a mix of crops, everything from spinach, beets, and mustard greens to tree fruit, all of which is then sold at farmers markets within the Detroit city limits, rather than in wealthier outlying suburbs.

Even in mid-winter, baby kale and bok choy plants try to push their way out of the soil in their tidy raised beds. Hoop houses used to extend the growing season flap in blustery December winds as Malik Yakini points proudly to the garlic patch planted in the fall.

“Malik has a vision. He knows what this is supposed to look like,” says Kadiri Sennefer, the farm's 34-year-old compost manager. “I've worked in factories and restaurants where you're disconnected from the outside. Now I'm developing skills to remediate soil. To create soil. It's given my life purpose.”

There's no doubt Yakini's made an impact in this city. There are over 80 local farming groups in Detroit today. It's a dynamic movement, and one that's attracted a number of outside food activists—white outsiders—to a city that's principally African-American.

There aren't enough full-service grocery stores in inner-city Detroit, and only one is black-owned, which is notable in a city with a population that's nearly 83 percent African-American. As recently as 2010, 31 percent of the city's

families with children were at incomes below the poverty level, while it's estimated that 72 percent of the residents have no easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

But job candidates with farming experience don't grow up in Detroit, which is why Malik Yakini isn't only growing vegetables at D-Farm; he's also growing a flock of farmers. Ten African-American interns each summer eventually blossom into a crop of experienced and skilled farmers. And because of that focus, sometimes he's accused of outright favoritism

"I've been called a racist. It's disappointing, but not shocking," he says. "But raising the issue of race doesn't make me a racist."

Kami Pothukuchi, Ph.D., an associate professor at Wayne State University, director of [SEED Wayne](#), and fellow member of the [Detroit's Food Policy Council](#), says Yakini's contribution to the city's conversation about food is invaluable.

"Malik has really woven together the food community, and his views on race and food are very important," Pothukuchi says.

"We're all aware of race," she continues, "but there's the view that [white] outsiders were coming to the rescue of Detroit. What Malik did was name that, and he's not apologetic [for pointing out that] black community problems should be solved by the black community. You won't find it in any other city. You'll find black leaders organized, but not the combination that you'll find here. Not in Oakland or Philadelphia. And I think Malik has been a driving force."

It's simple, really. Malik Yakini wants to create a model of community self-determination.

"This is about a community organization addressing problems within our own community," he says. "We're not waiting on the government. We're not

waiting on foundations. It's about taking destiny into our own hands, which is larger and broader than simply who is buying the produce we're growing."

An important piece of the effort is Yakini's new Food Warriors program, which is also supported by [FoodCorps](#) and the USDA. The "warriors" – 125 students in three schools – learn both the importance of eating whole foods, and about the food traditions tied to their African-American heritage.

The organization also initiated a buying cooperative, where members get monthly access to items like bulk beans, nuts, grains, cereals and vitamins, and products like natural soaps and detergents at a reduced price.

And with Malik Yakini leading the way, DBCFSN held an influential role on the [Detroit Food Policy Council](#), which resulted in a [official city food policy](#) designed to address food insecurity and urban agriculture. That may sound wonky, but it was vital to the future success of the movement.

"At the time, there was a lot of ambiguity over the legality of urban gardens," says Yakini. "We were building an urban ag movement here. What helps it grow more rapidly is having city policy that is supportive of that. Our presence raised the consciousness of the role of food in urban development."

Indeed, without working policy in place, and the support of city leaders, it's nearly impossible to implement real change. The Policy Council has become a de facto umbrella of local organizations committed to Detroit's burgeoning food movement.

For everyone involved, the work here is about continuity and sustainability. To create something that will continue and grow far into the future. DBCFSN has been successful in securing funds from the USDA and nearly \$600,000 in grants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. It's garnered widespread recognition from the Food Sovereignty Prize, to the prestigious James Beard Leadership Award, but Yakini wants to ensure that D-Town Farm becomes self-sufficient.

“Funders can be fickle. Urban ag is the new hot thing, but there may be a time where it gets kicked to the curb. It’s imperative that we are sustainable,” he says. “But there’s always more that we want to do than we have funding for. For example, people like Edwin [Dowell, 35, who’s dream is to launch a large-scale aquaponics operation with a connection to D-Town Farm]. I’d like to see him on the payroll right now.”

Basically, he takes the long view.

“I have this kind of internal orientation that helps me know that good wins out over bad. If you move with integrity, and in a principled manner, with the cause of justice—you will ultimately be victorious. It may not happen in two or three years, but the world is changing. Consciousness is shifting. I feel blessed to participate in this. I know we’re on the side of right, and it’s part of the universal flow that’s going on the planet. Am I optimistic? Yes. Absolutely.”