

Finding Roots: Asian American Farmers in Contemporary America

Leslie Wisner

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Interview conducted by Katelyn Reuther

Leslie Wisner is the founder and owner of Radical Family Farms in Sebastopol, California.

This was a remote interview conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leslie Wisner joined the interview from Sebastopol, California, and Katie Reuther joined from Boston, Massachusetts.

Interview Log

00:00:00 Introductions

00:00:29 Leslie describes her family's food culture when she was growing up. She is a child of immigrants on both sides. Her mother, from Taiwan, came over when she was twenty-four years old. Her father came to the U.S. from Germany when he was around ten. Leslie grew up eating regular American food. Her mom used the cookbook, *Pei Mei's Chinese Cook Book, Volume I*, as a guide for cooking some of her ancestral foods when Leslie was growing up. However, because they were living in the Midwest, their access to Chinese ingredients was limited until they moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There, Leslie's mom had access to an Asian plaza, a market, a dim sum place, and a community inaccessible to her in Minnesota. Leslie grew up eating the mix of foods her mom made, including American food, Chinese food, and her dad's favorite European dishes.

When Leslie was around fifteen or sixteen years old, she went to live with her German/Polish Jewish grandparents in Indianapolis, Indiana. That experience had a significant impact on how she sees the importance of having access to your cultural foods and ingredients and keeping recipes and foods alive within your family. Through assimilation, both sides of Leslie's family lost so much coming to this country.

00:03:03 When she was younger, Leslie had no idea about the cultural aspects of the food she was eating, or the connection to her heritage that it was providing. She grew up a very confused person. She didn't start putting things together until, in her early twenties, she went to live with her Chinese grandparents in Taiwan for three months. She had never met them and wanted to learn more about her Taiwanese

side. Although they didn't share a common language and couldn't speak to each other, they took care of her through food.

00:03:55 Living with her grandparents in Taiwan gave Leslie a window into a whole other side of her and her mother's life that she didn't fully understand or have access to. She wanted to understand her family's history during the civil war and Japanese occupation of China, how they ended up in Taiwan, and how her mother came to the U.S. Leslie's mother was the first in her family to come to the U.S. and acted as the anchor to bring over her siblings. She sacrificed a great deal, including her own heritage, by marrying Leslie's father to be able to bring over her siblings.

00:05:15 Leslie discusses how living with each set of grandparents has shaped her. First and foremost, she loves old people because of her time with them. When she saw the attacks on the elderly in San Francisco's Chinatown areas, she was heartbroken. Due to her Chinese cultural values and her experiences living with both sides of grandparents, she has a great respect for elders. She says this doesn't seem like a shared American value.

When Leslie was around sixteen, she went to live with her German/Polish Jewish grandparents in Indianapolis. It was a life-saving event for her. Leslie is one of five kids, and because her parents were working a lot to try and make ends meet, they weren't able to be there all the time. She fell through the cracks, and she needed that one-on-one attention from her grandparents in Indiana to be able to thrive.

Leslie attributes much of who she is and her values to her time living with that set of grandparents. Sitting around the table at dinner, her grandparents would talk to her about their history before and during World War II. Hearing about their stories had a significant impact on Leslie, who believes in learning your family history so mistakes won't be repeated in the future. All of their struggles have shaped who she is as a person today.

Leslie's grandmother was always bemoaning that there were no good bakeries in their area. Every time she would go to a major metropolitan area, she would look for Polish and German bakeries, marzipan, and German grocery stores. She has Hungarian, Polish, and German influence, and she tried to keep a lot of that alive for herself and Leslie's grandfather through her cooking. When she passed away this year, Leslie made sure to get her Polish, German, and Hungarian cookbooks and note down which recipes were important to her so she could cook them herself. That was very significant for Leslie and brought some awareness about the process of immigration to this country and the loss of cultural heritage as viewed from her grandparents' side.

She also experienced this with her mother growing up. As a young child, Leslie's family would get together with her mother's siblings and their families after they came to the U.S. They would have big family gatherings periodically and order Kentucky Fried Chicken. Her mom and siblings would speak Chinese, but the kids would all speak English.

When she went to live with her Chinese grandparents in Taiwan, that was a whole other side of her family history that she didn't know about. It was the Sino-Japanese War side. Living with her grandparents in Indianapolis, she learned about the European World War II, the Holocaust, and their effects on her German grandfather and her displaced, half-Jewish grandmother.

