

Finding Roots: Asian American Farmers in Contemporary America

Kristyn Leach

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Interview conducted by Katelyn Reuther

Kristyn Leach is the owner of Namu Farm in Winters, California.

This was a remote interview conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kristyn Leach joined the interview from Winters, California, and Katie Reuther joined from Boston, Massachusetts.

Interview Log

- 00:00:00 Introductions
- 00:00:32 Growing up, Kristyn says her family didn't necessarily have a deliberate culture around food. She can remember both of her parents cooking, and they always had a lot of meals cooked at home. When she was younger, her dad worked for a catering company at night. She remembers staying up until he got home from work and eating food together.
- Kristyn has a lot of food memories, because she really loved food as a kid. She always enjoyed eating. She says her parents did their best to make sure they were eating some form of vegetables and fruits. It was a combination of what they thought was healthy coupled with being thrifty. They didn't grow up with a lot of sugar and things like that around the house. They spent a lot of time at her grandparents' house, and her grandmother cooked a lot for them. She was fortunate to have a lot of meals where they ate together.
- 00:02:24 Kristyn's grandma let her and her uncle put in a big garden, and she remembers putting in a lot of time there and being fascinated with it. She also liked cooking food and learning about it. She's the oldest of her siblings, and sometimes if her parents weren't home, she would be tasked with putting something together. She was interested in food and agriculture growing up, but they didn't have a ton of access to larger-scale growing. Her parents told her that she liked spending time at her grandma's in the garden and in the kitchen.
- 00:03:37 Kristyn isn't sure how much those early memories and experiences with food impacted her decision to get into farming. A lot of Kristyn's favorite memories were being outdoors in nature. She grew up on Long Island, and most of her

mom's siblings and Kristyn's grandparents ended up moving to upstate New York when she was in middle school. She has a lot of fond memories of going up there, learning to forage, and learning about different wild edible plants. It was always her comfort zone. She was pretty shy as a kid, and she liked spending a lot of time outdoors because it helped her feel grounded. She had a lot of positive associations and ease being outside and around plants. Her parents joke around and say that when Kristyn was a kid, she said she wanted to be a farmer. However, it wasn't necessarily clear growing up that things were going to go that way.

00:05:15 As an adolescent, Kristyn spent a lot of time getting involved with community gardens around New York. The 1990s was a very contentious time, but there were many vibrant community garden and art spaces. She was drawn to that through being into some of those young, anarchist spaces and being into punk rock, art, and things like that. She was introduced to different parts of that culture, and she was meeting adults who had a much stronger belief and analysis around the importance of land, growing your own food, and what that meant in the bigger scheme.

The anti-globalization movement of the 1990s also informed a lot of Kristyn's thinking about what peasants were struggling with globally. She learned through that history and framework and saw Korean peasants organizing within that. Kristyn felt privately very proud of anything that was from Korea when she was younger, including every article of clothing or product in her house that said it was made in Korea. Learning about the intersection of agrarian and politicized movements and seeing Korea's strong voice within that peaked Kristyn's interest and instilled in her how integral land access and the ability to feed yourself and your community are. Everything else we think of in terms of our collective freedom rests on our ability to feed ourselves and our communities. From that more intellectual place, Kristyn started thinking about and wanting to learn to grow food.

00:08:19 At that age, Kristyn was very curious about her Korean identity, but it was also hard to look at in certain ways. There was one other Korean adoptee in the town where she grew up, and she felt uncomfortable with the expectation that they would be put together. She didn't have a ton of ways to connect to Korean community, let alone her own sense of Korean identity. She also just shied away from it in an external way. She didn't want it being brought up or to feel different in her surroundings. It was mostly something she processed internally. She could find that in the comfort of reading and learning about different things or finding news or other information regarding Korea.

When Kristyn was five or six, the Olympics were in Korea, and that felt like a big deal. She says she has gotten to see Korea transform from a military dictatorship to rise into its current economic situation. Although she was definitely interested in her identity, it wasn't something she was seeking in terms of connection with anyone else. She mostly tried to process it for herself and make sense of how many different feelings there were.

00:10:40 There were a lot of Asian Americans in the area where Kristyn was. She doesn't know how emotionally intelligent she was as an adolescent. She thinks she repressed a lot of feelings. It felt safe for her to engage with things from a politicized and more intellectual point of view, especially things she felt critical of and the different ways people experienced neoliberalism in the time she was learning about all of this.

She had a lot of strong role models, and she feels lucky to have grown up when she did in those spaces. Growing up, there was an integral squatted art space she was part of, and one of the leaders there was an Asian American woman who was doing a lot of prison abolition work. At that time, Kristyn was learning many different things and becoming aware of the types of things that were driving people to do good work in the world. Everything at that time was blowing her mind. It was powerful to see Asian Americans organizing cross-culturally and organizing for bigger social movement causes.

