

Finding Roots: Asian American Farmers in Contemporary America

Laura Xiao

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Interview conducted by Katelyn Reuther

Laura Xiao farms in southern Vermont.

This was a remote interview conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Laura Xiao joined the interview from Newfane, Vermont, and Katie Reuther joined from Boston, Massachusetts.

Interview Log

00:00:00 Introductions

00:00:41 Laura describes her family's food culture when she was growing up. Both of her parents immigrated to the United States from Guangdong province, China, in their early twenties. They first lived in Nebraska, where they had a strong community of white Midwestern families and started incorporating stereotypical Midwestern American dishes into their diets.

They raised Laura and her sister with a mix of southern Chinese (Cantonese) food and western food (from the Midwest). Laura's dad enjoyed barbecuing, so they also had slabs of meat at the same time. Laura recalls meals during the week alternating between Chinese food and Midwestern American food. When she was younger, it was important that they all ate together at the table, especially dinners.

Food is a major part of how Laura looks back on her childhood. She learned to enjoy eating as an experience, and she jokes about being very food motivated now. Her sister, on the other hand, doesn't care about the experience of eating. Starting at a young age, Laura has always anticipated her next meal.

00:05:05 Laura says they had preferences for both Chinese food and western/American food at different times. Her dad loves the Souplantation buffet, so he would suggest going out to eat there or at a Cantonese restaurant nearby. Chinese food and American food were the main options. They didn't typically branch out into other cuisines.

00:06:40 When Laura initially started farming, it was more about how small-scale, organic farming has the potential to impact larger economic and social patterns than about

a personal sense of her food culture. Laura liked food, cooking, and working outdoors.

00:08:08 Laura talks about how she got involved with agriculture and farming. When she graduated from college, she knew she wanted a short-term physical labor job. She never felt like she belonged in very academic spaces, and by the end of college, she was questioning what value a heady, intellectual space had for her. She wanted to get back to the idea of being someone who likes to be outside and enjoys physicality, so she joined a nonprofit backcountry trail crew for the summer. By the end of the season, she was fed up with the white outdoor bro culture of trail work. She still wanted to do something outdoors, but wanted to be motivated by something that felt more meaningful.

For her, that meant trying to create more resilient, sustainable, small, local-based economies that revolve around working closely with and on land. Farming felt like an obvious transition. That winter, she started looking for farm apprenticeships and internships. She ended up interning at Mountain Bounty Farm in the foothills of northern California.

She went into the internship thinking it would just be for one season. After majoring in environmental policy, Laura felt that it would be disingenuous to do policy work without having done work in that field. She believes there is a disconnect between policy makers and people impacted by policy, and there needs to be more policy making from people doing that work. If she were to pursue a career in policy, she felt obligated to have some farm experience first. Since then, she has dropped the interest in transitioning to policy and is focusing more on what it looks like to be a serious farmer.

00:12:20 While attending Middlebury College in Vermont, Laura lived in Weybridge House, the College's local food house. That experience was one of the best decisions she made about how to spend her time and where to put her energy. It helped Laura understand the realities of local food and what it means when people say they want to buy locally.

Buying locally is a commitment, and it involves both sacrifices and privileges. Even if you have the privilege of making decisions about how you buy your food, you still have to make sacrifices (money, time, the work to source food, limitations to diet depending on season). Laura did not eat a one-hundred percent all-local diet, but she did get a taste for what that might look like, how difficult it is, and how limited consumers are in their choices by what the market looks like.

Laura notes that it's important not to place the burden on consumer choice, but to step back and recognize that not everyone is even in the position to eat in a certain

way because of what's available. One person's buying power is not going to create a diverse marketplace. It's not any single family's responsibility to do that. A lot of the language around consumer choice and food puts the responsibility on individual people, a strategy under capitalism to prevent change from happening and to hide the fact that change is not happening at a systemic level. It scapegoats the individuals who don't have the power to do that.

