

FOOD + HOME

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Photos by Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle
Right: Museum chef-in-residence Bryant Terry cooks vegetables with Kanesha Harris, 11. Above: Terry (top) shreds greens with kids at Meadows Livingstone school in S.F.

Museum's hands-on cooking

Culinary residency puts foods of African diaspora on the table

By Jonathan Kauffman

When Bryant Terry, chef-in-residence at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, arrives at the tiny, rainbow-walked Meadows Livingstone elementary school in Potrero Hill, his first act is to strap on a Technicolor apron. The students at the Afro-centric, Montessori-based school break from reciting Langston Hughes poems to let him into their circle. Terry folds himself into a half-size chair and brings out a book about the childhood foods of famed Southern writer Edna Lewis, reading to the students about peaches, strawberries and wild mustard greens.

In the Bay Area, where many of us would check the "strongly agree" box next to both the statements "Food is art" and "Food is political," a culinary residency at a museum seems inevitable. However, Terry's role at MoAD may be the first of its kind.

"To my knowledge, we are

the first museum that has made this a formal program," says Linda Harrison, who took over as executive director in December 2013.

Harrison thought up the residency as part of her much broader rethinking of what MoAD could do. "At the Museum of the African Diaspora, one of the areas that we focus on in terms of adaptation, transformation and migration is food," she says. The museum had opened with a permanent exhibition about diasporan (African, Caribbean, African American) food, but Harrison wanted to bring the topic to life and use it to engage new audiences.

Terry, Harrison's immediate pick for the position, is as well known for his social justice work as for his four cookbooks, including "Vegan Soul Kitchen" and "Afro Vegan." "My guiding mantra has been to start with the visceral to ignite the political," he has said.

He brings this principal into

each of the MoAD events he curates. A year into the two-year residency, Terry has already convened a panel, "Black Women, Food and Power," with some of the country's preeminent food historians and has thrown a dinner spectacle in the museum lobby. It combined jazz and spoken-word performance with a multi-course meal tracing the movement of food across Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas.

Next up: On Sat., June 18, the museum will host a cookbook release party and reception for the GroundNut Collective, a London group of African European chefs. Terry is working on

fall events centered around coffee roasters, food historian Michael Twitty and a chefs' collaborative called Ghetto Gastro from Brooklyn, N.Y.

As MoAD also finds ways to extend into the Bay Area's African diaspora communities, the culinary residency is taking a less public form: participating in the museum's 2-year-old "MoAD in the Classroom" initiative. The initiative, explains program director Joy Crumpton, brings museum staff into schools and then schoolchildren into the museum. The class Terry is leading at Meadows Livingstone is a smaller version of one he will

do later this month with 75 third-graders at Horace Mann Elementary in Oakland.

As Terry describes his work to the children, he talks frankly about the challenges African American communities face, about environmental racism and children who have adult-onset diabetes. He tells the kids how he loves to celebrate the food of the African diaspora, and that it is much broader, and more healthful, than what many people call soul food.

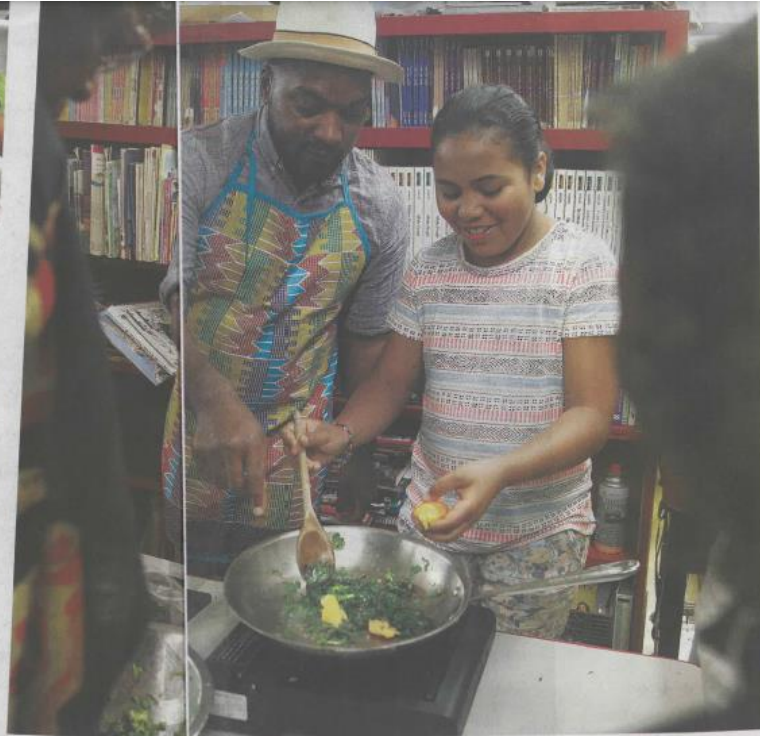
The circle slowly becomes a cluster, kids moving off their chairs onto the ground close to him. They listen to him kinetically, their arms and hips tak-

ing in the words along with their ears. One 5-year-old urgently wants to talk about how much he loves strawberries; others raise the issue of chemicals in our food.

The class, Terry later says, felt like a return to the early days of his activism, when he founded an organization in New York called b-healthy that taught cooking and gardening as a way to politicize young people to fight for a better food system.

This day is not about lecturing, however. Starting with the visceral, Terry shepherds the students into a room with three

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prep stations, dividing them by age. The youngest cut and scoop out berries and kiwis for a fruit salad, sticking with the task until a large bowl is filled.

Students a head taller gather around Terry's sometime-collaborator Jocelyn Jackson, who teaches them to curl their fingers while they chop peppers and tomatoes for a salsa of black-eyed peas and vegetables that she helps them coat with a sun-dried tomato dressing.

Some of the 10- and 11-year-olds who work with Terry to tear greens and saute them with garlic, raisins and orange juice show practiced comfort with knives and pans. Others take their turn with more trepidation. A coterie of museum staff lurk around the edges, cell phone cameras slipping in and out of shirt pockets, unable to suppress the vague smiles that infect adults who don't get to work with children every day.

The children are too intent to pay them any mind.

Despite the fact that every student takes a turn at each task, the meal barely takes an hour to finish. As the adults set the dishes up into a buffet line, Principal Gail Meadows gathers the students together to thank Terry by singing "Get Up, Stand Up." Then they line up to spoon food as Technicolor as the walls onto paper plates. Terry doesn't bother to explain that the dishes are healthy or vegan; the kids don't bother to leave food on their plates.

"At one point, people asked, what would a chef have to do with a museum that doesn't have a kitchen?" MoAD director Harrison says. "Now we have chefs giving us a call wondering how they can be part of this movement."

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Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle
Chef Bryant Terry and Meadows Livingstone Principal Gail Meadows talk with students, including Evelyn Snelgro (left) and Michael Padilla (far right) about food health at the school.