

# **Finding Roots: Asian American Farmers in Contemporary America**

**Madalyn Warren**

**March 24, 2021**

**Interview conducted by Katelyn Reuther**

Madalyn Warren is the founder and owner of East Branch Farms in Roxbury, New York.

This was a remote interview conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Madalyn Warren joined the interview from Roxbury, New York, and Katie Reuther joined from Boston, Massachusetts.

## **Interview Log**

- 00:00:00      Introductions
- 00:00:36      Growing up, Madalyn’s family’s values around food were different than they are now. They always had plenty of food, often Korean food made by her mom. Now, they put an emphasis on health and organic and chemical-free food. They see food more as medicine than they did before.
- In addition to the Korean cuisine they ate when she was younger, they also had chicken nuggets, mozzarella sticks, Combos, and other “junk” food. They wanted to get along with everyone else, so they ate what everyone else was eating.
- 00:02:18      Madalyn didn’t have a preference for Korean or American food when she was younger. She was never a picky eater.
- 00:03:06      Outside of eating and enjoying food, Madalyn wasn’t interested in food or agriculture. She says food was what her mom made. It was also what they had on the road (Burger King Whoppers with extra sauce, pizza), what they bought at the supermarket, and the seafood they’d eat at the ocean.
- 00:04:08      About eighteen years ago, Madalyn visited an organic vegetable farm in the Catskills. She went in August at the height of the season, and she saw more vegetables growing than she’d ever seen before. She got to eat fresh vegetables right off the plant. This was where her interest in food and farming began.
- 00:05:25      Madalyn’s interest peaked right away, and then her addiction developed over a full season of farming.

- 00:06:05 She lived and worked on the farm she first visited. The farm is just up the road from where her farm is located, and they still work together.
- 00:06:35 She isn't sure what about farming hooked her at the beginning. If she had to say, she would say that it was eating the food she grew and being able to take care of her local environment. It was also a holistic way of living and working. She grew up with her parents living and working at home, so there was no separation between home and work. Living and working at a farm seemed very easy to her.
- She likes to work, and she enjoys pushing herself. Thus, she's grateful to be able to do something that not only makes her happy, but also feeds people.
- 00:09:18 Madalyn's father is from the Connecticut River Valley in Northampton/Amherst, Massachusetts, so she spent a few summers next to a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm in Amherst when she was younger. Although she didn't go over there much, she made observations. This was her first, arm's-length experience with food production in the field.
- She is hands-on, and she likes to eat a lot. She had helped out with various community gardens before she started farming, but nothing like what she does now. Agriculture from arm's-length is very different from doing it.
- 00:11:30 It wasn't a surprise that Madalyn fell in love with farming.
- 00:11:53 After her first season at the farm in the Catskills, Madalyn continued to live and work there for five or six years. Eventually, she wanted to try and do things her own way. She says every farm is styled by the hand that's farming it. She found a couple of satellite fields and started growing some things on her own. It eventually progressed to what she's doing now.
- It's hard to go too far away from how you first learned something. She's still learning.
- 00:13:28 Madalyn says after many years at her own farm, she is still in a transition period. Her friend who runs the first farm she worked at has the heated greenhouse, and she has the cold greenhouse. They work together in various forms, and they exchange a lot of food between the two farms. She learned from the other farm that although a farm's product is the food, there are many other products it offers a community.
- 00:15:13 In her early years of farming, Madalyn did think some about how her Asian American identity related to her work. Specifically, she thought about the different ways Korean agriculture trickled into American organic agriculture

(tools, seeds, composting methods). When she first started farming, because Japanese food has a better brand than Korean vegetables, it was all about the Japanese varieties.

Many Korean folks are very uptight about their Korean vegetables. She isn't that nationalistic or brand sensitive. Early on, it was nice to see the vegetables and meet the people eating these nonstandard varieties of foods whose origins are in Asia.

Nowadays, it's much different, because they have a very Korean added-value product at the farm: kimchi. Now, they're the kimchi farm.