- 00:15:57 As a freshman in college, Laura went on a service learning trip to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where she and ten other students delved into the complex world of natural gas fracking. They stayed in a house, bought groceries, and cooked together. That felt really good to Laura, who had been living in a dorm and going to the dining hall for meals. Two of the students in the group lived at Weybridge House, and she recalls talking to them about their experiences at Weybridge and how they compared to those during the service trip.
- 00:18:30 Laura started living in Weybridge House as soon as she could based on the College's housing rules. She lived there for a total of four semesters, plus one month over the summer while she was a preservation intern.
- 00:19:10 Living in Weybridge pushed Laura to pursue food and agriculture afterwards. At the beginning, she wanted to be there for the personal benefit (living in a house on the outskirts of campus, having access to a kitchen, being able to cook and make her own cup of coffee). Making her own cup of coffee was one of many daily experiences that built up. Living in Weybridge and being a preservation intern made Laura think more about scale and the local economy that goes beyond the individual person-level.
- 00:20:30 Laura describes her time as a preservation intern at Weybridge House. As part of the yearly budget, Weybridge pays students to preserve food in the summer and early fall when the Vermont growing season is at its peak. They primarily focus on canning, freezing, and sometimes dehydrating. Her work involved calling farms, ordering food, and then processing it after it arrived. Laura again notes the sacrifices and privileges people need to make and have in order to eat in a certain way.
- Preserving food is a whole skill set that a lot of people take for granted. With the pandemic, it's actually very difficult to get gardening and food preservation supplies. Ultimately, it's a good thing that people are now interested in valuing those skills. During the internship, Laura had a lot of learning moments around how to preserve food. She didn't grow up gardening, so she didn't know anything about preserving food. She says canning is a whole science that looks a lot easier than it is. Even today when she works on farms, it's important for Laura to do a lot of canning to preserve food. She can trace her commitment to canning to that

summer, and to feeling like she wants to get better and keep experimenting with new recipes.

00:23:38 Only after interning at the farm in California did Laura get any sense of growing food. At Weybridge, she wasn't interested in farming, but in what farming means to society as whole. She didn't ever think she would decide to farm.

00:24:20 Laura ended up choosing the farm internship in California for two main reasons: first, she missed being closer to her family. Second, when her Vermont trail job ended in October, it wasn't an option for her to start farming at that time of year if she stayed in Vermont. Because of the timing of the growing seasons, it was better for her to return to California to start farming.

00:25:13 Laura explains how she chose to intern at Mountain Bounty Farm in California. She knew she wanted to be on a farm that had a crew, and that she wanted to work with other young people. She was afraid of being the one outsider on the American nuclear family farm, which was what her perception of a farm in the United States was at that time. She also wanted to be on a farm that emphasized the educational piece.

Mountain Bounty wanted everyone to be learning, and to learn by doing. This is in comparison to looking for a farm internship program through a university extension where you learn the skills, but not in a production farm setting with the same bottom line.

00:27:13 Laura describes her experience at Mountain Bounty Farm as a "mixed experience." She assumed a lot of college-educated people without farming backgrounds who started farming in their twenties and thirties were all interested in farming as a way of subverting capitalism. Much to her disappointment, that was not the case. Laura views farming as a practice with the potential to push back against late-stage capitalism if done in a certain way. Coming to terms with the fact that not everyone thinks capitalism is a problem was difficult for Laura.

Laura was the only person of color on the crew, and one of only a handful of people of color in the small farming community where Mountain Bounty was located. Despite California's size and reputation for ethnic and racial diversity, Laura found herself in one of the whitest counties in the state. It was difficult for her to be there and feel so alone a lot of the time. She also struggled with one of the other interns who was having problems of his own at the farm.

Laura spent the first half of the season thinking about leaving, and then shifted to being very determined not to leave. She knew she wanted to stay and see her

commitment through, but she also thought about what it would look like if she left.

She was excited about having a culture of young, active farmers, but then felt pressured to be part of such a big group of people. In addition, the whole town community was familiar with the farm, and Laura didn't like how visible it was (and thus how visible she was as part of it).

00:32:03 Laura worked at Mountain Bounty for one season. She started working there on her twenty-third birthday, and she stayed until Thanksgiving.

00:33:21 Laura still values the fact that her first farm experience was on a financially viable production farm. She always had to be working fast and looking for ways to be more efficient. She notes that it's exhausting always having to look for ways for the farm to get better and faster, and she has deep respect for people that are able to do that and not feel burned out.

Laura says the potential for burnout is very high and normalized in farming. There need to be more conversations about how people can push themselves and others to be more efficient, but at the same time, it's really hard to be in an environment where you're never good enough, fast enough, etcetera. How do we find a balance? She still thinks a lot about these questions today, and believes that a farm needs to be at a certain pace and efficiency to stay viable.

00:36:01 Although she originally intended on leaving after the season finished, Laura met someone and ended up staying in the area to continue spending time with him. To keep doing outdoor work, Laura looked for farm work at different farms. At the end of her second season farming in Nevada City, she felt like she wanted to continue with farming into the future. She says the end of year two was a turning point for her short- to medium-term commitment to farming.

00:37:20 Laura started farming in April of 2018, and by the fall of 2019, it felt more like a salient choice to her.

