

Food Leaders of the Good Food District- Issue 2: Japanese American Farming Heritage in Southeast San Diego

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The Good Food District and Food Heritage

The Good Food District is a place-making approach which builds upon the assets within the community of Southeast San Diego: vacant lots, food entrepreneurs, residents, and other partners. While building these assets, the goal of the Good Food District is to make healthy food more available in Mount Hope and surrounding neighborhoods in Southeast San Diego, commonly referred to as a “food desert”. The Good Food District takes Project New Village’s Food Justice work to the next level by inspiring collective agency and promoting food security at a neighborhood level (read more



ENCANTO HILL BRAND, LABEL OF ITO FAMILY FARMING BUSINESS

on Project New Village vision in Issue 1). Project New Village is partnering with many organizations to make this happen including the Diamond Business Association, housing developers, Kitchens for Good, SDSU Geography Dept, City’s Promise Zone, City Councilmembers, County of San Diego HHS, County Board of Supervisors, Assemblymembers, UCSD Center for Community Health, San Diego Food System Alliance, and many other partners. For Project New Village and partners, “good food” is food that is sustainable, equitable, healthy, affordable, and accessible for all residents.

To explore place-making for the Good Food District, Project New Village and partners believe in the importance of examining the history of the foodshed of Southeast San Diego. Southeast San Diego, now considered a “food desert”, was once a farming community operated by Japanese Americans. The property that is now Morse High School was once farmland owned and cultivated by the Ito family. The family grew acres of avocados, squash, string beans, and bell peppers. They were neighbors with four other Japanese families who also farmed. Development pressure and other factors led to the disappearance of Japanese American farmers south of Interstate 8. Furthermore, divestment in communities such as Southeast San Diego led to the emergence of “food deserts”.

We interviewed Robert Ito, the son of Martin Ito (of Encanto Hill Farms), who is now a housing developer with a background in social work and workforce development programs. Mr. Ito has included a space for a community garden in

his most recent project, Ouchi Courtyards, an affordable housing complex with 44 units in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Southeast San Diego with a waitlist of over 1600 families.

Though the development was completed in March of 2017, Mr. Ito has been familiar with the site for decades. It turns out that this exact location, 5003 Imperial Avenue, used to be a nursery owned by his uncle. Ito has deep farming roots in Encanto; his grandfather, a Japanese immigrant, started farming here when he arrived in 1924.



ROBERT ITO OF OUCHI COURTYARDS (PHOTO: COLIN LEIBOLD)

Racism and our Food System: Japanese American Farmers



MARTIN ITO AND FAMILY FARM IN SOUTHEAST SAN DIEGO

According to Mr. Ito, “Most Japanese worked in agriculture because nobody else wanted to do it. There was very little competition.” Even before World War II, there were strained relations between Americans and Japanese immigrants, and racism towards “orientals” was pervasive. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, Japanese Americans were forced to sell their businesses, their rights were revoked, and they were relocated to internment camps.

After Executive Order 9066 was issued by President Roosevelt on February 19th 1942, the Ito family was sent to Poston, Arizona, one of ten internment camps that uprooted over

120,000 people of Japanese ancestry. “A lot of it was economics,” says Mr. Ito. “You had a group that was acquiring land and after Pearl Harbor, there was an opportunity to buy their equipment, farms, houses, and to eliminate competition. There was no case of wrongdoing of any Japanese or Japanese American at that time, but that was the excuse used by the government.”



MARTIN ITO, 24 YEARS OLD

Despite these injustices, many Japanese Americans went off to war and risked their lives on behalf of the United States. Among them was Mr. Ito's father, only 24 years old. He returned with a Purple Heart, Bronze Star and a Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award granted in the United States. Nonetheless, when he came home, the young man could not get a haircut because the barber didn't like Japanese individuals.

After the war, Mr. Ito's father got married and like many other Japanese Americans, he went right back to farming. He farmed the land for nearly 30 more years until he was ready to retire and sold it to a developer. There are no more Japanese American farmers in San Diego County south of Interstate 8. Mr. Ito says that farmland has simply become too valuable, especially land near suburban and urban areas. Farmers were encouraged to sell, and expanses of land that once grew fruits and vegetables became residential neighborhoods and commercial developments.

From a Farming Family to Developing Affordable Housing within the Good Food District

Growing up on a farm, there was always things to do. Mr. Ito recalls his father consistently reminding him, "Don't stand there, do something!" This experience has shaped Mr. Ito's work ethic, now an affordable housing developer, committed to finding deals to meet the needs of the community. As a developer, Mr. Ito understands that businesses such as grocery stores will not move into a neighborhood without enough "rooftops". For Mr. Ito, affordable housing projects are critical to addressing healthy food access.



ROBERT ITO WITH OUCHI COURTYARD COMMUNITY GARDEN (PHOTO: COLIN LEIBOLD)

In addition to an empty retail space ready to be filled, Ouchi Courtyards also includes a community garden space with grey water and composting systems. Mr. Ito is committed to providing an opportunity for members of the community to learn about gardening and make decisions that can benefit the health of families. He envisions the garden as an educational tool for children to help them learn where their food comes from and to allow them to participate in the whole process of growing food. Mr. Ito hopes that the residents will take ownership of the space provided. "Somebody has to take the lead," he says, "and I see my role as trying to help facilitate that."



ROBERT ITO IN FRONT OF OUCHI COURTYARDS (PHOTO: COLIN LEIBOLD)

Mr. Ito's family history has made him well aware of institutionalized racism and the impacts it can have on both identity and well-being. For this reason, he is sincerely invested in eliminating barriers that may obstruct the vitality of individuals and the community as a whole. Mr. Ito is a critical partner in building a Good Food District in Southeast San Diego, with first-hand account of the decline of farming in the region and uniquely positioned to improve accessibility of healthy food for the community.

How can we support the Good Food District?

1. Volunteer opportunities using your skills and expertise
2. Charitable contributions for Project New Village's work to build the Good Food District
3. Investment opportunities for food environment changes

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Stay tuned for the next issue of Food Leaders of the Good Food District in our next newsletter!

To support the Social Equity Collaborative Fund project, the San Diego Food System Alliance will be documenting the growth and lessons learned from the Good Food District until mid 2019.