00:12:49 Kristyn's father was a police officer all through her growing up, and pretty much every male figure she had in her life was related to the police, fire, or military fields. Becoming a teenage anarchist didn't elicit the best dinnertime conversation, but overall, Kristyn still had a lot of respect for the experiences of her family. Even though they definitely clashed, her parents were also too busy to really care or limit what she was doing. She was left to her own devices a lot of times and could spend her time doing what she wanted.

It was tense, but looking back, it was pretty run-of-the-mill in terms of teenage rebellion and how that felt to her parents. For Kristyn, some of the tension was being in these spaces, coming from that background, and still having some amount of perspective of the lives of people who were in law enforcement and the military. As much as it was contentious, it also forced her to think about things with some complexity. She couldn't get too swept up in the pure rhetoric of it.

00:15:05 Kristyn moved to Washington state when she was nineteen or so. She lived in Olympia, and it's still probably the most incredible and beautiful place she has ever lived. The Olympic Peninsula is beautiful, and there is a ton of small-scale farming happening there. A lot of people Kristyn met were working on those farms or grew up in more rural areas, and through that, she got to learn by

working on some small farms. She also had some close friends who lived on larger pieces of land, and she was able to experiment with growing things and learn from her peers.

She lived there for seven years, and toward the end of that time, she started to take it a little bit more seriously. She realized that there had been a constant enjoyment of the actual work, and she liked physical labor and being outside. A lot of her time there was spent learning how to do things, and then toward the end, she felt like it was something that really stuck with her and that she was curious about. She thought that if she liked the actual labor part of it, she might enjoy learning about the science of it.

In the last few years, she tried to learn whatever she could. There's a college in Olympia that has a sustainable agriculture program, and Kristyn worked with the manager of the student farm at another farm. She asked him what books she should read and about the things she should focus on and learn. Through the co-op extension and public universities, Kristyn started going to free field days and any other free educational opportunity she could. Even if she didn't understand what they were talking about, she would take notes and then go to the library to research it on her own. She started going down that rabbit hole, and all of it was endlessly fascinating.

She learned about soil and plant biology and botany, and instead of just being told how to do something, she started thinking about how things actually work. Once you start learning about the mechanisms that govern life on this planet, there's never going to be an end point for how much you can learn and take in. Once that door was open and Kristyn got really curious about it, her passion grew and she realized that it was what she wanted to be doing with her time.

00:19:26 When Kristyn went to Washington, she didn't go with the intention of farming. When she graduated from high school, she went to a technical trade school in New York and got her associate's degree in commercial illustration. However, she quickly realized that wasn't what she wanted to do. She had a friend moving to Olympia, and she felt ready for something different. Looking back, she can't really explain what drew her to the place, other than curiosity, wanting to be on the West Coast, and having the means to move. It feels fortuitous now, because her time there was quite impactful, and she feels very shaped by it. She says she grew up there in a way, and it was fundamental to a lot of how she sees things now.

00:21:27 Kristyn found the farms she worked on through different people she knew, and because there are a lot of farms there, there's a lot of opportunity to have odd jobs or volunteer at different places. She had a friend who started her own farm while

Kristyn was there, so she got to see that process. She worked at a restaurant and music venue in downtown Olympia, and the owners had a small farm where she spent a lot of time. A lot of it wasn't super deliberate on her part. She didn't have a lot of clear direction. She was just fortunate enough to be in this community and was presented with these opportunities.

When Kristyn moved to California, she had a clear picture in her head of what she wanted to learn and what skill sets she wanted to fill in. She still wasn't thinking she would necessarily have her own farm, but she understood more about what she felt interested in. Moving provided her with a big opportunity to be more intentional. Her time in the Northwest was a time of taking in new information and new experiences and being far from home for the first time. She felt more responsive to things that presented themselves and a lot less like she was controlling the rudder of the ship. She was guided more by curiosity and openness.

00:23:41 Kristyn recalls how she thought about her Korean adoptee identity while living in Washington. She remembers being there and hearing things like "person of color" for the first time. She wasn't quite sure what to make of it. At that time, coming to terms with things and processing her own identity was still pretty nascent. In addition to Tacoma and Seattle, there was a lot of Korean community in the town adjacent to Olympia.

Where she grew up in New York, there was a lot of Korean American community as well, but it wasn't something she ventured out to see. In Washington, she felt a little bit more curious. She got loosely involved with a leftist Korean organization in Seattle, but since she didn't live up there, she wasn't a regular member. However, she did make a point to try and connect with that group or go to their different functions.

