

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to The 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Ashia Aubourg:

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.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the podcast is Ashia Aubourg, who earned a dual bachelor's degrees in food studies from Falk College and also in policy studies from the College of Arts and Sciences in 2018. Ashia is a dedicated food justice advocate, a journalist, a podcaster, an entrepreneur, and a creator of some pretty tasty recipes, if I may say so myself. She serves as the global culinary program lead for Asana based in San Francisco. And Ashia is kind enough to join us here for this episode of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast, diving into all issues related to food justice. Ashia, how are you holding up these days?

Ashia Aubourg:

I'm doing good. Can't complain. Excited to be on this podcast to kind of just talk through my journey and how Syracuse really influenced a lot of it.

John Boccacino:

Ashia was always interested, always passionate about food from an early age, but didn't want to take the traditional route with food. Pick up the story from there. How did you become so interested in food? What was that relationship from an early age?

Ashia Aubourg:

Love this question. I feel like that's the question I love when I'm applying for a job. I'm like, "Ask me that question, that's what I want to answer." Because my path is very just untraditional. So growing up, my family, let's just start there, food was the epicenter of our culture. When we have gatherings, food is always present. When we're unfortunately taking time to honor just like unfortunate events that have happened in our lives, food is always present. Comfort wise, food is always there to really kind of just bond us together. So just from my early ages of growing up, food has always just been the epicenter of my life.

Different cultural recipes. So my grandparents immigrated from Haiti, so a lot of Haitian cuisine. But also just, I love to say my family's kind of this melting pot of culture. So whether it's Ethiopian food, Puerto Rican food, Dominican food, Haitian food, other types of Caribbean foods, we always had all of these beautiful cultures present at our table for different holidays and family gatherings.

I just naturally grew up wanting to be a chef. My family was very supportive of this at an early age. I know typically a lot of people that grew up wanting to be chefs typically get a lot of backlash from family members just because it's a pretty cutthroat career. But no, my family was very much onboard. I was

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 actually come and enjoy these delicious foods that we have offering."

So kind of just got me thinking just a lot about like what does inequities look like in the food system and just from a baseline of access to food. So essentially, it just got me thinking a lot because I'm here, I am just super tunnel vision in this culinary path wanting to be a chef. The culinary curriculum was very much focused on the technique, right, or just the history of food, but we never dug deep into socially how does food impact us, right?

And at the same time that I was having all of these questions, I started to just naturally like I love inquiry. I started to ask a lot of these questions in my courses at my school and things like that. And one of my professors was like, "Let me connect you to this woman. Essentially she started a program here in Cambridge, Massachusetts," which is where I'm from, "and essentially what the program is that she gets all of these volunteers to essentially packed lunches for students in the K-8 elementary school system in Cambridge to give them free lunch on the weekends." And I was like, "This is super cool," because the root of that was that a lot of public school students depend on the free school breakfast and free school lunch in order to get their main nutrition for the week. But on the weekends, of course, without that being present, unfortunately, a lot of people that are food insecure can deal with not having food present.

So I was just immediately in love with just the mission of her volunteer project. And me, of course, being the very passionate and motivated person that I was at 16, I emailed her and I was just like, "Are you looking for interns? I would love to work with you and love to learn from you." And essentially that kind of just like I always say when it comes to the food justice or overall food policy field, it's very small. So once you get plugged into, it's kind of just this array of just awesome people you meet and also just this array of opportunities that then present itself.

That's when it came down to this pivotal decision I had to make when I began applying to colleges because I was so set on going to a culinary school. But then after getting these experiences of working on the ground of community members and working on these really vast issues that we had going on, I really had to sit with myself and be like, "Is working in a kitchen really what I like? Is that really what I want, or is it something else?" And write food studies was not a popular major then. It wasn't even a major at Syracuse when I considered Syracuse.

But eventually, long story short, I decided to go into some type of nutrition or public health program because it kind of seemed aligned. So I started looking for schools that had cool programs that I was interested within that realm. And I will never forget, Syracuse was always one of my top schools just

because I had known people that went there. My Aunt Diana had graduated from Syracuse and just had a very amazing career after working at Syracuse. So for me, I had always had this connection to Syracuse for a very long time. And essentially, I'll never forget I applied and while I was waiting for my application to go through, they did these in-person interviews and they had come to Boston to do these interviews. To my mom, I was like, "We have to go."

