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On the street where you live



Chef Nadine Nelson (left) begins her cooking classes with tours of local gardens and specialty marts. (TOM HERDE/GLOBE STAFF)

By Genevieve Rajewski
Globe Correspondent / October 31, 2007

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A short walk from Nadine Nelson's home is a small farm where tuft-headed hens cluck contentedly and grape vines twine the latticework in the late autumn sun. "Look as these! They're just perfect," says Nelson, stooping to pluck a handful of ripe red, yellow, and orange heirloom tomatoes.

Most Bostonians don't think of Roxbury as a center of agricultural bounty, but crops and cuisines flourish there - so much so that Nelson, a chef, now offers a culinary tour and cooking class in partnership with the nonprofit group Discover Roxbury.

Nelson loves exploring the neighborhood. "Roxbury is like Harlem in that it's the black mecca of Boston," she says. "It's the conconvocation of cuisines of African descent. And there are more food gardens than there are in Jamaica Plain and the South End."

Next month, Nelson's tour starts not far from her home in Fort Hill, with a discussion of the neighborhood's current cultural influences. "The population here is primarily African, Caribbean, Latin American, and African-American," she says. Those cuisines all make use of stewing and hot flavors as well as okra and other greens, she says.

After the farm the tour visits a nearby community garden where Nelson's

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After the farm, the tour visits a nearby community garden, where Nelson's neighbor has a plot that will provide some vegetables for cooking later. Nelson also gets produce from The Food Project, which farms a traditional and a rooftop garden in Roxbury as well as fields in Lincoln. She says her students might expect to find heirloom tomatoes, carrots, herbs, parsnips, peppers, and pumpkins.

"I like to show people the spontaneity of seasonality," Nelson says. "Many people have anxiety about shopping at farmers' markets because of the lack of control. I try to show people how fun it is to improvise."

The farm and gardens represent only half of the message of Nelson's tour.

"When you talk about eating local, I think you not only need to buy food that's grown locally, you also need to patronize local businesses," says Nelson, who is of Jamaican descent.

From Fort Hill, the chef strolls down to bustling Dudley Square, past four stops that include a halal meat market, the Haley House cafe, and Eddy's Restaurant.

The tour concludes at the mind-boggling Tropical Foods. As the group shops for sugar cane, tamarind paste, and salted cod, Nelson offers extensive guidance on ingredients in the Caribbean, South American, and Mexican dishes, including her favorite jerk and curry pastes, and Asian bouillon cubes that make "a really good gelatinous chicken broth."

At historic Hibernian Hall, tour-goers will learn to make quick dishes such as double-fried green plantains; a Ghanaian treat made with mashed sweet plantains, onions, garlic, and ginger; fresh salsa; and curry and jerk specialties.

Nelson, who owns Discerning Taste, lived in Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, Brookline, Somerville, and other neighborhoods for nearly two decades. But in Roxbury, she says she's found "a true sense of coming home and what a community should be."

The Roxbury Global Market Tour and Cooking Class (\$63) is from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Nov. 15. For more information go to discoverroxbury.org. ■

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