Kristyn also became curious about different Korean foods and Korean crops. It was there that she started thinking her agricultural world and her love of food could be a means to explore her identity. Although it was still largely internal processing and learning on her own, it was racked with a lot of vulnerability. It was anxiety-ridden just to go to the Korean market and feel very scared about the types of interactions she would have there. Generally in those spaces, someone would read her as being Korean and speak to her in Korean. She still can't speak the language well, and she couldn't speak it at all then. Those moments, even when you get to interact with the culture, can sometimes feel very negative.

00:27:06 Kristyn felt somewhat emotionally repressed for a lot of time and then gradually felt more and more comfortable with exploring her identity. Finding pockets of Korean Americans who understood that the adoptee experience was a really

quintessential part of the Korean American experience and contextualized it was important for Kristyn to feel safer and to feel welcomed. Having organizations or communities that actually held that idea and had it built into them validated Kristyn's experience and ran counter to her earlier experiences of not quite knowing how she fit into her view of Korean American culture.

It was important for her to have supportive people and be curious. She realized there were so many plants that could bring her back to thinking about her grandma and the experiences she had at her house. Kristyn says there are things that become gateways for her to perpetually think of someone in some place in time that become enshrined in her memory. What if the dial gets turned back to look at longer expanses of histories or ways that aren't a direct memory of hers but a broader cultural memory of her people and the place she was born?

Kristyn recognized the nostalgia that she had eating different things and what it would remind her of. Thinking that there might be some other more epigenetic imprint of different foods, she was curious about tasting them and wondered if it would not only stir something in her, but also let her connect with other Korean people. She had those skill sets and knew how to grow things, so she started growing her own Korean crops.

It felt like a safety blanket, because she could bring these plants with her to some sort of Korean American function or event as an offering. It helped convey something about her and how, even if she doesn't know what it means to be Korean, she does want to think about what it means to keep their traditions and culture alive and to care for their collective heritage. It gave her some assurance and confidence, because she understood how she could contribute to that. It took it out of this esoteric realm of identity and put it into something practical. She knew how to do some sort of work that would be meaningful.

00:31:27 In Washington, Kristyn knew someone Chinese American who was involved with growing, but she wasn't necessarily growing anything culturally specific. There was also another Korean adoptee who worked at the same place, and they started connecting about things like that.

When Kristyn moved to California, she first got involved with a farm that was related to a food justice organization in West Oakland. From there, she worked for a tomato breeder and then a commercial lettuce farm. None of that was really related to Asian American culture. She read David Masumoto's book *Epitaph for a Peach* and was very enamored with that. It was also very impactful to find and read through the Kitazawa Seed Company catalog. They started carrying Korean crops more recently in 2009 or 2010, but Kristyn remembers looking through the

catalog and keeping track of everything that said it was Korean. It gave her a shortcut to see what the significant Korean crops were.

There were things shaping Kristyn's perspective and letting her better understand the rich history of Asian American farmers and the different immigrant communities that have contributed to agriculture in this country, but it was from afar. There was no direct mentor around that.

00:34:22 Kristyn had lived in Washington for a while and she loved it, but her partner ended up getting into graduate school in California. Although Kristyn had applied to a farm manager job in Tennessee, it was easier for her to move to California and find work than for her partner to move to rural eastern Tennessee.

There were plenty of things that Kristyn was curious about in California. Her love of different movement histories made her excited to live in the home of the Black Panthers and the United Farm Workers. She was also captivated by the food justice work happening around the Bay Area at that time. She says she didn't expect to be so settled in California. She thought of it as the next best move and where she could continue to learn and build, but that was in 2009.

00:36:17 Kristyn talks about what led her to think about starting her own farm. She was growing things as a side hustle, because she wanted to grow and understand different crops, such as *kkaennip* and *chamoe*. She grew in a couple of different places, including her back yard and the side spaces at the farms she worked on. The Bay was the first place she lived that she saw a bigger food culture and conversations among young Asian American cooks coming up in leadership, starting their own projects, and wanting to incorporate their own heritage and new iterations of what California food is. It was the first time Kristyn saw this rich tapestry of Asian American people centering food as part of the conversation. That was when she first started thinking about having her own farm.

She remembered having a conversation with someone she worked with in Washington about trying to sell things more direct to restaurants. There wasn't a huge culture of that there. In a lot of places, it was direct-to-consumer farmers markets and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture). A lot of the restaurants were buying from bigger distributors. In the Bay, it blew her mind how many restaurants were shopping at the farmers market or buying direct and how farmers had rich relationships with different chefs and cooks.

Kristyn worked in the kitchen at a restaurant called Camino. The chef there, Russ, was a chef at Chez Panisse, and he was their produce buyer. Kristyn moved in the fall and couldn't find full-time farm work, so she ended up getting a job there in

the kitchen. Russ is half-Korean, which she didn't know at the time. She says she learned so much from his cooking and approach to food.