In Taiwan, and then in Cupertino where Leslie did a full interview with them, she learned about her grandparents' experiences during the Sino-Japanese War. She learned about running from the Japanese, the bombing, how the Japanese lost, the civil war between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong, and Chiang Kai-shek's loss and escape to Taiwan. Then there was everything that happened in Taiwan after Kai-shek's arrival on the island, including the White Terror and martial law. Leslie's grandfather was in Kai-shek's army.

00:12:12 When Leslie went to Taiwan, she would go with her grandmother every day to the market to buy fresh meat and produce. She recalls a time at the market when her grandmother selected a chicken, and the vendor slit its throat before throwing it into a barrel where it bled out and died. Every morning, they would walk to a cook on the street who only made *rou geng mi fen*. They would get soup in a bag and have it for breakfast back at their house. *Rou geng* is a popular pork stew in Taiwan.

Because they couldn't communicate, Leslie's grandmother signed her up for Mandarin lessons. She went by herself by bus to the Mandarin Daily News for classes. On the way there, they would stop at the *bao* (bun) vendor, and Leslie would get pork buns for breakfast.

She could only get a thirty-day visa, so she flew to Thailand twice to visit her aunt, who married a Thai man in Bangkok. When she was in Taiwan with her grandparents, it was during the Lunar New Year. At that time, she had no idea what was happening, because she couldn't speak the language. She learned most of her Mandarin from her Thai uncle, who spoke broken Mandarin and broken English. When he was in Taiwan, he helped explain what was going on, but after he went back to Thailand, she was lost. That was her first experience with Chinese New Year. She didn't fully understand any of the things that were happening, and she remained a removed observer of something that should've been her cultural heritage.

Until she started the farm in 2019 and met a community of Asian Americans who are all on the same mission of reclaiming their culture through produce and heritage cooking, Leslie had no idea how significant Lunar New Year was. She thinks about how her mom came to the U.S. at twenty-four and gave it all up. Lunar New Year is a time to be reunited with family and to cook your foods, but she doesn't have any memory of doing that as a child.

Knowing what she knows now, having to give all of that up is a huge crime. She has a great deal of empathy for her mom. In Taiwan, her mom was surrounded by a large family, friends, and a big community, but when she came here alone and met and married Leslie's dad, she was very isolated.

In addition, this country is very independent, and you have to be the individual. This is a completely different mindset than where Leslie's mom came from as a young adult. Leslie isn't sure her mom fully understood that she would be a minority in this country when she came. In addition, an interracial marriage in the early 1970s wasn't that common, especially in the Midwest.

00:19:43 Living with her German/Polish grandparents influenced Leslie's decision to get into farming. She majored in dietetics at Indiana University, but it wasn't really what she wanted. At that time, she couldn't vocalize or identify her connection with food, but she knew it was more of a sociological or anthropological connection. Where she ended up studying, it was all science and nutrition-based.

She was privileged enough to attend an outdoor canoeing camp throughout high school, so she knew the importance of food and nourishment and saw how it brings people together. Around that time, she also worked at a farm in Alaska. When she thought of farmers, she thought of the small family farm with the white guys who look like Jesus. She worked on the farm for one summer, but she didn't really connect with it and couldn't see a viable career path. She thinks her inability to connect with it was due in large part to the fact that she never saw anyone like her farming.

00:22:22 Leslie's last experience with summer canoeing during high school was in the Northwest Territories. After observing how food can bring people together, she wanted to have that experience again. She loved the Northwest Territories and found the farming job in Alaska through ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas).

The one class Leslie took in Indiana that spoke to her was called The Biology of Food, taught by Marti Crouch. Dr. Crouch talked about the horrific, giant agricultural systems in this country and their environmental impacts. Leslie

specifically remembers learning about dairy farming, Monsanto, and Roundup. Dr. Crouch told Leslie about ATTRA and got her a list of internships and jobs around the country. Leslie picked the one in Alaska. She says she thinks she got the job because she's used to being around children. She spent most of her time there taking care of and hanging out with the owners' two small children.

00:25:06 The farm in Alaska was a sustainable, ten-acre farm. They grew typical Eurocentric vegetables and specialized in basil. This had a big influence on Leslie, and she now grows many different varieties of basil on her farm. They also grew flowers mainly for the pollinators and beneficial insects for their IPM (Integrated Pest Management) program. That led Leslie to grow flowers on her own farm.

00:26:33 Leslie says she probably didn't have any impression of farming after her experience in Alaska, because she forgot she even did it. She didn't feel like she could farm. When the farmer told her how much money it was to buy their land, she thought she could never do it.

