

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

**Sarah Sohn**

**April 14, 2021**

**Interview conducted by Katelyn Reuther**

Sarah Sohn is the farmer-gardener at Young Sohn Gardens in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

This was a remote interview conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sarah Sohn joined the interview from Gaithersburg, Maryland, and Katie Reuther joined from Boston, Massachusetts.

## **Interview Log**

00:00:00      Introductions

00:00:33      Sarah describes her family's culture around food when she was growing up. Soon after getting married in Korea, her parents came to the United States around 1970. Sarah is the youngest of three kids. Her sister was born in 1970, her brother in 1971, and Sarah in 1979. At that point, her parents had been in the States a lot longer than when her siblings were growing up. They had also moved up economically. Her dad was a doctor, and when they first came here, he was just getting started. They were living on the East Coast in New Jersey, so her brother and sister had some formative years there. Her mom learned to speak English by watching Sesame Street with them, which was a very different scenario than when Sarah came along. By then, they had moved to Michigan and were much better off financially.

Sarah thinks that the culture of food in America had shifted a lot in the decade between her siblings' births and her own. There are many stories around food that weren't from her childhood, but that Sarah heard growing up. Many of these stories were from her parents' first few years in the United States when they were living in an apartment in Hackensack, New Jersey. She heard about there not being garlic at the grocery store, and about her mom acquiring coveted gochujang from neighbors and friends.

Sarah's mom grew up in Korea with people cooking for her. When she and Sarah's dad came to the U.S., not only was the food landscape totally different, but she also didn't have a lot of cooking experience. She knew how to boil an egg and boil a potato. She would send Sarah's dad to work with a boiled potato and a boiled egg while he was doing his residency. After a week of the egg-and-potato

diet, he needed a change. Because he had been in the army and had to cook for himself at times, he knew more about cooking and taught Sarah's mom how to make certain things.

After reaching a point where they couldn't beg Gerber Baby jars of gochujang off of the neighbor anymore, they made a Greyhound bus pilgrimage to New York's Koreatown to stock up on core supplies. Some shipments also came from family in Korea. Those are the vivid stories Sarah has around food.

After her dad finished residency, they moved to Michigan where Sarah grew up in a suburb of Detroit. By the time she has memories of her childhood in the 1980s, she always remembers there being Korean food around. There weren't H Marts or things like that, but there were local mom and pop-run Korean grocery stores. They were in neighboring suburbs, but she doesn't remember a time where there wasn't access to Korean food.

By the time she was growing up, there was a hybrid of American and Korean food. However, Korean food was the "real" food. It's not that they didn't have sugary American cereals and things like that around, but in terms of the main meals, it was always Korean food. When non-Korean people meet Sarah's family, they always wonder how they eat so much. As soon as her family comes home from eating an American lunch, everyone wants to know where the real food is.

Sarah has many memories of growing up in Michigan. At the time, the way to take a local vacation was to "go up north," which meant to drive north to more rural places. That's what Sarah's family would do, but it got whiter and whiter, and finding even one Chinese takeout place would become hard. When they were in the middle of a place that only had a Dairy Queen and a McDonald's, Sarah's mom was notorious for wanting Asian food (just a bowl of rice!). Sarah remembers them driving around looking for any vaguely Asian-looking place that might have vaguely Asian food. They would waste an extra two hours finding it, and once they did, her mom would be satisfied.

They ate dinners together, although her dad worked late hours and didn't necessarily make it home in time. Sarah remembers staying up a lot, and as a small kid, being weirdly fascinated by her dad eating spicy foods that were beyond her palate, or things that she perceived as "weird." Sarah specifically remembers watching and listening to him eat baby radish kimchi that has a really loud crunch. Her dad didn't eat during the day at work, so he really savored the food when he came home. If Sarah thinks about his relationship to it, she picked up on something sacred or ritualistic about it.

He was five and a half years older than her mom, and he remembered much more from the Korean War than she did. He remembered being hungry and having long spans of time when he only had a bowl of rice to eat a day. If Sarah thinks about it now, she can see how his relationship to food was shaped by having experienced real scarcity at a formative age.

Sarah grew up in a very white area. Within her neighborhood, they lived next to an Indian family, and in her school, there was a smattering of Asian kids at any given time. There were very few, and many times no, Black or Latinx kids. There was also a sizable Chaldean population and a large Jewish population.

Food culture at school was pretty standard 1980s American fare. When she was younger, Sarah remembers bringing a thermos of *boricha*, or roasted barley tea, to school. She recalls her lunches getting more and more white as time went on. Around first grade, she was being sent to school with leftovers, but then it gradually became a rotation of bologna, turkey, and tuna sandwiches.

To this day, Sarah still thinks about the concept of “real” food. She mentions a phenomenon that mainstream white culture doesn’t know about, which is that immigrants and their families are not necessarily longing for access to white culture and for white mainstream culture to be their home. There might even be a lot of ways in which they feel superior.