- 00:17:41 Madalyn met those consuming the Asian vegetables they grew through the farmers market, at restaurants, and at the farm.
- 00:18:02 The farm she worked at grew a little bit of everything. The farmer there grew up in New York City, and had exposure to many different cuisines and friends with a variety of backgrounds. He did and still does grow many Japanese varieties.
- 00:18:56 Before Madalyn started farming, she didn't see or know any other Asian American farmers. Her family didn't have a relationship with a farm. Her mom was always busy at home taking care of Madalyn and her siblings, so she didn't have a cultivated community of people. Otherwise, they probably would've had a connection with a farm at some point.
- 00:19:54 Not seeing other Asian American farmers didn't impact Madalyn's decision to go into farming, or how she saw herself within the profession. She doesn't claim to represent anyone other than herself. As far as being a woman and pursuing a role in a traditionally male industry, that was more significant than her Korean background.
- 00:20:47 She started farming when she was twenty-seven years old, so she was still soft in her definition of herself. She may have been more sensitive to things than she is now. Now, her only challenge is the weather and nature. She's not sure if it was agriculture or age that helped her become less sensitive.
- 00:22:01 Madalyn started her own farming business with her mom. Her only experience with agriculture was working at that first farm and doing a couple of traveling WWOOFing (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) stints. She attempted to follow the same program she was taught, but she had to go through a few years of struggling to figure out her style.

To increase the profitability of the farm, her mom pushed the idea of building a kitchen and making kimchi. Madalyn and her mom don't cooperate most of the time, so there was a lot of challenge doing something new like that together. It took a few years before they decided to build the kitchen, and then a few more years to get everything in order for the kimchi business. Although it runs itself now, the start was very challenging.

How Madalyn thinks and does things now versus back then feels very different. With experience and success behind her, she can now operate more comfortably knowing what her plants need, and what they can tolerate. Before, she says it was as if everything was on the edge of a cliff and could fall off at any moment. Her mom still operates in that mindset, with fear as a motivator. Although she and her siblings don't completely understand why, it works well at a farm because she's paying attention to everything.

00:28:19 Madalyn started her farm with what she knew. When she was working at the first farm, she never questioned why they did certain things, or proposed different ways of doing them. She set out to do her own experiments for her own growth, not necessarily because she wanted to break away from the other farm.

The plants themselves and being there at her farm have taught her a lot. She says there is something to the permaculture idea of occupying your land for a little while before you start having your own ideas about it. Every acre has something to offer, both good and challenging. Just being there in one spot has taught her a lot.

She believes in continuing education, seeing what other growers are doing, and checking out Cornell University's best practices and recommendations. While she continues to learn, executing it is something else. Because the season is so short, the amount of risk she's willing to take on with something new is very low. She believes organic farms should be experimenting more, but because the pressures are already so high, they (and agriculture in general) don't change as fast as people want. In addition to the economic part, there's also just the human ability part.

00:32:22 This is Madalyn's seventh season on her farm. In the spring, they start running out of their own cabbage, and she begins buying in local organic cabbage for their kimchi. This year, they still have plenty of garlic, onions, frozen apples, and chives for the kimchi.

She isn't as worried about everything being all their own as she would've been ten years ago. She says it's just too extreme. Madalyn's understanding of her neighbors and why people would grow conventionally has changed. Knowing

more about what she's doing there at her farm allows her to appreciate everything else a little more, too.

00:34:44 About three years after starting the farm, they started the kimchi business.

00:35:04 Last year, about seventy percent of their crops were grown for kimchi and their other food service products (banchan, Korean barbecue). The rest was grown for a small CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and local farmers market.

Madalyn wonders what she will do with all of the napa she is seeding. While the cabbage in the fall is grown to fill up storage bins and move to kimchi and sauerkraut makers, spring cabbage is different. Once it's ready, it must get picked or it declines quickly.

00:37:13 Madalyn's mom goes to the markets in the cities (including New York City) and makes the kimchi sauce. Madalyn grows, harvests, washes, and chops the vegetables. They both do some chopping and jarring. The business is growing enough that they can hire other people to help do those things.

Madalyn and her mom have never cooperated, but something changed last winter. Things are very different, and she can't tell why it's happening. However, it has come at a good time, because the business is growing. To keep it growing smoothly, they have to cooperate. She's not sure how they did it for the past few years, though she says she's grateful for all that her siblings have done at the farm. She, her mom, and her brother are immersed in food, while her sister is interested in entertainment culture and art.

00:40:30 The farm is getting to what she envisioned when she first started. She says her vision hasn't changed that much, but she didn't see the heavier Korean influences coming. It doesn't surprise her, though, because her mom lives and works there, and her influence has always been stronger than Madalyn's.

00:41:37 Madalyn can't think of anything in particular she wanted to include on the farm when she first started out.

00:42:06 However, she wishes there were more fruit trees on the farm, and she regrets not planting them there earlier. Everything else is happening in its own time. With the limited energy she and her family have, they are establishing a foundation for more things to grow from. In some ways, their family dynamic and madness has been a good thing. They've had to sit with each other and struggle with it to have some level of success to share with other people.