00:27:12 When Leslie went to Taiwan, she had dropped out of school because she was so disgusted with the dietetic and nutrition science program. No one knew she had dropped out of school when she went, but luckily her grandparents let her stay with them after they found out.

She became more interested in photography, design, and commercial design, and started shooting photographs of her grandparents and her time in Taiwan. She loaded up on graphic design, commercial design, and photography courses to graduate from school with a General Studies degree. She continued on to get a Media Arts and Sciences master's degree. Her capstone centered around her Chinese grandparents' history, specifically focusing on their time living in China during the Japanese invasion and occupation. To make her capstone documentary, she stayed with her uncle and grandparents in Cupertino for a few months.

From there, she went with her media arts and science experience to work for digital media and advertising companies. She then had her own digital advertising and media company before having her kids. Like farming, digital media production is a lifestyle. Leslie was doing a lot of 3D work, spending eleven or twelve hours in front of a computer. After having her kids, she reflected on her experience in Alaska and how they raised their kids. She wanted to try and create that for her kids, and she wanted them to know where their food comes from. Leslie didn't know until she worked on that farm. It gave her a huge respect for where food comes from, and she wanted to make sure her kids had that.

After having her kids, she stopped working to take care of them. She then moved from Indiana to Cleveland to California, all the while looking for farmland to raise the kids and have a family. She ended up having to get a divorce, and because she was married to a woman living in Ohio, she had to go to a different state to get the divorce. On her way to get a divorce in Washington, she stopped in California and ended up staying due to family and social connections.

00:33:06 Farming in Sonoma County in California is extremely expensive, and it's not something she could personally afford. She is very privileged to have the support of her family, who helped her purchase a place to farm and provided stable housing for her kids. She doesn't take that lightly, so she tries to make the most of the privileges she does have to work with a community of queer Asian Americans.

It took Leslie two years of actively looking to find land in Sonoma County. She was finally able to secure a place in 2018, and that fall, they cover cropped the whole acre and a quarter to acre and a half that's being farmed. They went to Taiwan, and when they came back, the cover crop was lush. Leslie didn't know anything about *dou miao* (pea shoots) being such a significant Chinese crop, but she somehow made the connection and started selling it on social media.

00:35:51 It was a long process to get the farm going (over five years). In that time, Leslie started reading books and subscribing to magazines. In Sonoma County, she did the Master Gardener course, in addition to taking sustainable agriculture classes at the junior college there. She did everything she could to fill herself with as much knowledge as possible. She looked into the University of California Santa Cruz's apprenticeship program, but she couldn't do it because she had kids. Working on another farm with children also wasn't an option. Working on the farm in Alaska for one season, reading books, and gaining educational knowledge was all she could do to prepare for her own farm.

00:37:42 It was scary for Leslie starting her own farm without very much practical experience. However, she says she was so ignorant that her ignorance helped her. Knowing what she knows now going into her third season, she would be too scared to start a farm without the experience. Leslie relied heavily on the methods she found in a Master Gardener book, especially the no-till permanent bed system. She also saw a lot of no-till permanent beds in Taiwan, and she took a few workshops at the no-till farm Singing Frogs Farm.

Usually when you farm, you have customers lined up. Leslie didn't have any customers. She just planted everything she wanted to plant. At the time, she asked her German/Polish side and her Chinese side what crops and vegetables they wished they had access to when they came to this country. On her Chinese side,

her cousin compiled a list and sent it to her, which turned into her seeding list. Her Polish/German grandmother gave her a list of everything she wanted and wished she had access to, and Leslie planted that. She did it with no customers in mind.

Thankfully, it all started with the pea shoots, and they led to the direction of the farm. They're mainly growing Asian and Chinese vegetables, including many Southeast Asian herb varieties. Leslie also planted currants, European gooseberries, and green sorrel for her grandmother. Their CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) members will get random crops that are not Asian or Chinese in any way. They try to make it clear that it's not solely Asian vegetables, but a mixed Asian vegetable farm. They also grow kale, beets, and zucchini, because she knows they will yield well. A lot of the Asian vegetables are heirloom, so Leslie tries to buy some hybrids for their yield and disease resistance.

00:42:02 Leslie gets most of her seeds from Kitazawa Seed Company in Oakland, California. She also gets a lot of seeds from Johnny's to try some of their Asian crops, as well as from the Seed Savers Exchange.

00:42:55 Leslie says the book, *The Chinese Kitchen Garden*, has been very helpful for learning about Asian vegetables. The writer talks about her father's garden and how he cultivates it. He uses traditional Chinese methods to create deep, permanent beds. The author also discusses how to grow, what seasons to grow in, and how to prepare the vegetables for cooking.