00:37:44 By the end of 2019, Laura says farming felt good, and she wanted to keep being challenged in certain ways. She and her partner decided to leave California and move to Washington to try farming there. Moving to Walla Walla, Washington, felt like a situation that would be equally good for both of them.

00:38:38 Laura's experience in Walla Walla, Washington, was difficult. Interpersonal differences with the two owners made going to work every day very stressful. Laura wanted a farm job where she had more managerial responsibilities, so part of the stress was also the management component of the job. Along with a

management role comes more potential for disagreement with other managers. When Laura's opinions and decisions came into conflict with those of the owners, they had difficulty communicating that in a way where everyone felt good.

Fundamentally, Laura believes people should stick up for each other, especially when you recognize that there's a power dynamic. It was important for her as someone who had named positional power to uplift people at the farm that didn't have that power. She felt the owners discouraged her from doing that.

00:42:06 Interactions with and comments from the owners of the farm make Laura think her experiences were related to her race. She believes she was cast as being too outspoken and too disagreeable, and if she was a white woman, it wouldn't have been interpreted in that way.

One of the owners once called her "hard to read," which was a time for her to question whether the person said it because she's a woman, a person of color, or a woman of color. Those two identities are so interlinked that you can't separate why it was said from one reason or the other. Laura is skeptical the farm owner would say that to a man, or even a white woman on the crew. A final debrief at the end of the season put the rest of the season in perspective for Laura.

00:45:41 Laura discusses race in her work. There are so many little moments in Laura's life that they are now normalized. She can never experience farming while not being an Asian American woman, so it makes her question everything. Whiteness and capitalism make those who are not in the dominant position of power question themselves. She has experienced a lot of microaggressions and annoying, offensive comments from white people.

Laura has been mistaken for being a different Asian woman in the area. She also notes that there are many offensive seed and vegetable variety names in the world of small-scale, organic farming. There have been instances where her white co-workers refer to "Asian" eggplant and "normal" eggplant, or "Thai" basil and "normal" basil.

She also wonders what people are saying based on her identity as a farmer, and what they are saying based on seeing her in a rural, white area. Although it's not all related to her being in a farming space, it's all interlinked because farming is the reason she has ended up in these rural, white spaces.

00:50:02 When Laura first started farming, she assumed everyone farms because they're trying to find ways to push back against late-stage industrial capitalism. After

realizing that's not the case, she decided she wanted to work with and for people who are clearly skeptical, if not anti-capitalist.

She describes the class versus race debate, where some believe we must focus on class in order to eliminate hierarchy and oppression, while others believe we need to focus on race-based marginalization in order to eliminate other forms of oppression (including class hierarchy). Now, the next iteration of Laura thinking about farming is finding ways to work with people who want to farm for the same reasons she does: to use farming as a tool to remake local economies and make them more equitable, including on race-based lines of oppression and hierarchy. She's realizing that it's important for people to have a strong anti-racist analysis in their work, not just an anti-capitalist one.

How can you be a financially viable farm business and do so in a way that's actively anti-capitalist? A lot of people, including white farmers, struggle with this. Laura notes that asking, "How can you be an anti-racist farmer in your day-to-day work and how you run your business?" is a big question. It's easier if you have a broader definition of what anti-racist work means, and don't build into it the elimination of all forms of market economies.

00:53:43 Laura wants there to be more farms where the workers and owners have a strong commitment to actively fighting the inevitable racism that shows up in their day-to-day lives. Everyone is complicit in white supremacy, especially white people. Laura says she herself upholds white supremacy on a daily basis. She is trying to be around people who understand how that's possible and that that's work they also need to be doing. She thinks there are a lot of new techniques yet to be invented for how people can run economically viable farm businesses that do not exploit people, land, water, air, or soil.

Laura likes focusing on the power of imagination. One of her favorite writers, Adrienne Maree Brown, writes about the power of imagination to bring forth better, more evolved ways of living. Laura wants there to be more farms where people believe in that, in trying new things, and in the power of things they don't yet know or haven't tried, thought, or imagined before.

00:56:48 Laura is starting to think about whether she wants to start her own farm. She doesn't quite know what she's looking for, but she knows it's hard to find. One way to settle into something might be to create the thing she wants the most. For the next few years, Laura is trying to commit intensively to thinking about whether she wants to start her own farm business. If so, she wants to do research and understand how whatever she creates can fit into existing structures and support the work that people are already doing. Instead of establishing something completely new, she wants to take into account what more marginalized folks are

already doing so that she can use her resources and privileges to support that work.

00:58:35 Laura has struggled to find strong community around being an Asian American farmer. She recognizes that she doesn't have a strong community around being Asian American in the first place. Only since she started farming has Laura begun to own her Asian American identity. Being in a very white space has made her lean into that more.

