

Finding Roots: Asian American Farmers in Contemporary America

Emily Tzeng

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Interview conducted by Katelyn Reuther

Emily Tzeng is the founder and owner of Local Color Farm and Fiber in Puyallup, Washington.

This was a remote interview conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emily Tzeng joined the interview from Puyallup, Washington, and Katie Reuther joined from Boston, Massachusetts.

Interview Log

- 00:00:00 Introductions
- 00:00:35 Both of Emily’s parents moved from Taiwan to the United States in the 1980s for graduate school. Starting around first grade, she and her family lived in a pretty rural area on the eastern shore of Maryland. They ate the best approximation of Chinese food they could get living in the countryside. Her mom mostly cooked, and they would go to Chinatown in Philadelphia every few months to buy Chinese groceries they couldn’t get where they lived. Neither of her parents loved cooking, especially as they got busier with their careers. By the time her sister was born, they ate more western food. However, ninety percent of the time, they still ate Chinese food.
- 00:02:28 They had a family friend growing up who had an enormous vegetable garden full of Asian vegetables, and they would go there fairly regularly. Most of the people her parents hung out with were also from Taiwan. Emily remembers eating a lot of vegetables from that huge garden growing up.
- 00:03:35 In second or third grade, Emily decided to become vegetarian. Based on things she had learned about, such as rainforest deforestation, not eating meat was the one thing she could contribute to the cause. There were places to buy better farmed meat, but to her, it was a very binary decision. She would avoid eating things that looked like meat, but looking back, she knows her parents tricked her into eating meat a lot. She was vegetarian until she started farming (about fifteen years).
- 00:05:23 Emily read a lot of books as a kid. Living in a rural area, it was hard to hang out with other kids outside of school. She loved animals, read books about animals,

and then read books about where the animals were from. Reading those books motivated her to become a vegetarian.

00:06:13 Emily's parents didn't like her decision to become a vegetarian. Because of their already busy work schedules, they didn't feel like they could accommodate her vegetarianism on top of everything else. She didn't understand why they didn't agree with her decision. Although there are a lot of vegetarian Chinese dishes, her parents were resistant to changes in their cooking, because cooking some of those foods was one of their only remaining connections to their culture. Her dad still didn't believe she was a vegetarian until she went to college.

00:07:27 Emily didn't cook for herself very much, but her parents would leave some food meat-free for her, separating it out from the rest of the food they would cook. She started cooking in high school, partly because she didn't want to eat Chinese food.

00:08:24 Like many people who are interested in food, Emily enjoys going to restaurants. During university, she became involved in a community garden at school. Although she says she wasn't a good gardener at that point, she enjoyed many aspects of her time there. After studying architecture and graduating in 2009, she worked for over a year before needing to find a new job. Living with her boyfriend rent-free allowed her to pursue her secret desire to get involved with food and farming.

In the summer of 2011, she volunteered at a few community gardens in south Seattle, and the person in charge revealed that she could become an apprentice at a small garden. Where Emily grew up, all of the farms were multi-generational, and there were many chicken houses, a few dairies, and many row crops. She didn't realize you could have a vegetable farm. The following year, she apprenticed at a small farm on Vashon Island (Washington) and has continued on ever since.

00:12:02 Emily likes being outside. To avoid the extreme heat in the south, the built environment allows people to spend as little time outside as possible. At university, she worked long work hours and missed spending time outdoors, so the community garden was a nice change from being inside the studio for twelve hours a day.

00:13:39 Emily did her first apprenticeship at Plum Forest Farm on Vashon Island. She says she never could've done it if she had massive student debt, and she was fortunate that she could take an apprenticeship that paid very little money. They lived in tiny cabins, had an outdoor kitchen, and used a composting toilet. It was an acre and a half of vegetables, and they had laying hens, meat chickens, and cows. It was fun to learn more about all of those tasks.

00:15:23 Emily wasn't specifically looking for programs with animals. Because her partner was still based in Seattle, she was looking for something close that she could access via bike. The location, farmer, and other apprentice were all a good fit for her.

00:16:19 The apprenticeship was March through November.

00:16:39 Most winters, Emily worked at restaurants or bakeries. After her first apprenticeship ended, she looked for other apprenticeships at bigger farms with different crops. She ended up doing a joint apprenticeship on Bainbridge Island (Washington) at two farms located on the Suyematsu family farm. The original family was Japanese, and they cleared the land and bought it in their oldest son's name. Later, the city purchased most of the land to keep it as open space.