Leslie learns through trial and error. She applies the knowledge she gained from her experience in Alaska and the classes she took to her own farm. A lot of the varieties, like cucumber and eggplant, are just Asian varieties, so specialized knowledge is not necessarily required.

She grows things in five or six different places, so if things are taken out in one area, she also has them somewhere else. By planting them in different locations, she's also testing to see how they grow in one place or another. Their fields look very different than if you're tractor farming. They don't have super long rows of one crop. In one row, they might have two or three different crops, in addition to flowers.

00:45:19 Going in, Leslie wanted to do a CSA. She liked the diversification at Singing Frogs Farm and at the farm she worked on in Alaska. They have a CSA, restaurant accounts, wholesale, and sell at the farmers market. That's what Leslie did in 2019, but in 2020, a lot of the restaurants dropped off due to the pandemic.

For Leslie, the farmers market is hard. Many of the crops she grows are very personal, and not everyone knows the story behind the farm. People say “it’s too expensive,” “it’s gross,” or they just walk away. In addition, Leslie’s farm isn’t certified organic, and they haven’t built up the credibility at the market they were going to. In 2019, they sold at a chef’s market, where the chefs would place their orders beforehand and pick up the produce at the market. People walking by the table wouldn’t know what anything was, and then they would see Leslie, who doesn’t present as Asian. If they do the farmers market, Leslie would have to hire someone to do it for them.

In 2020, they shifted to ninety-five percent CSA. She likes that, because she wants to feed families and as many people as they possibly can. A lot of their customers are immigrants and children of immigrants who are on the same journey she is. They are learning about their cultural heritage through food and cooking, and they want access to sustainably grown, non-GMO (genetically-modified organism), no-spray, chemical-free Asian produce.

00:48:39 The exchanges Leslie has with customers are always exchanges of food. When she delivers CSA boxes at drop points, she’s always given food. Leslie doesn’t cook a lot, but she gets to eat what everyone else is cooking with the produce she grows.

One of her customers and friends, Henry, is also Taiwanese. His mother was always talking about this flat, Taiwanese cabbage, and when Leslie saw it in Taiwan, she decided to grow it. She found the seed through Kitazawa, and it grew into a tender, sweet cabbage that’s used in *baos* or for quick Taiwanese kimchi or pickles.

Henry came to Leslie’s booth at the farmers market in Marin to buy these flat cabbages that had so much significance to his family and his mother. He has taught Leslie a lot about Taiwanese food culture. His family has been in Taiwan for generations, whereas Leslie’s family came over in 1949. There is a lot of struggling to understand the political dynamics there with everything that has happened.

Leslie didn’t fully understand that a lot of the Chinese vegetables in the United States are called by their Cantonese names. It’s been an eye-opening experience. She has been trying to hone in on the Mandarin and call the vegetables by their Mandarin names.

Usually around this time (February), they’re in Taiwan. In 2020, they were in Taiwan just before the pandemic hit. After her first year of farming in 2019, she actually knew what the vegetables were at the night market and on the streets. She

could call them by their names in Mandarin, and people could understand her. It's had a huge influence on the development of her Chinese side.

It's done the same for her kids. They've tried *ku gua* (bitter melon). Her kids are also Korean, so she grows quite a few Korean crops to have a better understanding of that part of them. They grow perilla from Kristyn Leach at Namu Farm, as well as her gold cucumbers.

The whole farm is Leslie putting her identity first and foremost, and trying to learn more about the things they lost within just one generation. With the migration and fleeing from mainland China to Taiwan, there was the loss of a lot of culture and foods with her grandparents and mom growing up. Her grandparents always wanted to go back to mainland China, but they never could. Her Chinese grandmother was always bemoaning how she had no home or no place.

00:56:14 Leslie is tall and white-presenting, so she has some "privilege" there. She doesn't see it as a privilege, though, because she's sort of in-between, belonging to nobody. Throughout her farming journey, there haven't been a lot of challenges that she attributes to her racial or ethnic identity, which has been surprising for her. Being very clear about their values for social, racial, and queer justice has repelled the people that would create problems for them and attracted people with similar shared values. Leslie feels very lucky for that.

00:57:33 Sarah Deragon is Leslie's partner in the farm and in life. She's a professional photographer, and she is very much a city girl. She had no idea what it meant when Leslie said she wanted to farm and be a farmer. Sarah came into their lives about four years ago and is the step-parent to their kids.