00:43:33 All along, Madalyn planned to grow some Korean crops on her farm. Other than a handful of small farms growing for specific markets, it's difficult to get organic Korean vegetables. She always knew she would grow some.

Plus, she says her mom is an arrogant Korean foodie now. She has to have Korean peppers and Korean cucumbers. It makes Madalyn think about seed saving, and about how Korea kept its seed and those seeds came to be heirlooms. That heirloom seed has translated into a person's demand for the Korean variety. For those people, everything else is not Korean.

As nationalistic as her mom is about her foods, she also understands that they're a business, and people want to eat other things, too. She's open to using everything, including Genovese basil in her sauces. Her need to use Korean vegetables is second only to her need for organic varieties. After six years of exposure, she is becoming more strict than Madalyn in some ways about what she consumes. Nowadays, Madalyn is okay with eating the occasional GMO (genetically-modified organism) corn tortilla chip, where her mom would not.

00:47:35 They grow around fifty percent Korean vegetables and fifty percent western vegetables.

00:47:56 Madalyn's mom picks up seeds when she goes to Asian supermarkets. She buys them by the bagful, but they're not great quality. They also buy seeds from Fedco Seeds in Maine and Kitazawa Seed Company in California.

Madalyn had the honor of doing an interview with Maya of Kitazawa, and she learned that Maya is not of the Kitazawa family, but bought the company from the family when she was a customer.

Madalyn says that's how food is. Everyone is connected. Maya went from being a seed buyer for her small garden to running an Asian seed company. Food is that way, because it is so foundational for humans. It can send you in many different directions.

00:50:45 Madalyn hasn't acquired any specific knowledge for growing the Korean varieties she has. She says she probably should have, but she's very against the idea that there's only one way to do something. When someone tells her that there's only one way to do something, she gets very prickly, and it's hard for her to receive the information. In her experience, the people who favor special handling of certain crops usually say that there is only one way to do it.

Because things are pretty diversified at her farm, if anything fails, nothing is going to be ruined. Furthermore, if they did have any crop failures or issues with starting crops, they could source from the farms they sell with at farmers markets.

As you stick with farming, the pressures change. When Madalyn first started, she thought everything had to be from her own farm. She put enormous pressure on herself to make sure everything was from there, but now she wonders: what for? There's already enough pressure.

Seeing where their values are as they develop and grow has been fun for Madalyn. Soil and gut microbes are a big part of agriculture, food, and human health. She feels fortunate to be making kimchi at this time. Having an awareness of the microbes that start in her field and go into the products they sell has been really satisfying.

It was lucky timing that the market was ready for kimchi and them doing it in this way. Madalyn recognizes that their ability to keep the business going and have it grow was all due to the market being the way it is. They've benefited a lot from the more recent focus on soil, vegetables, fermented food, and gut health.

00:55:18 Madalyn doesn't really know what her customers value the most about her farm and products. She does know, however, that people love the kimchi. Customers like that she and her family are the farthest thing from a corporation, that she and her mom both care a lot, that the vegetables are organic, and that they use spring water.

00:56:43 There are many customer interactions, stories, and memories that have been significant to Madalyn. At the farmers market the week before, one of their customers told them that he had been eating their kimchi for a year and a half, and he thought that it helped his whole life. He pinpointed having kimchi in his refrigerator every day for the past year and a half as being an integral part of his happiness.

There have been many moments like that over the years, where people express their appreciation for what Madalyn and her mom do. Doing this type of work, they don't get to go out very much. It's nice to be acknowledged by their neighbors and customers through gifts that are left at the farm, or that they receive by mail. They're reminded that even though people don't see them, they're thinking about them.

00:59:18 Madalyn thinks more of their customers are interested in the health benefits of the products than the connection to Korean culture. However, Korean food is trendy now, so who really knows. She says people don't buy their food for only one

reason. Some of the reasons they buy are because they know it's healthy, super tasty, and they want to keep the local economy circulating by buying locally.

1:01:17 Madalyn's identity as a biracial farmer has allowed her to be more open-minded. She doesn't have to do things in one way, and she doesn't have any cultural pressures to do things in a certain way. It can also be too loose, however. If there are too many options, it can be difficult to take action.