So for the most part, most of the colleges I was applying for, I wasn't doing the in-person interviews, it was pretty much just the typical application. But there was just something tying me to Syracuse and I was like, "We have to go." If I remember, I'm just talking about what I'm interested in, what I'm passionate about. And the woman that was interviewing just cut me off and she was just like, "Wait." So she was like, "You're interested in food. You're interested in social justice policy," blah blah, blah, blah, the environment, like all these things. She was like, "Okay," I know this is going to sound weird, but she was like, "They're thinking of making this new major at Syracuse called food studies." It's not a major yet, but she was like, "I promise you, just apply into nutrition or public health and by the end of your freshman or sophomore year, it'll probably be a major."

So then again, it was another one of these moments where I was like, "Okay, this isn't really firm. I have to trust this woman that I literally met for 30 minutes. But okay, let's just go for it. Let's hope that it works out." And essentially, I ended up going back into my application and being like, "I'm very interested in the food studies program that they're hoping to create." And then essentially, from there, I remember I ended up getting the acceptance and then a lot of the food studies faculty that had got hired on ended up reaching out to me because they were super excited that they had this one person that was interested in the major. And then I think actually within two months of me being at Syracuse, I was enrolled into that major. But that's essentially how I got to Syracuse.

John Boccacino:

I love finding out people's how and the why and how you connect the dots with your passion out there and we have a lot to unpack in your response right there, but I want to start off with this kind of follow-up question. How big of an issue is it in our country right now the issues of food insecurity and food justice?

Ashia Aubourg:

I think it's a huge issue, right? I think it's a huge issue because it affects so much, right, from early adolescence. If we're not getting the proper nutrients that we need, it can affect our development when we get into grade school and high school. Again, if we're not getting the foods we need, and not just from a nutrition standpoint, but also from just a cultural and comfort standpoint, it could affect us in terms of being able to focus, unfortunately developing eating disorders or unhealthy relationships with food. And then continuing to move forward from I just to think about it from just the developments of people, but also just from an adult standpoint. If I don't have access to foods that I feel connected to in my neighborhood or foods that I can afford, right, it's just this spiral effect that at each level can have these terrible consequences.

And that's just the food access piece, right? Then we also have the food policy piece, as it relates to a lot of the work that I typically worked with was around food stamps and SNAP. So really just like able to make sure that people can have access to the resources that they need in times of hardship or in times of just social inequity, right? So a lot of the work that I typically did as it related to food stamps was around these healthy incentive programs, so essentially allowing people to use their food stamps to then purchase foods from farmer's markets. Because I think, of course, there's just a lot of just terrible rhetoric around the food stamps program in general, the people that use it, what they typically want 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.

And another piece that I really love about a lot of the BIPOC companies that I'm working with is that they all have some type of social impact piece connected to it. So I'm working with one company in Vancouver that's a catering company, but half of their business in terms of where the profits for this business goes is directed to feeding homeless people in Vancouver and training people who are formally incarcerated to work for their catering company.

So for me, it feels like a ripple effect, right? It's like, "Okay, how can we get these BIPOC-owned food company or food businesses, like these smaller ones, into a position to be able to get more revenue for their business and then in turn they end up helping the communities that they're in or employing people from the communities that they're in?"

So that's essentially what I've been working on mainly with my role at Asana. But I know eventually we're also hoping to do more work around really engaging BIPOC growers as well. So we don't want to just purchase from BIPOC-owned food businesses, but we also want to ensure that the produce that we're getting for our programs is from local farmers, things like that. So that's essentially the next step for me once I'm done kind of ramping up a bunch of these smaller food businesses.

John Boccacino:

It seems like a really both a perfect fit and a logical next step in your career. And especially, I love the fact of investing in the community and helping the BIPOC businesses and farmers both invest in them and help the communities rise up by having the revenue then come in and goes back into the local community versus being outsourced right into a national company that you're not going to see the return on the investment.

Ashia Aubourg:

Exactly.