There were two farmers that ran the apprenticeship program, Betsy and Brian. Betsy had a small, draft-horse powered farm with storage crop vegetables and a ten-acre vineyard. Emily split her time between vegetable work, vineyard work, and the draft horses. Brian did mostly vegetables and sold through a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), a farmstand, the farmers market, and to restaurants and a grocery store. He has multiple pieces around the island in production. Overall, she enjoyed the experience. It was very different from her previous experience.

00:20:43 That was another one-season apprenticeship. For the next few years, she worked on and off for both farmers while developing her own farm business.

00:21:24 Emily's farm business started when she decided to buy some sheep. At the end of her first year, there was a farmer she knew who was getting out of farming. She asked if Emily was interested in buying her sheep. Emily agreed, even though she didn't have a spot to keep them. Since she was working with Brian, who has land around the island, she figured it wouldn't be hard to find a place for them.

She started with five sheep and bred the ewes to have lambs the next year. It went well, especially considering she hadn't had sheep before. Overall, it wasn't a super successful lambing because of her lack of experience, but it was a good learning experience. Concurrently, she decided to grow natural dye plants to dye the yarn that the sheep made. She spent the next two years trying to move these projects along.

With the natural dyes (mostly flowers), it's easy to grow too much. When you're used to farming, it's difficult to garden again. Left with too many dried materials, Emily recruited a friend to start a yarn company with her. They have sourced

American-grown and processed yarn from the beginning, which was much harder at that time than it is now. They sold at the farmers market, a yarn store on the island, at local events, and through an Etsy store.

It didn't really take off, but people bought the yarn, which always surprised Emily. It grew slowly, and for the next three to five years, Emily worked part-time for the vegetable farm or vineyard, took care of her sheep and a few plots of dye plants, and dyed yarn.

00:27:05 Emily got the sheep in 2013.

00:27:23 At that point, a couple of years into farming, Emily knew she didn't really want to get an architecture job. She was very fortunate to have a partner who had money, and they had very reasonable rent. She was also still on her parents' health insurance. All of these factors meant she could take more chances.

Emily knew she wanted to continue farming. However, the downside of many small family farms is that there's nowhere to grow. You're either a field hand, or the owner. Many people Emily knows have been squeezed into starting their own farms, because it's the most financially viable option.

00:29:51 Emily didn't think starting her own farm business would be that hard. Although she didn't own any land, she had been able to access bits of property on an increasingly expensive island. Four years in, she realized she needed to secure some sort of long-term land lease with space to grow. She went through a couple of possibilities with different land trusts, but nothing ended up working out. Six to eight months into the process, one deal fell through, and she and her partner decided that to make it a legitimate career, they needed some sort of land tenure. They started looking, and after two years, they found the land they're on now.

00:32:04 Emily knew they would never be able to afford land on Bainbridge Island, but because they already had a community there, they started looking for land in Kitsap County. However, the land in that area was not ideal for a number of reasons, so they widened the scope of their search and found land in Puyallup. It's about a forty-five minute drive from Seattle.

They were open to raw land so her partner could design a house for them. Emily also wanted to be part of a farm community. Although the land didn't have water, electricity, or a septic, and it's a weird shape for agriculture, it's very nice agricultural land. Unlike other properties they tried to buy, they didn't have any competition for this piece. Emily says the land is too weird and too expensive for a big farmer to want it, and because it's on the river, it can't be subdivided by developers.

