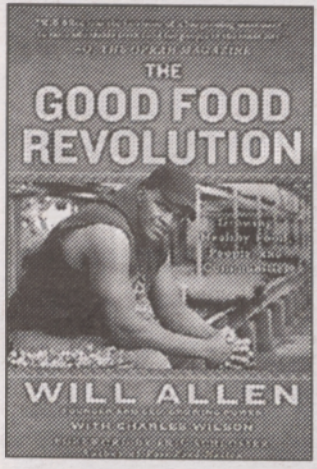


All is not lost, despite what the liberal diet tells you



The Good Food Revolution: Growing Health Food, People and Communities, by Will Allen

BY TOM WATSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It's an article of faith for urban liberals that the food system is broken. By shopping at farmers markets, eating organic foods and growing their own vegetables, these progressive-minded folks make a statement that corporate, chemical-laden, factory-farmed foods are not fit for their families.

But a vital ingredient is missing from that perspective: the connection between healthy food and social justice. In his new book, "The Good Food Revolution," Will Allen helps us bridge that gap.

Generously and forthrightly sharing his life story and his passions as he makes the case for a new food system, Allen inspires us to move beyond self-interest when considering greener and healthier food. Assisted by the able writing of journalist Charles Wilson, Allen gives us the straight talk we yearn to hear from politicians.

The son of Southern sharecroppers, Allen grew up in the Washington, D.C., area and was the first African-American basketball player for the University of Miami in 1967. He played professional basketball in Europe, managed a disco in Wisconsin and worked as a successful regional sales rep and manager for years for KFC and Procter & Gamble.

But Allen loved to grow vegetables, and in 1993 he bought five old greenhouses and adjoining property in Milwaukee and opened Will's Roadside Farm Market. Since then, he has forged a national reputation as a leader in the urban food movement by doggedly pursuing these dreams: grow food; make healthy food available in the city to all, rich and poor; and educate youth and adults alike about why we need a food revolution.

This book is more than just an autobiography with a point of view. Allen and Wilson flesh it out with dozens of concise and illuminating depictions of people important to Allen's life and work,

from his steadfast mother, Willie Mae, to his inspirational longtime co-worker, Karen Parker.

These gripping personal stories woven through the narrative provide a strong foundation for Allen's incisive historical and social commentary. Early in the book, Allen notes that in 1920, African Americans operated more than 900,000 farms in the U.S. But today, only 18,000 black people name farming as their primary occupation. Allen believes many blacks have wanted to disassociate themselves from farming because of its historical connections with slavery and sharecropping, but he suspects that other urban blacks may share his own love and affinity for farming. He sees urban food-growing, by people of all races and ethnic backgrounds, as a key to restoring balance in our food system and economic and social justice in our society.

Allen decries the American government's support of massive-scale corporate farming, which began in the 1970s. "If we are going to foster a revolution in the methods of American agriculture," he asserts, "we must pioneer ways to make small-scale farming economically viable."

In the heart of Milwaukee, Wis., Allen's nonprofit food-producing and educational organization, called Growing Power, has led the way by trial and error. Allen and his crew grow some crops vertically and use millions of worms to produce rich nutrients for the soil. They raise fish in large tanks. They have employed street kids and former convicts. Allen was an early adopter in using food scraps and agricultural waste for composting, and the book includes detailed tips for making your own compost. He fervently believes that healing damaged urban land is vital to successfully growing food in cities.

Allen also has faith in renewable energy: "My intention in time is to build a facility that is entirely off the grid and that uses

only the power of the sun, the earth and decaying waste to grow food. I'm not there yet, but I believe I can make it happen." Based on the successes and learning experiences described in this book, a reader can also believe it.

The greatest lesson for future leaders of the urban food-growing movement might be this, in Allen's words: "All of these innovations at Growing Power came from relationships." Allen and his organization have worked with and educated individuals from all walks of life. They have partnered with companies, organizations and governments.

In 2011, Growing Power, which is now expanding nationally, even accepted a \$1 million grant from Walmart. Allen says that resulted in the "largest wave of criticism I have ever experienced," from social activists upset about Walmart's record on labor and social issues. But he says he would rather take that money and try to do some good with it than worry about being called a sellout.

"The Good Food Revolution" is a real-world guidebook to positive change. Although Allen comes across as heroic at times, not so much through his own words but through his actions, let's hope this book does much more than just enhance his image as a leader in the environmental and urban food-growing movements.

"Join us," urges Allen. "Pick up a shovel, get your hands dirty and let's begin."

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