When they first started in 2019, Sarah was working five or six days a week in the city doing photography. It was really because of Sarah's presence in the city that they were able to create customer connections and do those deliveries. Before a photo shoot, Sarah would deliver *dou miao* to some of their first customers. Without that, Leslie says she doesn't think the farm would be where it is now. It's hard logistically to be away from the farm for that long to make deliveries.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, all of Sarah's photography business stopped. It wasn't good for their family income, Sarah's income, or her identity as a person, but it did allow her to work on the farm more. Farming with your partner is hard. It's an adjustment. Economically, you make a higher salary as an individual professional than you do farming at a small scale like they are. They're lucky that they were able to be profitable in their second year. The first year they were not. A lot of money went into infrastructure development at the beginning.

Farming with a partner is a blessing, but it can also be very hard. It's very stressful, and they're always together. Sarah has been Leslie's number one support with the farm, and she has helped especially with the deliveries.

1:01:28 As a farmer now, the Asian American community (immigrants or children of immigrants) is critical for Leslie. They feel the same sense of loss and are clinging to their identity and heritage to fight the assimilative forces of America and white supremacy. The queer community has also been important in Leslie's farming journey. She notes that there are many non-Asian people who support the farm, because they like its social justice stance.

1:02:38 Leslie discusses some of the biggest takeaways from her first few years of farming. First, farming is very expensive. You have to be in a privileged position to even farm, and she doesn't think it should be that way. She says it's not accidental. It's by design. It's about land access and inequity. She also started farming when she was forty-two years old. Because her body is ruined after only two years, she emphasizes getting into farming when you're young. Lastly, she says that something has to be done for land access and equity, especially so farmers of color and Black and Indigenous farmers can have access to land.

1:04:36 Last year, they had quite a large crew of people working on the farm. Farming in the way that she farms requires a lot of people and human power. She loved the people that were working on their farm. It created a dynamic community of mostly queer people of color, and she hopes to do that for the 2021 season. One of her goals as a business owner and farmer is to keep the crew employed throughout the year. Generally in farming, people are hired seasonally and then they're gone. She sees value in building long-term relationships with her crew and employees and giving them opportunities for growth. In the future, Leslie would like to explore different models for structuring the farm, such as adding people to the LLC (limited liability company) or creating a worker-owned co-op.

She says you can't farm alone. Leslie thought she could do the whole farm by herself in 2019. Luckily, Sarah was there to help out in her time off, and Leslie was able to hire someone periodically at the end of the season. Having to hire other people is expensive. You have to pay them (hopefully) more than minimum wage.

One of the biggest challenges Leslie faces is the expectation that all Asian or Chinese vegetables should be cheap. Leslie's produce is not cheap. They can't be cheap. They wouldn't be able to survive in this economic landscape farming the way they do without chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides to increase their yields. They have lost many customers who expect them to be cheap.

1:08:09 To be anti-racist, you have to be constantly evaluating yourself. Leslie is always thinking about that, evaluating herself, and checking herself. The racial uprisings that took place in the wake of George Floyd's death last summer didn't create any major changes for them at the farm. They've had those values on the farm from the beginning and those lived values as people. This has allowed them to attract the crew and customers they want surrounding the farm.

1:09:50 On a broader scale across the food system, something has to be done about the inequities of land access so that we can have more farmers of color out there. On her farm, Leslie would like to explore doing some kind of worker-owned cooperative or amend the LLC to add owners or additional managers. In terms of food access, she wants to expand their direct-to-home delivery capabilities, especially for elderly, disabled, or immunocompromised CSA members.

Leslie is looking into the possibility of them becoming fiscally sponsored so they can get larger donations for a food access fund. She's referencing the model they have at Rock Steady Farm in New York. Rock Steady has a fiscal sponsor, and they are able to get grants and large donations to feed a community of people who might not otherwise have equitable access to food. Leslie applied for a grant to support their direct-to-home delivery, and they got it last week. They'll be partnering with community organizations within Oakland Chinatown to locate seniors in need. Some of the seniors are already getting access to fresh produce that's delivered to their homes, but it's not culturally relevant. Leslie wants to be able to provide culturally relevant food to their elders.

1:13:46 Leslie advises other people of color who are trying to get into farming to farm with a group of people that share similar values. Don't think that you can do it all by yourself. Leslie has a good business, project management, and marketing background, but not everyone has that. You need to have a diversified team so that you're not managing everything at once. Starting a farm needs to be a community-based initiative. If you're able to acquire or take over a farm where the infrastructure is already in place, that would be the best. Starting something from scratch requires too much money. Leslie thinks farming should be valued more, but as things are, you don't make very much money.

1:15:41 End of interview