Food Fight

Leroy Whitfield goes on a fruitless search for good food in the ghetto, and realizes he's been red-lined.

December 1, 1999 By LeRoy Whitfield

Unless you've been deliberately avoiding the gospel of nutrition—much like I avoid my landlord at the first of the month—then by now you've heard about how eating well can aid us HIV positive people to defend our bodies against the virus. I'm no nutrition expert, but you don't have to be the surgeon general to know that protein found in fish, meat and eggs helps to promote muscle mass and that the vitamin C in oranges and leafy greens helps to ward off colds and other nagging infections.

That's why grocery shopping in my neighborhood makes me want to holler. Choices of nutritious food range from slim to none. Want fresh fish? Fuggedaboudit! Just-picked produce? Keep dreaming. And I don't even fix my lips to ask for a specialty item like tofu, lest the cashier toss me out faster than she would a wandering crack hype jonesing for a hit.

I live in a typical down-and-out ghetto. Broken glass underfoot, drug dealers on every corner. Of course, I've heard more politically correct terms for my type of habitat: *disadvantaged neighborhood, impoverished community* or—my personal favorite—*the inner city* (as if high-society urbanites don't densely populate inner-city ghettos of their own). But whatever folks call it, there's no denying the distinct lack of services here. Never mind that I have to travel nearly an hour by bus or train to visit my doctor or pick up the latest AIDS newsletter—what's worse, there isn't a green leaf within miles of my home. That doesn't bode well for me, an HIV positive veg-aquarian (I eat veggies and select fish) attempting to improve his diet and health. In fact, it's no less than outrageous.

Down the block at Super Deal Foods and Liquors, the bulletproof walk-up window showcases pure octane: Wild Irish Rose, Mad Dog 20/20, Night Train and Seagram's Gin. Just past the sugary snack cakes, candy bars and potato chips, I can make out generic white bread and a few canned goods.

Around the corner at the Food Cart there's a perk: Instead of yelling and pointing out my groceries through the scratched and streaked plexiglass window, I'm actually allowed to shop *inside* the store. The selection, however, is hardly better. There are bags of cheesy-puff snacks, but no cheese in sight. There are onion-flavored chips, but no onions; fruit-flavored candies, but no fruit. And there's no orange juice in the cooler, only orange drink—right next to the Flavor-Rite (ghetto-

brand Kool-Aid), which has so many flavors it qualifies as its own food section.

This ghetto-licious menu is why I'm increasingly concerned about getting proper nutrition. Last year at the 12th World AIDS Conference, a report presented by a community-based group in New York City concluded that "malnutrition continues to be a major contributing factor in progression of disease from HIV infection to AIDS, particularly among low-income minority groups with limited access to food and to drug therapies." But this news came as no surprise to me. The study concluded that AIDS agencies could improve the nutrition of HIV positive locals by offering cooking classes and doubling as food pantries. Sounds great on paper, but the reality is that in my 'hood—the same as in many black communities nationwide—AIDS groups are as few and far between as health food stores and Starbucks coffee shops.

Wait a minute! I'm a resourceful brother, wired for the new millennium. With my computer and the power of the Internet, why should I struggle to find fresh groceries when they can find me? A snazzy website, www.peapod.com, promises fresh grocery delivery to your home or office in San Francisco, Dallas, Boston and five other U.S. cities, including my town, Chicago. Although I have some qualms about a stranger squeezing my tomatoes and thumping my melons, anything beats yelling at the bulletproof window. In just minutes, I figure, I'll be clicking my way to mesclun salads, eggplant parmigiana and steaming spinach-and-lentil soup.

It's all good until I get to the part where I have to input my zip code. I type it and hit enter. It doesn't take long for the computer program to determine that I live in a ghetto. In all of its impersonalized computerness it explains that because of my location, all of the megahertz in the world won't buy me fresh celery. Even as the company—which is based in Illinois—celebrates its 10th year and has expanded nationally, services have yet to be offered in my neighborhood. As I key in the zip codes of my ghetto-patch friends across the country, returns show that Peapod misses their areas as well—we are all victims of nutritional red-lining. A Peapod spokes-woman assures me that these boundaries have nothing to do with race, but "demand for service and household computer concentration." In other words, blame the digital divide.

I chew on all of this and it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Good thing there's plenty of Flavor-Rite around here.

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