- 00:36:17 The land was relatively affordable, because it didn't have anything on it. At that point, they had been saving for about ten years. They cobbled together the money to purchase it from a variety of sources.
- 00:36:59 They are on about twelve acres of land, and adjacent to them is a forty-acre piece that's also farmed. Emily sometimes uses another ten-acre piece for the sheep. There are big tracts of farmland around them, and she would like to lease or buy the piece next door in the future.
- 00:37:52 They have two acres in annual vegetable and dye plant production each year. She focuses on a lot of Asian heritage vegetables, which is a newer development in the last two years. The remaining land is pasture for sheep. They use the sheep's meat and fiber. They also sell sheep to people who want them for their homesteads or to mow.
- 00:39:13 They currently have fifty-something sheep. Emily bred seventeen ewes, and this breed often has triplets. It can easily become too many sheep. They do a round of lamb in the winter and one in the spring/early summer.
- 00:40:01 They have a CSA that's about thirty weeks, and they sell at one farmers market in Seattle. During the winter, they sell vegetables through a distributor in Seattle, which simplifies things a lot. The yarn is sold through a CSA (three shipments a year to people all over the world) and an online store. In the winter, lamb is sold by the whole and half. People buy a whole lamb and get it processed to their specifications. They also sell some lambs to neighbors who sell meat to Halal customers. For holidays like Eid, the families come and pick out the sheep they want, and the whole family participates in the slaughter.
- 00:42:29 Emily still has the same breed of sheep she started with, and she even has some of the original members of the flock.
- 00:42:47 Growing up, Emily did some knitting. After her first year of apprenticing, she went back to that farm over the winter with another apprentice to help out, and the other apprentice was a big knitter. Emily picked it up again and started knitting on the ferry to the farm.
- She learned about the process of taking the wool from the sheep and making it into yarn as she went along. For natural dyeing, she also learned as she went along. She has very little experience with non-natural dyeing.
- 00:44:53 Sheep are fairly easy animals. Emily has Finn sheep, a pretty primitive, hearty breed. She has experienced all of the normal things that happen with sheep, and

says every time you have an issue, you learn from it. There are a few people Emily can call if something comes up, including the vet, who has only come out to the farm about three times in the last seven years or so.

From the fiber end, it's been a slower process to get the yarn milled, because there aren't many mills that will do a smaller batch of wool. For the last five years, the yarn has been milled in Washington. Before that, they sent the fiber to mills in Colorado, Wyoming, and Arizona.

They started by dying commercially available yarn milled in Wyoming. As a yarn consumer, she knew it was a different-looking product. It looked much more rustic. At that time, they couldn't get machine washable, domestically-milled yarn as hand dyers. She decided she wanted to lean into having a less processed product, but it wasn't very popular in the yarn world at that time. Despite people's desire for easy care and bright colors, they have always responded well to the yarn, because it was a big contrast to what was available. Now, it's the best time to have a rustic, naturally-dyed yarn line. The aesthetic is much more popular.

00:49:43 On the side, Emily and her partner have meat rabbits for personal consumption. Emily has thought about adding poultry for renovating pasture, but she doesn't love taking care of poultry. They are focusing on animals mostly for ecological purposes.

00:50:27 The sheep are slaughtered and butchered on the farm.

00:50:55 Because the Seattle area already had a lot of amazing vegetable farmers, Emily wanted to find a niche. It turns out growing eight types of bok choy was it. This past year, they grew the CSA a lot more because of COVID. There have always been people looking for organically grown Asian vegetables. Although there are a good number of Asian grocery stores, consumers don't know where the produce is from or what the growing practices are. Emily's customers were excited to find locally produced Asian vegetables.

00:53:10 They are primarily a CSA farm, and they sell the excess at the farmers market and through their other outlets. For the CSA, they use a software that allows people to set preferences, which helps Emily see what members want so that she can adjust her crop plan accordingly. For varieties, she has developed favorites over the years. She limits trying new varieties to fifteen or twenty percent of her overall crop plan.

00:54:36 In 2020, they had about seventy-five CSA members. They split the CSA between two seasons, so some people only join for summer, while others join for the summer and winter.

- 00:55:10 Emily's target customer is currently more affluent people that are able to spend thirty-five dollars per week on vegetables. They do an on-farm pick-up, but ninety percent of their products go into the city. She would love to cultivate more of a local community.
- 00:56:21 They are primarily a vegetable farm now. The yarn has shrunk to fifteen to twenty percent of their gross sales. People who are really interested in the farm are always interested in the natural dying. They also get people who like the integration of animals and crops. They grow a lot of unusual varieties, particularly of tomatoes, so they often get tomato-only customers.
- 00:58:20 Emily was lucky to be on a farm where the original farmer was Japanese American. They also have a large Hmong community in the area, many of whom are growing cut flowers. She has been very lucky to be in a place where you can see Asian representation, which is pretty rare.
- 00:59:50 Like a lot of nonwhite kids who grow up in majority white places, Emily tried not to think about her Asian identity when she was younger, which created some tension with her parents. She only started to think about it somewhat recently (in the last four to five years).
- 1:00:56 There is a Hmong family in the area who are flower farmers, and they've had some difficulties with people trespassing on their property. Emily is part of a group trying to help them with potential legal action. She knows they have that problem because they are not white, and because they don't speak much English. Situations like that make Emily think more about her identity, and about how that probably wouldn't happen to her because she has an expensive education and a white male partner. Often when people come to the farm, they talk to her partner first before coming to her.
- 1:02:34 Emily says she's used to people assuming her partner is the farmer, and that it's common for any woman to experience that. For some women who are in situations where they are the farmer and their partner has an off-farm job, their partner's income is helping to support the farm. Based on economics, Emily couldn't farm without her partner. She still lists him on their website, and the "we" is both of them. It feels better for her than saying "I."
- 1:04:03 When thinking about selling Asian vegetables, there are plenty of farmers that grow baby bok choy. However, Emily thinks it's different to buy those vegetables from someone who actually eats them.