Sarah isn’t the best cook, and she would love to know how to make Korean food better. She shares what is likely a common experience: when trying to ask her parents how to cook something, they say, “You put a little of this, a little of that.” When Sarah does that, it comes out disgusting. However, because it was often her role in the kitchen growing up, Sarah is very good at the prep duties. While she did a lot of the slicing and dicing, her mom would combine it all and get the flavors right.

00:20:27

Sarah says she was a hayseed early on. Growing up, she enjoyed going to her Mormon neighbor’s hobby farm where she gardened and witnessed livestock slaughter. She says the suburbs where she grew up must have been agricultural land in the recent past. Her elementary school had old apple trees that still bore apples, and there were other remnants of things like that on the school sites. The county had a farm that they incorporated into the school system, and although she only went there two or three times throughout her elementary school years, it was formative.

Sarah has dreams about the school farm; it made a big impression on her. She may have milked a cow, and she definitely seeded in a dixie cup and planted them out later on. She was always drawn to plants. When she was growing up, her parents had all ornamental gardens with no food crops or herbs. In middle school, she watched Canadian cooking shows and Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch's gardening show, *Gardening Naturally*. She was very into that show as a seventh grader, and she remembers having a strong crush on Barbara Damrosch. Sarah still refers back to some of those shows, and she uses them for her new farmer training program.

Starting early in high school, Sarah began planting vegetables in her parents' ornamental garden. That also coincided with her coming out at age fifteen. Prior to that, she did a lot of reading. She read her way through the entire Gay and Lesbian and Women's Studies sections at Borders bookstore. Without any context, she was reading Audre Lorde, Mary Daly, and more. For a while, she was a vegetarian. When Sarah's mom talks about that time period in Sarah's life, she says that Sarah had "hard times" as a teenager.

All of those things were very much of a piece: getting into gardening, vegetarian stuff, animal rights. She didn't have anything clearly parsed, but all of these things together - the gayness, the vegetarianism, the desire to garden - led to her getting a job at a local health food store when she was sixteen. Sarah says this was before Whole Foods, when a health food store was a weird place. There wasn't local produce yet, but it was all organic. This is where Sarah was introduced to organic produce.

Before Sarah left for college, she took some classes at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. There was more of a small farm scene in Ann Arbor, and through a food co-op, Sarah found and then was hired at a local organic farm the summer before she went to college. It was a five-acre farm, and they sold at a variety of places. Sunflower sprouts and wheatgrass were about fifty percent of what they grew, in addition to head lettuce and garlic.

Sarah's explanation for being in Ann Arbor was to take a class to prepare for college, but in her mind, she was having a good time farming. She remembers her dad being both mystified and amused by her interest in farming. If Sarah's mom had her way, she would never touch dirt. Sarah and her dad, on the other hand, would do gardening stuff together, like squishing the Japanese beetles on their roses. It was their bonding time and something they would do ritually.

She recalls a core memory of her dad coming to visit her in Ann Arbor. He wanted to see the farm, so around dusk, they drove there and stood together admiring the garlic field. The swan-like scapes had a powdery sheen and looked beautiful in the dusky light. After that, something shifted for Sarah. There was something that made sense in that moment between she and her dad. With garlic being a core Korean crop, he would have seen it growing in Korea that way. There's not a lot of language around that exchange, since it was very sensory.

Sarah didn't make any particular commitments to farming at that time, although she does remember her parents joking (but not really) about needing to escort her to college, because they were afraid she would run away to live on a lesbian separatist farm. Her parents didn't know exactly what kinds of words to use around it, but they knew she might end up somewhere other than where they wanted her to be. It turns out, eighteen-year-old Sarah knew what her interests were very strongly.

It wasn't super conscious, but she always really liked to grow things. Since then, she has always consistently grown things. Some friends of hers from her twenties remind her about how she illegally grew in cardboard boxes on the roof when they were living in Brooklyn. She was always growing stuff, even when she lived in cities.

00:39:28

In college, Sarah did some farming at an urban farm in New Haven, Connecticut. The project was founded by another Asian undergraduate who was a few years older than Sarah. The two people Sarah knew who were involved with the farm were both Chinese American. The urban farm project partnered with a local homeless shelter, so there was some workforce development around it. Sarah helped out there for two seasons.

After college, Sarah went to law school. She had been doing activist stuff around queer issues, AIDs, and reproductive justice since she could drive. She doesn't remember how she ended up doing a lot of this work, but says there was a lot of randomness in how she found these opportunities.

When Sarah encountered lawyers in those situations, they seemed to be effective. Seeing that as one way to be effective in that work was part of Sarah's decision to go to law school. The other part was appeasing her parents. It was similar to Sarah going to college so her parents would feel good. She consolidated her classes into one day a week and lived in New York with her girlfriend for the rest of the week. There were many ways Sarah navigated making her parents happy while also doing her own thing.