Originally, before she was thinking about growing Korean crops, she tried to experiment with growing things she knew chefs would want to use or had less access to. She met amazing farmers through Russ, and she saw a lot of mentors doing things around heirlooms and biodiversity. That collided with her budding personal interest and side hustle of growing different Korean crops. It felt like the opportunity was present, because there were Asian American cooks she was meeting who were going on to do their own things. She had the assurance that if she grew it, she would have the market for it. It gave her confidence that having her own farm could be viable from a market perspective. It was because of the rich culture and conversation happening and still evolving in the Bay Area.

00:40:55 Kristyn knew she wanted to grow Korean crops, because she knew how enamored she was becoming with the plants. There are some crops that are so specifically linked with different cultures and communities, and there's something beautiful about plant domestication in general. It's a beautiful side of something that can become a devious thing at times. Kristyn also thinks about these long periods of history and the repeated selections made in regards to preference, flavor, and cosmetics. She likes how it offers her a glimpse into what Korean people have historically thought of as delicious or useful. Those preferences result in distinct cultivars of different crops like melons, perilla, or peppers. She knew she wanted to focus on that, because it's personally enriching, and it made sense in terms of building that community and feeling a desire to contribute to the growing understanding of Korean food in the U.S.

Through Russ, Kristyn got to know a lot of food industry people, and there were a lot of Korean Americans doing great things in the kitchen. He ended up introducing her to the brothers that own Namu Restaurant, and that's still the partnership that informs her farm.

00:43:10 Kristyn talks about the process of starting her own farming business. She was working in Bolinas (California) at a long-standing farm growing mostly lettuce and salad greens. There, she started growing mostly perilla and unsuccessfully tried growing Korean melons. Someone mentioned that there were these guys who had a restaurant doing a take on California cuisine from a Korean American perspective. Kristyn had to work the farmers market every weekend, and she remembers bringing a small box of perilla with her for several weeks. She knew that the brothers from the restaurant shopped at the market she worked at. She brought a spritzer to keep the perilla fresh and had it in the back of the truck, but she never worked up the nerve to approach them.

Finally one day when she was driving down to the Bay, she went to their restaurant, met one of the brothers, and dropped it off. They immediately connected because of that love of perilla. As soon as he opened the box and smelled what it was, it clicked. Kristyn says seeing him so excited about it was the best feeling for her. She started bringing them stuff each week.

When she was going to move back to the Bay Area, she was returning to work for a farmer that she worked for before. In exchange for managing his farm, she was going to be able to use some space on it to start her own small side business. She had made connections with a handful of chefs around the Bay, and she thought about focusing on two or three crops and starting to build a market for them. Around that time, Namu wanted to contract her to grow Korean chili peppers. She agreed to do that, and then the opportunity came up to sublease a whole acre from her boss. Once that offer was on the table, Namu stepped in and agreed to pay for the cost of securing that lease plus associated costs. Kristyn could then grow all sorts of Korean crops for the restaurant.

Having that opportunity through her old boss and having Namu invest in her enabled her to start up. They ended up putting about two thousand dollars into the project, and Kristyn grew food through that first season as a pilot to see what they thought. In the fall of that season, they said they wanted to enter into an agreement where Kristyn would grow some things exclusively for them, but they would have a partnership where the farm would grow all of these things in conversation with the owners and chefs at the restaurant. It evolved pretty quickly. Kristyn was going to take it a lot slower, experiment, and understand what crops she could grow well. Because the opportunity to start bigger came and was met with that financial investment, she tried to hit the ground running.

00:48:59 This year (2021) is their tenth year in business.

00:49:13 The operation has evolved quite a bit since they first started. When Kristyn looks at old pictures of the farm, she can see how happy she is in all of them. Now, she's much more critical. In those first couple years, Kristyn says she was deliriously happy she was getting this opportunity, growing these things, and just having her own farm. Now, she's much more familiar with the crops, and in some ways, feels like she's doing a worse job than ever. Some of that is because they moved farms three years ago and encountered a lot of problems with restarting the farm. They left her well-established farm where all of the systems were in place and the soil was built up over seven years and had to start from square one. Kristyn's familiarity with the plants has increased, and she's so much more acutely attuned to any little bit of stress. She says she's way more stressed out now than she was before, but it's from having a more nuanced understanding and a lot more experience behind her. In the first few years, there was a level of

naiveté and exhaustion. Now, she has to navigate managing her own stress and critical eye.

When Kristyn started growing, she was working for the person she was subleasing the land from. She wasn't getting paid from Namu, because she wanted to pay back their investment before they talked about any money things. Kristyn worked for the tomato farm from four-thirty in the morning to about two in the afternoon, and then she would do her farm with whatever daylight was left. That farmer ended up being pretty terrible to work for. They were getting paid in cash at the end of each day, and he stopped paying them at some point. Even now, he owes Kristyn about seven thousand dollars of wages from that year.