It's all a work in progress. The more she works with plants, the less patience she has for identity. She understands people's need to have a defined identity, but the further along she goes, the less interested she is in anyone's identity. It's possible that she doesn't want to dissect her own identity, but she's not exactly sure why she feels this way. Perhaps it's because she sees with the natural world how little impact one's own personally-defined identity has on the greater picture. She also understands the price of carving your own personal identity.

That being said, it gets into territory she wants to respect. She is talking about her own experiences, and she promotes people discovering and defining their own identities.

1:04:40 People don't assume that Madalyn is of Asian descent. She can be Mexican, Hawaiian, Inuit, but if anything, she feels more discriminated against by Korean people than anyone else.

1:05:32 Madalyn doesn't see it as an advantage to pass as non-Asian, especially when she's trying to sell kimchi. A couple of times a month, someone will ask if a Korean person made their kimchi. There is policing of products to make sure that the hands making them are of the right country of origin. If she looked more Korean, she wouldn't be asked that question.

1:07:13 Madalyn doesn't know exactly how her identity is playing into anything right now. That could be a lack of engagement with the world, or how limited her engagement is due to the time constraints she has as a farmer. In January, she had a feeling Asian rage was about to explode. She didn't know where it was coming from, or why she had that feeling. She thinks it could be related to the violent attacks and targeting of the Asian community, combined with their simultaneous exclusion from conversations around BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) issues.

She doesn't know what her role is in it all. A lot of her focus is food. People are suffering in many ways, and to talk about only food makes her feel like a jerk sometimes. However, that's what her belief system is. She believes good food helps things in many ways.



For now, Madalyn is saving her spiel for people who want to hear it. She feels it's okay to not know, and it's important to stay committed to finding out, to communicating, and to discovering solutions together. It just feels like she doesn't have a lot to contribute outside of where she sits.

1:12:16 In the future, Madalyn would love to increase on-farm fertility using vermiculture and compost teas. She also has two cows, and she wants to figure out how to make them more useful on the farm. Their whole bodies are fermentation machines. In India, there is reverence for the cow, but it's not a reverence for the cow, but for the deities that live inside the cow.

She wants to see cooperative producing and buying. Moving ahead, cooperative models of business can support all of our essential needs, as well as our potential dreams. Madalyn wants her farm to incorporate more of a cooperative business model.

1:16:05 Madalyn advises other BIPOC who want to farm to get plenty of experience apprenticing and working at other farms. She promotes two or three years of full immersion to get into it physically and ground your farming ideas and plans in reality.

Finances are hard with agriculture. Money goes straight back into the farm for maintenance and growth. For people who tie their value and identity to how much money they have, the farming life is going to be hard for them. Agriculture has a lot to offer, and there is a tremendous value in it, but it takes time to see how one would fit in. Figuring that out requires letting go of a lot of things. Madalyn feels lucky to be there with her family. She likes the small, family operations that make up rural America.

1:21:53 Madalyn thinks that if her mom was in a vulnerable situation and she had to choose, she would choose her Korean community over Madalyn. Her mom's culture is still a stronger influence in her decision making and reactions than their bond. Their mother-daughter relationship is challenging, to the point where Madalyn is grateful just to be there with her and try out being friends.

There's so much Madalyn doesn't know about her mom, herself, why they do things, and the layers of expression that exist. Madalyn is forced to read between the lines all the time, instead of being told directly like she prefers. She says a lot of energy has been wasted over the years on miscommunication.

Madalyn puts a lot of effort into understanding what her mom says. It frustrates her that she is invested in communicating with her mom, but her mom doesn't

even know it. Now that they're friends, she's been telling her mom these things, but she doesn't quite know what her mom is thinking.

We're all a work in progress. Madalyn is hopeful. She is working on increasing her own peace and happiness, appreciating her mom, and doing her best to hear her mom's message without the volume and choice of words. She knows she needs to find some harmony with her mom.

Madalyn wonders what it is that makes her mom really upset. She thinks that somewhere, there's pressure: the pressure to act right, say things the right way, be the right way. Then, she can explode with her family members. Her mom is still a stranger here. Koreans are still strangers here.

1:32:15 Madalyn emphasizes how caring, thoughtful, strong, courageous, and intelligent her mom is. She recognizes that her mom has her own story, and she will share it only if and when she wants to. However, Madalyn would like to know more about why her mom is so mistrustful, and work to create more trust and confidence in their relationship.

The mother-daughter dynamic is played out quickly, largely with the subconscious mind. Madalyn wants to create a more trusting relationship where they can share things with mutual respect and confidence.

1:36:58 End of interview