

SOUL FOOD

Kimbal Musk is sowing the seeds for a health revolution in Memphis.

By Jennifer V. Cole

Photograph by William Widmer



Right around the time in 2014 that Memphis was named the most obese city in the U.S., a local philanthropist approached Kimbal Musk with an idea. If Musk, a social entrepreneur who runs the Kitchen, a farm-to-table restaurant group and nonprofit, could help overhaul the city's food system, he'd supply the

funds. It was a big ask: Memphis is defined by its abiding love for fried chicken and a rich barbecue culture; each summer, it hosts the largest pork-cooking contest in the world.

A few conversations later, Musk accepted. After all, taking on outside challenges runs in the family. Musk

Growing Memphis

Musk's new Memphis restaurant is on a former commercial cotton farm that's being transformed into a vibrant city park.

was 26 when he and his brother, Elon, sold their first tech company for \$300 million. After they founded the startup that later became PayPal, Kimbal went on to culinary school and opened his first Kitchen restaurant in Boulder, Colorado, in 2004. He embedded himself in the community, pledging to buy most of

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

With more than 300 learning gardens in schools nationwide, Kimbal Musk is laying the groundwork for healthier communities.

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Who they benefit

The modular gardens are built on the grounds of schools, many of them in areas that lack access to fresh food. They are maintained throughout the year by teams of students and neighborhood volunteers.

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How they work

Each garden is assigned a “regional educator” who connects the Kitchen community and the local school. They work with teachers to create lesson plans for students as they grow vegetables and herbs.

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Why they work

It’s about the ripple effects. “We get emails from parents asking us what kale is because their kids are asking for it,” says Musk. “That kind of extraordinary presence in the community is critical to the future of real food.”



Going green

Musk estimates the learning gardens in Memphis will reach 60,000 to 70,000 students.

the restaurant’s food locally and to involve kids in the growing process by constructing learning gardens on public school grounds. His commitment had dramatic effect: Over 12 years, as Musk coached local farmers on how to scale their businesses to meet the demand of his growing restaurant group and other farm-to-table outposts, Colorado’s local food economy increased from \$4 million to \$20 million.

Now Musk is taking the operation to Memphis, with a mission to transform the city’s food scene as he did Colorado’s: by bolstering farmers, building learning gardens, and opening restaurants. Although Memphis is flanked by fertile Delta soil, much of that land is used for cotton. Real food isn’t farmed or sold on a scale that can feed the city, a fact that’s contributed to its obesity epidemic. “Memphis is a victim of industrial food—high calorie, low nutrition,”

says Musk. “You have it every single day. The prices are cheap, but they’re extremely expensive in terms of the effects on your body and your health care system.” He feels the solution lies in convincing cotton farmers to shift to organic food by showing them opportunity. “Once a farmer is trained in how to sell to our restaurant, they can sell anywhere,” he says, listing other restaurants and mass-market purchasers including Chipotle (he’s a board member), Walmart, and Whole Foods. “It’s a learning process

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[with us] that translates into working with other players.”

This past August, Musk laid the foundation for his Memphis work with the opening of the Kitchen in Shelby Farms, a recently expanded park in the city center that was once a commercial cotton farm. Designed by James Corner Field Operations, the team behind New York’s High Line, the undulating acres feature lakes, fishing ponds, meadows, wooded hiking trails, a thriving herd of American buffalo, and the potential for an organic demonstration farm. In January, Next Door, the Kitchen’s more casual sister restaurant, will open in Memphis’s Crosstown Concourse, a redevelopment project that’s transforming a dilapidated Sears distribution center into a vertical urban community with schools, apartments, a research hospital, concert halls, and 60,000 square feet of retail space. “The whole city is really coming to

life,” says Musk. “I consider myself a pretty fast mover, and very few [places] push me to move faster. Memphis is one of those places.”

Musk’s plan isn’t just to increase the amount of organic food grown in Memphis; it’s to make sure that produce is available to everyone. That’s why he’s building 100 learning gardens in local schools, and why he chose to open the Kitchen in Shelby Farms Park. “It has every level of wealth, color, and creed all around it. Everyone has access to it,” says Musk. This quest for accessibility also inspired him to develop the Kitchenette—an affordable, grab-and-go concept specific to Memphis—that opened this fall in Shelby Farms. “I didn’t want to create a restaurant that would just serve the wealthy in town,” says Musk. “Our goal is to bring real food to the masses. It would be distracting from the mission to do otherwise.”