Kristyn was in a precarious position, because she was on his land as a subtenant, and the owner didn't know she was there. Not having any savings when she started all of this, there were times when she was just trying to keep her head above water. She was trying to piece together other work, but he was leveraging the fact that she had so much planted and was committed to her project. She still ended up having to work for him even though he stopped paying her. He told her that if she stopped working for him, it would cancel their land agreement, and he could plow down her whole field with no consequences.

Being so strapped and being physically exhausted that first year was hard. Kristyn worked for him five days, did her farm those five afternoons a week, worked for another farmer on the weekends doing markets, and worked Saturday through Monday nights on the line at Camino. Even though she was working a lot every single day, she probably still made under twenty-four thousand dollars for that whole year. It was a mess, but when she looks back on it, she can still see a feeling of being unfazed and having a lot of conviction.

She worked multiple jobs for the first five years of the farm. She worked for the Korean mushroom farmer on the weekends and sometimes on random weekdays, filled in at the restaurant when she could, and worked a catering job through the winter. It's only in the last few years that she scaled up, added seed production, and was able to balance multiple jobs within her farm project. In the past few years, she has been able to do the farm full-time.

00:55:01 Kristyn talks about the seed production work they're doing on the farm now. Some of the seeds she started with were bought from Kitazawa, and some came from Korea. The Lee brothers from Namu have an aunt with a farm in Korea, and she sent a lot of seeds for things they wanted at the restaurant.

That first year of farming, she was pretty isolated and learned a lot from the folks at Namu. Part of the agreement with them was to set aside some produce for

donation or for something else that would benefit the Korean American community. They started donating produce to a Korean American domestic violence program. Through bringing produce there, Kristyn ended up meeting a lot more Korean American people. They hosted a big harvest festival on the farm at the end of their first year. They wanted to have a harvest celebration with traditional Korean drumming, because it's rooted in agricultural tradition. Kristyn and a friend both ended up getting in touch with the same Korean drumming group through two different friends, and they came out to the farm.

Once the bigger Korean community found the farm, it seemed very much like they felt a claim to it. It came to be their own farm, and people began sharing seeds with Kristyn. In her area, there weren't any other commercial farms explicitly growing Korean varieties. A lot of people had seeds that were in their family or shared with them by different family members. It quickly became a hub where people channeled a lot of their own seed resources.

Out of sheer necessity, Kristyn had to figure out how to incorporate seed saving onto the farm. This included thinking about how to keep everything well isolated and practical things about seed saving. From the beginning, it was also important to keep seed as a collective resource. Kristyn doesn't have the same nostalgia or sentimentality that a lot of other people have with these crops. From a scientific perspective, she realized every little decision she makes and every piece of implicit bias she has will inevitably shape these plant genetics, even in a short period of time. It made her feel accountable to having Korean American community involved at the farm.

When Kristyn was figuring out what plants to save seeds from, she wanted to know what would safeguard the crop at a genetic level so that at the end of a decade of growing, it would still bring about that nostalgia when brought to Korean Americans. She wondered what keeps something tethered to those traditions while still adapting crops to the dry, intense conditions of the arid West Coast. She was thinking about it from a climate chaos perspective and equipping these crops with the means to survive harsher conditions. Alongside that, she knew she wanted to always keep certain traits intact so that it would still be maintained as a Korean variety.

Kristyn felt the opportunity and the burden of the trust that's placed in you when someone gives you a seed and tells you a story associated with it. That became very fundamental to the way her farm operated and something she always had to account for in her planning and crop planning, including how fast she could turn ground over and replant things. She had to account for the whole life cycle of every crop there so she would continue to have access to those seeds and be able to replenish them to their original providers.

To Kristyn's benefit, she had a good amount of growing and farm work experience at that point. Even if she wasn't super familiar with having grown that specific crop or saving the seeds from it, she knew the fundamentals of the plant family, the plant's biology, and how to grow good quality seed. Community input would help her shape the selection index she was looking at.

Kristyn went to Korea in 2014 to meet with the preservationists and people involved in traditional, natural farming. After that, she didn't anticipate having so many people share seeds with her, but in her travels there, people ended up giving her a ton of seeds to grow out here. It was either for Korean Americans who felt like their access to the fresh produce they wanted was limited, or for a lot of Korean farmers who felt the decline of food sovereignty for the peninsula and how it related to seed preservation.

In all of these cases, whenever seed was being shared with her, there was some urgency in the imperative to grow it and continue to perpetuate those varieties. Kristyn's experience up to that point was mostly as a fresh market producer. She had been really interested in seed saving for a long time. She volunteered at a seed saving garden in Olympia, but none of the bigger farms she worked at saved their own seeds. Economically, it's not worthwhile in a lot of cases. On Kristyn's own farm, it felt like that became the cornerstone of how things operated.

