

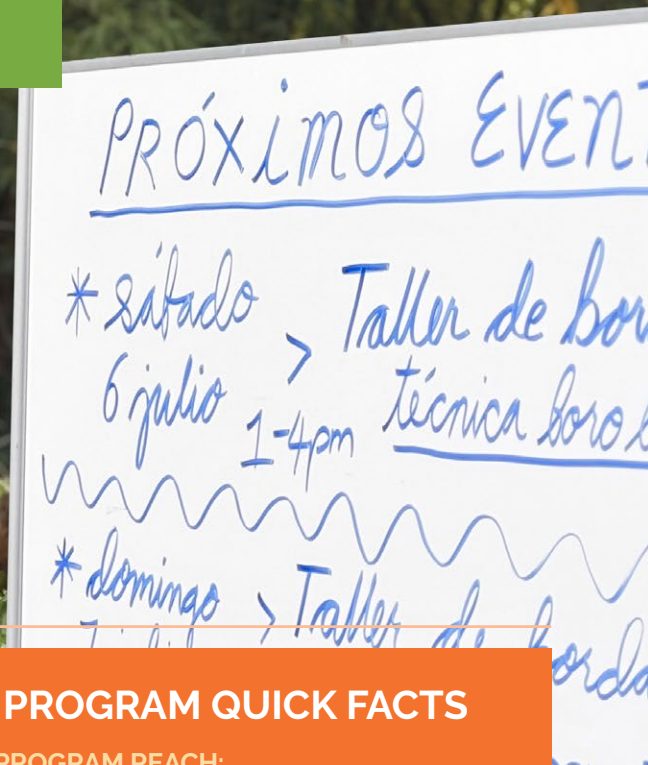


TEAM PROFILE

El Departamento de la Comida

Based in Barrio San Salvador in the Caguas municipality of Puerto Rico

Caguas is part of the traditional territory of the Taíno people.



F2FA PROGRAM QUICK FACTS

► **F2FA PROGRAM REACH:**

Barrio San Salvador in Caguas, Puerto Rico

► **FUNDING SOURCES:**

- USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program
- Philanthropic funding

El Departamento de la Comida grew out of a project started in 2010 and became a nonprofit in 2018.

Their F2FA program has been in operation since 2022.

► **WEBSITE:**

eldepartamentodelacomida.org

ABOUT EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA

El Departamento de la Comida de Puerto Rico (El Depa) is a non-profit collective that supports small-scale, decentralized local food projects across all stages of food production and distribution. Their work is anchored in a community food hub that includes a resource library with tools, seeds, and educational materials, as well as a commercial kitchen and on-site retail sales, powered in part by solar energy. Their programs serve the diverse agroecological community in Barrio San Salvador and beyond, including farmers, cooks, researchers, artists, community leaders, and neighbors. El Depa prioritizes the inclusion of LGBTQ+ communities as well as small-scale farmers, many of whom are of Indigenous descent. These farmers call themselves jibaros, a Puerto Rican term for farmers and people in the countryside who have ancestral knowledge of working with the land.

Staffed by an intergenerational team of female and non-binary cooks, farmers, and healers, El Depa views its models of decision-making to be as important as its programs. These models center the well-being of people, the food they grow, and the ecosystems that sustain these practices. They reflect El Depa's deeply held



EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA'S VISION

We want to live within a healthy, decolonized, regenerative, and just local food ecosystem in Borikén, for all. We focus on decolonization through food, healing through land, and freedom through community. For us, by us.

values like the community knows best, work at a life affirming pace, and water is life. These decision-making structures are neither vertical nor horizontal. Some decisions are made with the entire team at El Depa. Others are made by El Depa's "nuclear group of actors" who manage administrative tasks. Even when all team members are not part of the final decision-making, El Depa solicits a round of feedback from the full team so their input can be considered.

NOURISHING COMMUNITY ONE MEAL AT A TIME

Through El Depa's F2FA program, produce from local farmers is used to prepare weekly community meals and create shelf-stable products that are available within Barrio San Salvador, where El Depa is located. A subdivision of the Caguas municipality, Barrio San Salvador is home to around 1,800 people. Like many other rural communities in Puerto Rico, Barrio San Salvador is a historically agricultural and low-income community where an estimated 53% of people live below the poverty line. Its local school was closed due to austerity measures and governmental support for areas such as mental health and nutrition is limited.

El Depa's F2FA program began in 2021 when a staff member from the community recognized that many

people in the area—especially older adults and people with health challenges living alone— would benefit from healthy prepared meals. El Depa partnered with a farmer to purchase local produce and began using their commercial kitchen to prepare nutritious, plant-based lunches on a weekly basis. The lunches are open to all community members at no cost.