Laura has had important support from the Asian American Farmers Alliance in California. Last year, while she was outside of California and enduring the pandemic, it felt good for her to get the Alliance's emails. Getting those emails was a reminder that "we exist." There are a lot more Asian diaspora farmers than people think, and Laura is interested in learning more about them and about the history of agriculture, especially in California. That history has been purposefully erased to disconnect people from knowing where their food comes from, but also to hide how immigrants have always been the backbone labor of this country. Laura notes how closely linked the Gold Rush is to Chinese labor in California, and how that relates to her life as a Chinese-descended person deciding to live in Gold Rush country.

1:03:56 Laura's second year farming, she worked with a Japanese diaspora farmer in California. He grew up on an agricultural commune in Japan and came to the United States at different times under different visas. He ended up going to school in northern California and graduated from the University of California Davis with a bachelor's degree in economics. After graduating, he continued to navigate how to farm in the United States, especially with his unique background.

Laura knew him during her first season working at Mountain Bounty Farm, and then she worked with him during her second season farming in the area. They talked about living in that area and being Asian farmers. He was an important connection for Laura during that time.

1:06:40 Laura wants to work with more Asian diaspora farmers, but she says that it is tricky because of who lives where. Her interest in working with other Asian American farmers, and being around other Asian people in general, is sometimes in conflict with her desire to live in rural areas. She knows there are many rural places with a lot of people of color, but they are purposefully hidden. Despite there being more Asian-owned farms around cities like Seattle and San Francisco, Laura says she doesn't do well living within close proximity to a big city.

In return for choosing to live at a certain density, she must sacrifice being around Asian American communities or other communities of color with whom she shares experiences.

1:09:24

Laura talks about how the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and major mobilizations around police murders of Black people impacted her and her work. The pandemic significantly impacted stress levels (for her and everyone else) at her job last year. The farm owners were stressed about transitioning their farm marketing outlets away from high-end restaurants and in-person farmers markets. As the pack shed manager, this shift affected Laura the most. It felt like her responsibilities were unclear from the beginning. Everyone's heightened stress levels made communication among crew members much more difficult. In addition, because the crew was unable to have any pre-pandemic bonding time, it was hard for them to really know each other without the added pandemic stress.

When George Floyd was murdered and people across the country responded, they had conversations on the farm about race that didn't go well. As a farm, they never established clear communication norms or protocols about anything, particularly anything very emotionally charged. It was difficult for Laura to be the only person of color amidst all white people who were coming to terms with their own whiteness and white privilege. Their conversations are not the same ones Laura needs to be having as someone who is not white, but still benefits from white supremacy. It was frustrating for Laura to feel that there was no awareness around how those conversations were impacting and harming her.

Laura and her partner, who is white, tried to suggest boundaries around white-people-only conversations, but they were not interpreted as clear boundaries by others. Laura noted how important it is in the future to enlist the help of her white, male partner to establish clear boundaries around what is and isn't appropriate to be processing around people of color. Laura feels that her responses to people who were processing their whiteness were used against her.

1:15:42

Laura describes her dream food system. She wants everyone to be able to work outside; to breathe fresh air; to be near land, water, and plants; to grow things and be compensated well for it. Farming shouldn't be something you access. It should be something you do if you want to. It shouldn't be a privilege, or used as a tool to exploit people. Laura emphasizes that her experience farming has been in the very privileged white, college-educated, organic, small-scale farm movement. She is not talking about the dominant food system of the United States, where mostly Latinx people are exploited. The organic system only exists because of the conventional one. People should also be able to grow culturally relevant food that they want to eat, grown in ways that do not degrade land or the planet.

1:19:33 Laura gives advice to other people of color who are trying to get into farming. She says: just know that you're not alone, even if it feels like it. Have faith that there is a community, or that by you continuing to farm, you are building the possibility of community. The first wave of farmers of color is necessary to build a larger community. After hearing from other farmers of color who have had much more isolating experiences, Laura feels lucky to be coming into farming a bit later.

The internet has been important for Laura. Despite being anti-social media, she made an Instagram account during her second year of farming and saw how it connects a lot of small-scale farmers. The world of small-scale, organic farming is very isolating, even for white people, and Instagram is a tool for farmers to connect and learn technical information. Within the small-scale, organic farm Instagram culture, there are pockets of farmers of color. Instagram helps Laura see visually what's out there and what she could try herself.

1:23:43 Laura notes that Instagram serves a dual purpose as a platform for not just farmer-to-farmer connection, but also farmer-to-customer communication. Farmers can share a fake sense of what their world is like.

1:24:52 End of interview