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Alex Askew, President of The Black Culinarian Alliance (BCA) shares his thoughts on the state of food access in Harlem and what can be done to increase the availability of healthy food.

Alex Askew started his restaurant career at 14-eventually attending the Culinary Institute of America to learn more about the art of cooking and the history of eating. In 1993, he helped co-found the Black Culinarian Alliance (BCA) to increase community awareness about food and to support people of color in the food and hospitality industries.

What are the most important and pressing issues surrounding food in Harlem? Why are these issues critical to the Harlem community?

The top issues are the same in Harlem as they are for any urban area. These issues include how important it is for people and restaurants to understand the ingredients in food, food sustainability, where foods come from like whether they are local foods and also food freshness. In addition, it is necessary to be knowledgeable about healthy alternatives and health concerns.

Many of the issues that plague the restaurant industry today in making positive changes come from a lack of programs that are started and maintained by the local government. Other places around the country are looking into supporting healthy changes in restaurants. If we want Harlem to be one of the top destinations in the restaurant industry, these initiatives need political support. We know that we can get fresh food. We know that with a little effort, we can find places that can provide great local food options. This is being done at all the top restaurants so it's nothing that can't be achieved here.

Do you see any positive, healthy changes in Harlem when it comes to food?

The BCA started the Harlem Hospitality Initiative which helps existing restaurants increase the quality of food in restaurants with a focus on consistency in service and understanding healthy alternatives. This includes encouraging people in the industry to buy locally grown foods, buy fresh foods and make sure foods are stored properly. We are bringing new people to the industry to expose them to the profession and train them in these important matters. We hope to get this initiative funded. Sometimes we are

reactive instead of proactive when it comes to issues such as [obesity](#) [1] and other health concerns related to food. We need to be proactive. Even though our Harlem Hospitality Initiative is in its early stages and we have much to do, we want to not only reach restaurants, but also influence healthy cooking at home.

Do you think the new requirement to post calories in fast food restaurants? Will it have any impact in Harlem?

It will eventually have an impact. People need to know what [calorie](#) [2] counting means however. If there is not enough education about reading nutrition labels, understanding how many [calories](#) [2] you need to maintain a healthy weight, these rules are meaningless right now. Combining these calorie postings with a pamphlet to explain calories could make a big difference.

How can people get involved to push for healthier food in Harlem?

Everyone concerned about these issues should bring it up to their local politicians. We have all the evidence about what works in terms of promoting healthy food and what can be done, but we need to get people to put in the resources because this directly affects us all. To support the political process in advocating for a healthier Harlem, we encourage people to contact us because the more you know, the better you can help push for change. Because the BCA is a place to learn about food, access to good food and careers in the industry, we can help community members focus their energy based on their interests.

Harlem Word is a series of interviews with community health experts written by HHPC and reviewed by our Health Advisory Board.

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