Starting four or five years ago, there has been a lot more talk in the small farm community about the farmer versus the farmworker. The farmworker is still a farmer, and Emily wonders why we separate the two. In her area, farm crews are either all Hmong or all Hispanic.

- 1:06:13 Thinking about the current instance where they're trying to help the Hmong farmer with legal action, Emily thinks the family is more receptive to talking to her and an Asian American CSA member than they would be to working with others. It's still rare to make those connections.
- 1:07:38 At this point, Emily is sort of picky about what she eats. She still goes to Asian grocery stores, but she's less enthusiastic about buying vegetables with mysterious origins. She feels like this is her chance to eat some of the things she grew up eating. She has a larger appreciation for those things now. Based on responses from others, they are keen to do the same.
- 1:08:41 Emily sees about twenty Asian American farmers market customers on a regular basis.
- 1:09:11 The upcoming 2021 season is the fourth season at their current property.
- 1:09:33 Emily and her partner are living in a trailer on their property and building a house. They are about to build a barn, which she expects to be life changing. Now that they are more settled, her parents are more okay with everything. Emily and her partner also got married, which was a big deal. She feels like what she's doing is getting more legitimate every year. However, her parents still don't love it.
- 1:10:55 Emily's parents usually come once a year to visit. They still don't quite understand the appeal, but they're sort of resigned to it.
- 1:11:34 Occasionally, if her parents aren't just passing through, they're able to cook something and share some of the Asian vegetables she grows. Her mother has always been impressed with the quality of the vegetables Emily produces, but she's still amazed that people pay Emily a lot of money for it (more money than she would pay).
- 1:12:25 The first time Emily went to a farm conference, ninety-five percent of the people there were white, which wasn't that different from her whole life. It's gotten a little bit more diverse, especially in the past few years. The farm is very isolating, so having any sort of connections with people who understand your lifestyle is good.

- 1:13:54 Emily lists some takeaways from her past years of farming. She says the sooner you can invest in things, the better. It's not a good use of time to cobble things together that you'll have to fix every year.
- She wishes she had worked on another farm to learn different things. She has gotten more mechanically-minded, but she wishes she had learned how engines work a lot earlier. One of the biggest things is that Emily is not afraid of debt.
- 1:15:48 The biggest change Emily would like to make going forward is to live in a house. She also wants to figure out a way to have more consistent, year-round work, and to incentivize people to stay more than one year. One of the biggest difficulties is having to train new people every year. Right now, Emily doesn't take a salary. Every year, she invests everything back into the farm. She would like that to change in the future.
- 1:17:48 Emily talks about the changes she would like to see take place across the food system. She says many small farmers are struggling with the same things, like burnout. She suggests finding ways to work together to help ease the load, like finding someone to do admin work, having a couple of farms run a joint CSA together, and scaling up a cooperative model. It doesn't make sense for so many small farms to be struggling to do the same things while also lacking a high quality of life. Emily thinks rugged individualism is not the way forward.
- 1:20:02 Emily advises other people of color who are trying to get into farming to be aware that it's still a very white space. She feels like most parents are not thrilled with their child's decision to go into farming, so having the conviction to continue through a lot of things (lack of support, being poor, living in less comfortable situations) is important.
- Last year, she and her partner took their first vacation in seven years. You have to be okay with that. However, Emily says she has missed a lot of weddings, and people remember that. It's important to find a way to make more time for stuff like that. That's something she wishes she had the foresight to do.
- 1:22:41 End of interview