As word spread, participation quadrupled, and the program now serves lunch to more than 80 people each week. This includes people who join the communal meal and those who receive meals delivered by family members and volunteers. The program reaches a diverse array of community members, including older adults, people who live alone, individuals who are homebound due to health issues, people marginalized by mental health conditions, and families. As explained by Julie Mercado, El Depa's Kitchen Manager, "We believe that everyone has a right to have this nutritious food."

“

Since it is a small community, people really do know each other. It's really beautiful when we point out 'Hey, this is from Rafa's farm, this is from Carlos and Carmen's farm,' and sometimes it's just from people who come to the meals that donate their crops. They definitely know the farmers and understand that what they are eating is produced within the community.

-MARIELISA SABAT LAFONTAINE, OPERATIONS MANAGER



“
There is hardly any support and visibility in terms of farming and queer communities so we prioritize support to people who have farm projects and identify as part of the queer community.”

-JULIE MERCADO, KITCHEN MANAGER

all are people of color. This model creates a distribution mechanism and market for crops that otherwise would spoil, thereby reducing food waste and providing income for farmers. El Depa prioritizes purchasing agroecological crops—as explained by Marielisa Sabat Lafontaine, “Agroecology is not only the way you grow food, it’s also the political, social, and ecological impact that it can have in a community. It’s having diversity and thinking about decentralizing and giving power back to smaller communities and family farms.” As part of its commitment to equity and farmer viability, El Depa pays the price set by the farmer without negotiating. El Depa also educates farmers about the value of using agroecological growing practices, raising awareness that farmers can charge premium prices for these crops.

Community involvement has been key. Community members let others know about the program and volunteer with El Depa, helping in the kitchen or bringing food to people who can’t travel to the community meal. Community members also bring food from their own gardens to contribute to meals.

El Depa is creating new resources and building community in San Salvador. Their F2FA program has created a reliable and efficient way for farmers to sell produce, and at the same time, to share this local bounty with the community through nutritious meals. They are exploring ways to continue expanding access to local foods within Barrio San Salvador while deepening community partnerships.



Meals are planned based on the produce purchased from farmers that week. Produce is also used to create shelf-stable products such as dried fruits, canned goods, flour, fermented products, vinegars and oils. El Depa makes pasteles, a traditional Puerto Rican dish, to use the abundance of roots and bananas in the region. These products are incorporated into the weekly lunches, served at El Depa’s workshops and trainings, and are available at El Depa for purchase. On a daily basis, community members come to El Depa seeking food and are never turned away, underscoring El Depa’s role as a vital community resource for increasing food access.

To procure produce, El Depa has a purchasing agreement with a neighboring farmer who aggregates and delivers produce from more than 20 small-scale farmers in Barrio San Salvador to El Depa on a weekly basis. Many of the farmers have indigenous roots and

WHO’S AT THE F2FA TABLE?

To gather community feedback, El Departamento de la Comida surveys community members and seeks input from El Depa staff members who also live in the community. They aim to strengthen their mechanisms for seeking community feedback as their work continues to develop.

IN THEIR WORDS



KEY SUCCESSES

El Depa's F2FA program has been an effective way to build community and divert food waste

As shared by Marielisa Sabat Lafontaine, "Every day it keeps growing and we keep impacting more families and people."



KEY CHALLENGES

Creating a circular economy that provides a market for all of farmers' crops

Building trust with the community

Creating and managing the volunteer program

Centering LGBTQ+ people in a conservative community—as explained by Julie Mercado, "That's a hard part to manage, but we always do it because we are trying to break these walls of judgment."



VALUES IN ACTION

Supporting farm viability by offering a reliable and efficient market channel for produce that would otherwise go to waste

Paying farmers the price they set

Being intentional about including LGBTQ+ people

"Decolonizing" the palette by teaching people to use foods native to the island in different ways

Community members are prioritized and can attend all workshops for free; people from outside the Barrio give a small donation

The F2FA approach isn't a one-sided charity model; community members have created ways to contribute, for example donating produce from their gardens and bringing meals to community members who are homebound



LESSONS LEARNED

As explained by Marielisa Sabat Lafontaine: "One of the biggest lessons is really listening to the community. Listening in terms of what their needs are, what they want, what they're looking for from an organization like us. I think that's also why the food program has been successful because it literally came from an idea from a community member—they had identified a need." Importantly, the people that comprise the team at El Depa are also members of this community, so listening to each other is part of this.

Remain true to your core values—they are an important reminder of why we're doing this work

Adapting is key—you don't have to be married to the initial idea; it's important to listen, observe how things are going, and to change and adapt in response

The Farm to Food Assistance Learning Lab was made possible through a 2021 USDA Local Foods Promotion Program (LFPP) grant, with supplemental support from The Rockefeller Foundation. This profile features one of ten participating teams who served as co-investigators in the Wallace Center's research on the field of Farm to Food Assistance.