1:04:16 Kristyn says there isn't a clear breakdown between the fresh market crops and those used for seed production. A lot of things have a dual purpose. About ten to twenty percent of the farm at any given time is dedicated to crops used explicitly for seed increase. No one is eating it or trying it. It's just to boost the seed population to a point where they could grow it for their regular production and have people eat it.

They grow a number of heirloom soy on the farm, and it's just in the past three years that they've eaten it. They've grown it since 2015, and for the first several years, they started with ten beans of each variety. For the first couple of years, they were saving every single one for replanting and having to trust that they were delicious. Kristyn devoted a large amount of time and space to this crop, even though she had no idea what it tasted like.

For other things, they're able to do both. Some stuff, like peppers, were the first crop that she grew for commercial seed sales. Kitazawa realized there was a lot of interest in Korean chili peppers, and Kristyn was doing trials for them. She says chili pepper is worthy of its own interview, because in Korea, it was the gateway to a lot of multinational investment in the agricultural sector.

Kristyn brought an heirloom variety back from the region that's famous for gochujang production. It's a unique landrace stewarded by peasants there. She wanted to share that story and for there to be an open-pollinated variety. Farmers in Korea growing that pepper say it's hard, because they're contending with newer high-yielding, chemical-intensive pepper varieties. At this point, consumers are more familiar with that. Kristyn didn't want to replicate that trend here for Korean Americans, so they started selling those heirlooms through Kitazawa.

Pepper is a great crop, because you grow it, dry the fresh red pepper, and harvest the seed. Kristyn can still use those as chili flakes or something else, so you're not necessarily sacrificing anything in order to successfully grow and replicate the seed. For other things, like perilla, it takes several months for the seed to mature after they stop harvesting the leaf. On a production farm, you're trying to account for that real estate and the time you leave that plant alone. They're not necessarily able to monetize that space through some sort of product.

For a lot of fresh market farmers, it's harder to incorporate seed production. For example, you're harvesting a head of lettuce in forty-five to sixty days. It's high value, and there's constant demand for it. The margins for something like lettuce are great. To let that seed mature triples the time that crop is in your field, and with lettuce seed, it's a whole other process to harvest it. When you think about the pack of seed and how much that costs you in land, water, and time, a lot of people think it doesn't make sense economically. However, if you adapt varieties to your farming methods and are able to grow things with less inputs, you end up saving a lot of money.

There's not a clear breakdown for Kristyn of what portion of the farm is devoted to seed, because they let all of their crops go to seed. Whether or not they sell the crop, they want all of the crops to be gaining knowledge year-to-year of how to survive in a drier and hotter climate. Everything on the farm goes through its full life cycle. Some of that has no bearing on how it affects the fresh market side, and some of it does. It is a juggling act to figure out how to budget for all of that, including what volume to grow of different things so that a long-season seed crop is subsidized by other things with better margins.

1:11:19 Kristyn talks about her trip to Korea. Before she moved to California, Kristyn had explored the idea of wanting to go to Korea and connect with the Korean Women Peasants Association (KWPA). At different times, she had had conversations with KWPA and Korea's chapter of *La Via Campesina*. The trip never came to fruition for one reason or another. In 2014, Kristyn had an acquaintance (Steve) who was living in Korea. The mushroom farmer Kristyn worked for pushed them to connect and for Kristyn to go to Korea while Steve lived there. Kristyn couldn't believe that this person she knew just through being a customer at the farmers

market was so willing to take her on this journey. He was curious, too, because he had lived there for some time as a child. As a chef, he was spending an extended period of time there to learn traditional sauce making. Kristyn already knew she wanted to go to certain places, learn from farmers, and learn about seed preservation and traditional farming methods. Fortunately, it aligned with things that interested Steve.

Steve was Kristyn's local fixer. Kristyn had various contacts and people she had arranged to stay with and visit, and with his knowledge of Korea, Steve created an itinerary. He peppered the trip with other things that were interesting to him from a food perspective. Kristyn, Steve, and a friend of Kristyn's from the U.S. spent three weeks traveling through Korea, staying on farms that Kristyn had been in contact with, and visiting different places along the way. Kristyn says it's all to Steve's credit that he took on a relative stranger and her friend and spent every waking moment of those three weeks with them.

Kristyn remembers every day being so full. She was learning a lot of information, but it was also emotionally overwhelming. On one hand, it was a fascinating work trip where she was digesting so much content, meeting with so many interesting people, and hearing many interesting stories. At the same time, it was her first time going back to Korea since she was a baby and was adopted. It was a confluence of all of these really intense things happening. Only four or five days into the trip, she recalls feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. She didn't know how she was going to make it through the rest of the trip with so much to process.

