



See Beyond My Skin

Celestine Bennett Interview with Nigel Ousey

Nigel: This is Nigel Ousey for See Beyond My Skin and today I am thinking about food but more specifically, vegetables and fruit and where they come from.

My guest is Celestine Bennett - a teacher and farmer who just launched Gifted Hands CSA in Greensboro, North Carolina, which sold out in just 36 minutes!

CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture. People buy a yearly share and then the farmer delivers boxes of produce that change with what's in season.

Thanks for being with me today.

Celeste: Well, thanks for having me. I'm excited this is awesome.

Nigel: In the US it is sometimes hard to come across fresh organic produce and even harder to come across black-owned farms. What made you interested in starting a CSA?

Celeste: I think it kind of grew out of me loving to garden. I love growing things from a seed and producing something else just as small as a dot on a piece of paper that eventually is going to turn into something that we eat. And taking people along my journey during the time that I'm planting and growing through social media. I realized that people were also looking and searching for the same type of food quality that I was searching for. So I thought there was only one way for me to supply or make available to people that wanted the same things that I wanted. I realized as I'm in search of land there were other ways that I could make it happen so I kept researching. I kept looking at different models and I came up with the CSA. To open it up to a lot of people that just did not have any knowledge. They didn't know what the CSA meant. They have never been a part of a CFA and they were interested in really good quality, local grown vegetables and fruit so it kind of grew into its own type of entity or enterprise or business and it just took off. And I did not expect it to go the way it did but the program

actually sold itself and because so many people want fresh produce and fruit, I presented and they just grabbed at it. Like you mentioned in your intro within half an hour we were totally sold out of memberships. To answer that question, I know I talked a whole lot but it basically started off with me wanting better quality food and others watching my journey and decided that they wanted that as well.

Nigel: You have an amazing variety of produce you offer in your CSA and you are experimenting with other possibilities. With most CSAs there is a large variety of products. What do you think are the most popular that you offer?

Celeste: Well I think a lot of people love strawberries. They love blueberries. They love any type of fruit that's fresh and sweet and tasty especially in the summertime. I think as the season starts to wind down you have to look at your demographics and see what people like and what they don't like. As we get closer to the end of the season, pumpkins and squash may not be at the top of the list of what people want. But anything that has fresh, green, leafy vegetables when you think about salads and cucumbers are all high on the list. But like I mentioned when the season starts to dwindle down, people are not so much inclined to want a lot of pumpkins or a lot of squash. That would be the winter squash not necessarily the summer squash.

Nigel: Is there any produce that has been particularly rewarding or challenging for you?

Celeste: I'm part of a CSA program and the gist is people buy into it. You're sharing the season with the ups and downs of the season with the farmer. So you can have a farm that has many, many years of experience growing, let's say, tomatoes, but we never can tell what Mother Nature is going to do. We can have a late frost, we can have a downpour over a lot of days of rain that can make growing something that you've grown very well for many years be very hard to produce for that season.

So I think for me one of the hardest things - and I kind of think I mastered it this past season - was watermelon. And it was just one simple thing that I had to change in the way I was growing watermelons in order to have a really good crop of watermelons. And you know I had said the year before, I would never grow watermelon again because this crop would always fail. Another item that is really hard for me to grow is carrots and I have not quite mastered how to grow a very straight carrot. A lot of times my carrots go in all different directions. Some are really thin, some are thick. I plan on keeping at it until I figure it out just like I did with my watermelon crop.

Nigel: That's really interesting. Health and good eating go together and eating nutritious food is much harder for some people. I have been doing some research about food deserts in lower-income neighborhoods across America. I watched Ron Finley's TED Talk about Guerilla Gardening in South LA.

How do you think CSA's can change communities? And do you think you are a community leader?

Celeste: I do believe that I am a community leader because I'm thinking outside of the box to make local items available to people of color. A lot of time, people of color are not too many generations separated from those in our family that would farm not too long ago. We have gotten away from it because we only saw one side of farming where we were land rich and house poor. What that really means is we had all this food that we were growing and selling, but we couldn't afford to keep the house up and we couldn't afford to put certain food on our table.

So the children of those farmers started to grow up and they moved away from that lifestyle because they wanted something different. That resulted in a lot of farms owned by people of color that just started to disappear. When they start to disappear, a lot of times when you move to a bigger city you're trying to acquire that job as an executive or whatever the case may be and if it calls for you to do a lot of work hours and to get away from some of the healthy things that you liked eating on that farm.

If it's not grown here in our own city and we're eating blueberries or strawberries and maybe even a banana - and we can't even grow bananas here - but if we're eating food that has to come through international waters that's a long travel time. So what happened to that food where the sun hasn't had a chance to do its job to give us vitamin D? And the nutrients that we need? Once we consume that, if it's coming from other countries very early on, we pick it when it's not ripe, so it is traveling across many miles and many days to land here in America on our shelves in the grocery store. They have not had a chance to ripen and to get to a point where we eat it. We get what we need from a lot of people thinking that they're eating healthy because they may have consumed more vegetables or more blueberries. You really have to look at where your food is coming from. So I believe in the CSA. You're pushing more local grown that is not picked and placed in the grocery stores too early. So you can get the benefit of the vegetables and the berries in the fruit that you're eating

Nigel: Thanks. That's a lot to think about. You had a dream to become a farmer. You are a teacher, a mother, and now you have chickens and a CSA. You must be very busy.