John Boccacino:

Whereas in these areas where there's food deserts or food insecurity issues and food justice issues, it's a self-sustaining economy at that point. It gives back and you're reinvesting and the people that are really going to benefit from your work. I love that aspect. I also loved before Asana, you mentioned this briefly, but Nourished Palate, the blog, the RecipeHub, a really creative resource that you launched. And I loved your slogan: Cultivating palates, where food is love. How is food love? I love that phrase. How is food love and what really inspired you to create Nourished Palate in the first place?

Ashia Aubourg:

Yeah. I also just like, well, kind of what you said back to the other thing about refueling economies, because I think going back to the other question I think that's another aspect. I feel like about food justice that sometimes gets ignored. Sometimes it's like, "How can we make sure the food feed communities? How can we make sure that there's resources?" But I think the other piece to that is that a lot of community members want these dignified pieces of work, right? They don't want just emergency food technically always coming to their communities. They want jobs. They want opportunities for growth, right? And as we talk about Nourished Palate, I think for me, I became kind of a part of a space during my career where I felt growth wasn't happening. I felt like I was really wanting to go further in terms of the way I'm passionate about food and things like that.

And it was really a time where I was like, "Okay, maybe it's time to start my own thing," right? It was really important for me to go through that because I think it kind of teaches you how difficult it is for

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 receive a lot of just people wanting to have dialogue. So then I was like, "Okay, maybe we can just start a podcast out of this." So I was like, "But who do I want on the podcast," right? I love Chefs to Death. But I was like, "This is not about a cooking technique," right? I want to get deeper about food. So I started tapping into different people in the food justice industry, food justice realm to just interview them like, "How did you get to this space? What is it that you're passionate about? And what's a broad message that you'd want like a broader audience to know?"

And again, I think people just really connected with this idea of just opening up a space for different dialogue. And I was very intentional, too. I really wanted to showcase black women and black people that were in the food justice space in the work that they're doing. Because I feel unfortunately, especially then I think a lot changed when unfortunately everything happened with George Floyd.

But there was a huge period of time in the media where a lot of black food creators, a lot of black people that were doing food justice work were just not getting media coverage. And I'm like, "There are these crazy stories of all of this amazing stuff that people are doing. Why isn't Bon Appetit writing about this? Why aren't these big food publications taking this stuff seriously?" Again, I think a lot of that changed when everything with George Floyd and the protest happened, right? But there was a very much a dry spell of coverage in the media for black women and black people in food.

Essentially, I continued with this theme of food is love, so continuing to try to offer just resources that were uplifting that in this time of just serious insecurity for a lot of people that could help them take their mind off of everything going on. And I continued with that, of course, things of COVID began to kind of level out a bit. I don't think we'll ever be at a great place of COVID, but they began to level out. And I was like, "Okay, people are starting to go back outside, right? I can't continue just doing this work from the blog standpoint. I can, but I don't think it's going to gain as much traction."

So then I was like, "Okay, I had already had gotten my LLC," and I was like, "But how can I push the boundaries even further?" And I was like, "Okay, maybe we should actually just start a business." So I ended up getting something called a cottage license, which a lot of cities have that essentially allows you to be able to cook food from your home without having to pay rent at a kitchen commissary or something like that to then sell that food at farmer's markets. So essentially I started a farmer's market business selling Caribbean-inspired baked goods and drinks.

And I'm going to be completely honest with you. That was the most difficult time of my life. I think people really underestimate what it takes for small businesses to be able to get their grounds running. And I think that's even amplified for people that come from families that have never been business owners, right? I think that's even amplified for people that are immigrants and can't understand all of the legal jargon when having to apply for different certifications, LLCs, things like that. So essentially, I had figured it out, right, but it was not easy. But I did figure out all the logistical aspects to get my business running.

John Boccacino:

You have had, I'm just marveling here with the fascinating journey you've taken and from someone who thought they knew what they wanted to do to evolving your career and adapting and adjusting and still having an impact in the community and focusing on the greater good. It's commendable how you've taken this passion and made it a sustaining and worthwhile career. When you reflect back on Syracuse and the role that Syracuse University played, what are some of the biggest lessons you learned from your time here at Syracuse that have inspired and influenced your career?