A lot of the focus was on learning from the folks doing seed preservation. The whole experience was one of feeling more Korean than she ever had and also so un-Korean. The starkness of feeling her Americanness and what that means to people in Korea was blatant, especially going to places like Jeju Island to meet with a farmers association at the forefront of trying to prevent the building of a U.S. naval base there. All of this was part of the Pacific pivot and many decades of fortifying different parts of East Asia in the scheme of U.S. militarism. Kristyn met the head of the farming association when she was on tour here speaking about peasant organizing against the naval base. She and Kristyn really connected about being farmers, so she vouched for them.

However, Kristyn says it didn't matter there that she's Korean American, or that she was born in Korea. To them, Kristyn was American, and her country was destroying their landscape and livelihood. The dust from the construction of the naval base was coating their tangerines and destroying the coral reefs along the shoreline of the island. It's making them a pawn in this big, global imperial

scheme, and it's going to subject their neighborhood to the impact of what it means to have U.S. soldiers deployed there.

Kristyn felt like she could walk around Korea and be in the countryside, and she looked like your average uncle farmer. She very much fit in. She had asked a friend if gender stuff would be a little bit weird. She thought she might be misread a lot. Her friend told her that it would be weird, but what would be weirder is how tan she is and how much she looks like a peasant. That's class stuff, and that would be the bigger issue.

It was an interesting experience of walking around and feeling like that is how she was read. She looked like a country bumpkin buying a six-pack of beer or a coffee at a corner store. For the first time ever, Kristyn felt very integrated and that she didn't stand out. She also didn't feel vigilant in the way she does in the U.S. about how she's being read. At the same time, when there was more depth to interactions, she felt like her experience was not that of a Korean. It was so distinctly American. Koreans don't necessarily even care if it's Korean American. It's just American, especially when they are communities impacted by U.S. foreign policy.

It was the most incredible and most draining experience Kristyn had ever had. A lot of the seed preservationists she met were fascinated by the fact that, as a Korean American, she really wanted to learn about native crops and old varieties. A lot of the things that have been legitimized by the West are the modernized version of Korea. Kristyn's curiosity was interesting for them. She got into some interesting conversations with seed preservationists about who is interested in heirlooms within Korea.

She says there is definitely a larger push from young, urban folks wanting to return to rural areas as they recognize this conversation about food and food sovereignty. A lot of the seed people she talked to were trying to hold the tension of relatively inexperienced, idealistic urban-based folks wanting to take up that mantle and more experienced rural folks, peasants, and small-scale farmers having to band together to make that viable. Economically, heirlooms don't have the novelty they do in the U.S.

In some ways, earning people's trust was a big part of that trip. Getting to work on people's farms was Kristyn's comfort zone, and it was a way for them to see that she actually knew what she was doing. So much of Kristyn's gratitude is for having found this work and for it being the way for her to connect to things. It ended up being the shared language that cut through all of those other divisions and helped bond her with people. Seeing her as a farmer surfaced as the most important part and allowed them to connect across all of these other things.

On the rice farm she stayed at, she was threshing soy beans, working the ground with a basic hoe to plant cover crops, and returning dried perilla to the fields. Doing all of those things was the first time she could feel herself able to dig deeply and feel very grounded. She was in the comfort of plants that she was super familiar with, even if she wasn't familiar with everything else happening around her. For other farmers to see that familiarity and ease and that she could do the work and had done it before made them feel more ease with her.

At one agricultural research station, they clearly only trusted Kristyn because they touched her hands and felt that she had done a significant amount of manual labor in her life. At first glance and talking to her, Kristyn could see the skepticism in their eyes. After four grown men touched her hands at once, there was a complete tone shift. They wanted to go to the seed vault, talk about different things, walk through the fields. It was remarkable to have that experience.

Kristyn stayed at a hostel in Seoul that's explicitly for adoptees. She went to rural areas and stayed for days at a time, but she always reconvened at this hostel called KoRoot. She met all different people there as she came in and out, and every person there was doing some form of a birth family search. They would talk over meals about where they were at with their process. Kristyn says hearing everyone's stories was so intensely vulnerable, and then when it was her turn, she revealed that she wasn't looking for her birth family at all, but instead was collecting seeds and talking to farmers.

People thought that was the weirdest thing ever, but Kristyn says she was doing exactly what they were doing, just in the way that made sense to her. She recognized that she probably wasn't going to do that traditional birth family search, but she was searching in the exact same way. In some ways, it has given her more permission to hold the parts that are hard or that she's processing as an adoptee. She also feels she can mesh herself within an experience of being Korean, being born in Korea, or being Korean in her lineage.

Having all of this about adoption still in conversation while she was in Korea, she felt lucky she wasn't trying to wade through murky bureaucracy and opaque information. She was talking to a bunch of farmers and trying to figure out how to smuggle a bunch of seeds back into her country.