Celeste: The good thing about being a teacher is that you have your summers off. Starting the CSA so many people wanted to be a part of it to buy into a membership and I put a limit on it. Because I don't want to take on too many people into my CSA and not be able to produce and do everything that I'm promising to do for those that have joined. So I carved out my schedule to look at what it's going to take to run a CSA. How much time do I have and I cater that time around my summer schedule because teachers have the summers off.

My daughters, who are in high school, love it so getting them to help is not going to be a hard thing to do. So I have help and again, I've limited the amount of people that are part of my CSA. I do intend on growing and I'm hopeful and I'm prayerful that this will be something that I can do and maybe step away from being a teacher. Because I know the importance of it. I know that the community needs it and I also know that when we look at food deserts they can really benefit from it so I'm hoping one day to grow it to a point where this can be what it is that I'm doing.

Nigel: Wow! So that reminds me there is a quote you have on your social media that says, "Decide what kind of a life you actually want, then say 'no' to everything that isn't that." Is that how you maintained the power of your dream?

Celeste: Yes it is. I can show you that when I go out into my garden I think about nothing. It takes me away from the hustle and bustle of life and it makes me feel like I'm connected to nature. I'm connected to God. And I believe that sometimes when we get out into public into just our communities sometimes the noise can be so loud that it becomes a distraction.

Then we start to self-doubt. Then we start to rethink. And I just believe that when God gives you the vision he will make it happen and he'll give you everything that you need. But a lot of times, we walk in fear and I believe that we settle and we never reach our true purpose. But if we can hold on to everything that does align with what God has called us to do then we will walk in our true purpose and everything will seem like a beautiful day, always. Because there will never be a moment where you're not satisfied with what you are doing -each day you wake up and you put your feet on the ground.

Nigel: It seems like you have reached your dream

Celeste: It's been a vision. And that's the thing a lot of people, especially with the younger generation- they just want instant gratification and sometimes it takes a little time to get there. This is a prime example of it taking a little while to get there. It's been

a journey. I never walked away. It's been different farms. We don't have all the lands that we want but that didn't stop anything. I have a small postage stamp of a garden outside but I'm able to produce lots and lots of food in that one little small area. The journey to get there has been a little knitted, but I'm going to get there and I'm not going to stop.

Nigel: So have patience and work hard. That is some really great advice! (pause)

I want to ask you the two questions, that I ask everyone on my podcast:

How do you see yourself?

And the second...

How do you fear that others perceive you?

Celeste: I try to go through life and even leadership positions as a teacher doing to others and treating others as I would want to be treated. The hard part of that is everyone does not have that same philosophy or that same belief. I believe if I continue to maintain, no matter what you may say, no matter what you may do, and I handle you with love and kindness that at some point you can't continue to fight against that. So I see myself as an extension of what I would want for others and hopefully of what others would want for me.

Fortunately, others may not see me in that light because they may not understand the light that shines on me. Why I'm so happy. Why I'm so determined to figure out and walk in my purpose. But then there are others that do get it and I'm grateful for those that do get it. And they do understand and if they can see that I have a heart for any and everyone especially for those that are kind of behind the eight ball and may have been dealt a bad hand and they're trying to pull themselves up from the bootstraps. Those are the ones that I really - I hear everybody the same - but those are the ones that I'm really cheering hard for. I believe that most people are pure and genuine in their heart will see that. Those that may have hear some things again working on within themselves may not see that my heart is genuine and I'm like your biggest cheerleader. So for me, that's how I think people see me and that's how I also hope that they would see my deeds and to know that there's nothing that I'm looking for. I'm just being a calm person. There's nothing that I want. I'm just doing what Jesus would want us to do. We're all sisters and brothers and I always go with the philosophy I want for you what I want for myself. And I don't want bad for myself so I can't want anything bad for you.

Nigel: That's really inspiring.

Celeste: The journey that you're on. I see you in newsrooms. I see you on TV. I can see you taking off with your podcast. And it just growing and growing. No matter what, don't let the outside noise tell you to do something different. Do not allow it to be a distraction. And it will be. It will be very loud and it will make you believe it's not for me. But you gotta stay focused. Write it down. Get a vision board. Repeat it to yourself every day.

Nigel: Thank you.

Celeste: You are welcome. This is good. I can't wait to hear it play back.

Nigel: Thanks for sharing your story with me today

Celeste: Thank you for picking me.

Nigel: What you said was really enlightening.

Celeste: Well thank you and I am so happy that people are catching on and see that there is a story that needs to be told because as you do reach out to me and others are reaching out to hear what it is that I have to say it is also building a legacy not just for me but for my children. Because that is how passionate I am about what I am doing.

Nigel:

You have been listening to Celeste Bennett, farmer, and entrepreneur. This is Nigel Ousey for See Beyond My Skin. Stay strong and stay true to your story.