Ashia Aubourg:

I would say the first thing is just marveling at opportunity and understanding that you don't have to be put in a box. So I think when I got to Syracuse I was like, "Okay, I have this major. I have to stick in this major. All the clubs I joined have to be related to this major. That's what we're going to do." All the internships I do have to be related to this major. That's what I thought Syracuse is going to be like.

When I got there, it was a completely different scenario. It was like, "Whoa," there's all these clubs. Even if it's not tied to what I'm studying, I can join them. I did an internship in New York City for a semester when I was at Syracuse, teaching at a public school, which was completely unrelated to food, but an opportunity that Syracuse allowed me to go on. And I think having just so many opportunities to step outside of my bubble and just explore other passions was really important for me and just taught me the skill that I've carried throughout life.

If you look at my resume, if you look at my background, it is so diverse. Yes, I've done work mobilizing farmers, right? I've done work working for food waste organizations. I've done work working for food policy organizations. But I've also done work working for magazines, writing articles, doing podcasts. I've also done work like communications, working for different companies and things like that. And I think for me, learning that so early in college that although I have this passion and this skill set that I'm trying to develop doesn't mean that I can't jump into other fields or other avenues of work was just very important for me to learn very early on.

And it was so funny, when my friends reflect on my time from Syracuse. They're like, "Were you even at Syracuse?" Because I was always doing something. So my sophomore year, my sophomore spring semester, I was in New York City for the semester teaching. My junior year semester, spring semester, I was in Italy doing the whole food program. So I was just always in the mix doing something when I was at Syracuse.



But I think it was just very important for me to just learn very early that it's like we have this whole world, right? We have this whole life ahead of us. I feel like very traditionally, at least in my family. People typically stuck with whatever field they were in for the rest of their lives. And I think for me it was just pretty liberating to learn that like, "No, there's so many opportunities out there. Dip into this, dip into that," and kind of just see where you're at.

And granted, I graduated in 2018. So I'm still pretty early in my career, but I think I've definitely been taking these couple of years after college to really just take the time to explore what is it that I'm genuinely interested in and that can change. And I think that's kind of what I've been seeing so far in terms of what I've been doing. Really, just trying to explore before I settle and pick on something and pursue that for the rest of my life.

And luckily, when it comes to food, I remember all of my food studies professors, first of all, all amazing and I feel like that's rare. You know in college, there's always that one professor that you're like, "Oh, didn't work out for whatever reason." No, the food studies program, I was just always so amazed and always felt so supported by all of the professors. And I think one of the biggest pieces of advice that I took from them and a lot of their wisdom was like, "You can take this degree and apply it to anything. You don't have to just go and work for a nonprofit doing food justice work. You can go and work for McDonald's and try to help change their sourcing techniques."

Pretty much I feel like they really instilled into me that this degree is what you're going to make of it, right? We're going to give you the tools, the resources, try to help you feel supported, but it's ultimately we're kind of encouraging you to explore and see how you can take this work that you've been doing into other spaces.

John Boccacino:

What does it mean to you to be a Syracuse University graduate?

Ashia Aubourg:

I think for me personally, this might not be the typical answer that you get to this question. So my Aunt Diana Aubourg graduated from Syracuse. Unfortunately, she passed away from breast cancer a couple of years ago. Actually. The freshman year that I started at Syracuse, she passed away. She had a very similar experience to me, was just so involved at Syracuse in so many programs and that was kind of just the kick starter for her career. She ended up going into work, to do work with people in Africa, around various like NGO projects, just a lot of really, really important work.

So for me, being a graduate of Syracuse University really felt like how can I continue on this legacy of my Aunt Diana who went to Syracuse and just squeeze so much out of her experience. So I have a lot of pride in going to Syracuse mainly because I saw what it did for my aunt, right, and I also saw what it did for me. So I really just am so thankful for my experience and just almost for me the generations of opportunities that it's allowed just for me and my family.

John Boccacino:

She is Ashia Aubourg. She's going to continue to do great work in the line of food studies and food justice, and we wish you nothing but the best. Keep up the great work and thanks for stopping by the podcast today.

Ashia Aubourg:

Thank you. I really appreciate that. Thank you.

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.