1:27:18

Kristyn says there's so much advice to give to farmers, but there's also so much advice that needs to be given to so many to impact the fate of farmers. People who own land, the vast majority of whom are white, need to know something about what it means for farmers to thrive. Consumers need to know what conditions will help support BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) farmers so they're able to have their own businesses.

From a mentoring perspective, there are a lot of practical things to talk about and information to share on how to run a farm business. There are plenty of times when Kristyn thinks it would be easier to find a good, well-established farm and go back to being someone else's farm manager, but the community connections are what make that impossible. There's a relevance to why it feels worthwhile to be a small business person, which is a very different thing than just getting to be a farmer. If you have that sense of relevance and importance and reasons for why you think you need to do it, then everything else will fall into place. So many of the BIPOC farmers Kristyn knows who want to have their own farms are motivated by wanting to feed the people that are important to them. They want to see our different stories reflected in the bigger story of agriculture.

Kristyn says it's hard to give advice, because she feels very blessed in a certain way. Even just hearing herself talk about different things in this interview, she knows she has had incredibly good fortune. She has happened into beautiful communities where she has gotten to learn a lot. There's always been some wind at her back. Although it's not like she's worry-free, she has had incredibly good fortune with people and with things being driven from the heart. She's not sure she can just advise others to surround themselves with especially good people. In particular, these are people that will support your farm beyond just the things they take from being fed by it.

Kristyn doesn't know that there's any sort of advice to give, because she doesn't feel like she conjured all of this or that it's due to her own devices. In a lot of ways, she fell into good favor. As much as is possible, think about how farming shapes your accountability to the land and the communities that live there. If you think about farming as a series of relationships and how that shapes how you operate in the world, then all of the toil and challenges will be minimized.

Farming is always stressful. It's stressful every single day. However, you'll constantly be aware of the beauty that's present around you; you'll be intellectually stimulated; you'll always have things to learn; you'll feel grounded in a bigger narrative of purpose and place. As a member of an ecosystem, you gain an understanding that it is comprised of millions of dynamic interactions that grow and amplify and find different ways of relating to each other. The humility that being a farmer prompts is something that feels personally substantive, and it's the most spiritually grounding thing to feel your own smallness within all of this. As much as is possible, foster each one's own curiosity and appreciation for how we get to have some role in it.

1:34:03 Although Kristyn is connected to older Korean community in her area and some have farming history backgrounds, she isn't connected to some of the older

Korean farming community. Farmers and non-farmers alike can relate to the differences in experiences between first-generation immigrants and second-generation, adoptees, and people holding a dual experience in the U.S. In some ways, there's an existential angst in a lot of the stories that surround her farm about identity and heritage. She doesn't know how older generations find that when they were driven by very different reasons to grow Korean crops or have farming careers in this country.

The experience in the movie *Minari* is not Kristyn's experience. She has unique experiences with the people she does know who have farmed, and it's been mostly supportive. There might be people that roll their eyes, don't relate to it, or are perplexed that the conversation is ripe now compared to when they were trying to have farms in the 1980s and 1990s.

With the mushroom farmer Kristyn worked for, Kristyn could see both mentalities. She seemed both bemused and entertained that someone like Kristyn has the opportunities she does, but she was also appreciative. That farmer has three daughters. None of them are farmers, and she's very pleased with that. They all went on to be doctors, lawyers, and things like that. Kristyn can still see a kernel light up in her about Kristyn's choice to grow Korean crops and bring them to her, but she would never express that directly to Kristyn. Although she was resistant to accepting the produce Kristyn brought her every week, Kristyn would overhear her making positive comments to customers about Kristyn and her produce. She also expressed terror about not understanding how people would pay so much for organic produce.

Despite feeling perplexed, there were enough moments where she could concede she was very pleased that someone of Kristyn's generation still cared about these things. It's a mixed blessing to have kids that more successfully integrated into an American career, because she also lamented that her daughters don't care about this.

Kristyn can apply these experiences in the bigger sphere of how people think about what someone like her is doing. She doesn't hear the negative parts of it, because the people who approach her resonate with some part of it. Through this mushroom farmer, Kristyn can see confusion, pride, anxiety about her future, interest in some of the heirlooms, and little sparks of happiness, even if it's competing with the pressures she has obviously felt as an immigrant.

Some Korean Americans who are second-generation on their family farm might not want to be pigeon-holed in the same way. There's part of the Korean experience that wants people to stop making them be Korean. They might not

want to grow Korean produce, but instead grow things from all over the world because they have the opportunity to.

Kristyn always wants her experience to feel like this is the way she chose to do it. She's happy when it's something Koreans and Korean Americans respond to, but she doesn't want her experience to be presented as a monolith of what all Korean people should do or aspire to, or as the only way they can be successful.

1:41:47 End of interview