Sarah went to law school back at the University of Michigan. Soon into it, she got an internship at what was then called The Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force in New York. They focused on issues facing queer, trans, and HIV-positive immigrants. Sarah loved her co-workers and the work. Afterwards, she knew she would like to go there. Because they had no money to hire her, she found a fellowship that paid for her to do work there.

At that time, Sarah's relationship to growing food was growing kale illegally in cardboard boxes on rooftops. After she finished law school, she lived in New York for three years or so before moving out of the City to the Hudson Valley area. She commuted to the City to work at an organization in the Bronx, then called Bronx Aid Services. Sarah worked there for around three years offering legal aid-type civil services like eviction defense. Because she was living in a semi-rural area and had the opportunity to garden again, that was the beginning of her return to growing. She would wake up in a super sleepy, predominantly white town and find herself in a busy city setting in the Bronx.

Sarah and her partner moved down to Maryland for her partner's job in academia. Sarah figured she would find another law job down there. As she looked for jobs, it became clear that there weren't a lot of opportunities around asylum work. In addition, Sarah's daughter is autistic, and because care options for her weren't great, they decided it would be better for Sarah or her partner to be at home a significant amount of the time. It turned out that Sarah loves it, which led to her being the primary person at home. She also didn't go back into law, because she couldn't find anything that was flexible enough.

To get out of the house one day a week, Sarah started volunteering at a farm nearby in exchange for a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) bag. She jokes that that was the gateway drug back. She remembered how much she loved it, and she became a part-time worker there and then at other farms. She worked her way up to a farm management position, and she found herself back at the same place she was with law work. She knew she couldn't properly parent and put in eighty hours a week at a farm that's an hour away. That's what led her to finding the job she is in now, which is more flexible and allows her to work with farmers.

00:53:17 Sarah has been working in her current position since 2014. She started super part-time helping them complete their website. They were a very small organization at the time, and as they started to grow, she moved into different positions. She managed their conference for a while, and then this position opened up. She didn't anticipate how much she would like working with beginning farmers.

00:54:24 Sarah has a large garden of her own. It is about a quarter acre in cultivation. She doesn't know why, but she doesn't particularly identify as a farmer. She definitely identifies more as a gardener, even though she's the first person to say, "If you want to call yourself a farmer, you're a farmer." There's literally no definition, and she hates the ridiculous conversation around whether urban farmers are really farmers.

Sarah thinks she doesn't identify as a farmer because she has worked in positions where her salary was contingent on how much she sold, and that's definitely not the situation she's in now. She notes that other people who are in supportive roles to farmers, especially the ones she likes and admires, still tend to do some growing. There are many new techniques that are coming out, and although she isn't going to buy the latest equipment, she will experiment on her home-scale with stuff that's coming into use. She thinks it helps to have some grounding in actually continuing to grow, even at a small scale.

00:56:51 Sometimes Sarah will put stuff online from her own garden for educational purposes, but she wonders who is ever going to find it with the vastness of the internet. Mostly when she shares things, it's amongst their closed group of beginning farmers. Sometimes she shares things, because she knows that what she's seeing is notable. While at a local community garden site recently, she noticed the progressive growth of wire grass. The parks crew comes in every year to disc the plot with a tractor. Although the ground is fertile, it's full of wire grass. By discing, they're spreading it every year. She took pictures of its progressive growth after discing. She also wanted to take close-up shots of the Bermuda grass in different forms.

Sarah has developed a way of approaching the question of scale and equipment that are big intimidation factors for a lot of people coming into the program. She says first of all, tractors and all of the implements and their names are not that big of a deal. It feels intimidating, and she still feels intimidated sometimes, but also, most of the people in the beginning farmers class have experience driving a car, which is way more dangerous, and if they've driven stick, way more complicated than driving a tractor. Also, things that you would do at the hand-scale have their analogy at the tractor-scale. If you can understand what the function is of a digging fork, a shovel, and a hoe that's skimming the surface, then all of those things have their tractor equivalents. Don't let people consciously or unconsciously try to shame you. Anyone can do it, and it's just not that big of a deal. Whatever scale you're farming at is just as real, but also, that stuff is for you, too, if you want to farm at that scale.

It's about having enough money and having access to the many terms used around different tractors. For example, "hydrostatic" just means that it's the same as driving an automatic car. Sarah understands the intimidation factor, and she says there are lots of things to be proud and snooty about, but access to tractor terminology isn't one of them. It's easier for Sarah to do that kind of analogical stuff at a small scale, because she can tailor it to her own needs. Instead of fetishizing the tool, think about what you're trying to do with the tool. Otherwise, you're going to end up with a lot of expensive equipment that's outmoded in five years. Sarah is all for equipment and helping people's efficiencies, but she thinks a lot of it is consciously or unconsciously having these intimidation factors that are related to accessibility and making things seem more difficult than they actually are.

When she talks to her beginning farmers, she tells them that they are all already doing stuff that's way more difficult. The stuff that they are all really adept at, like interpersonal skills, communication, understanding what would make people happy to continue working with them, and understanding and being fluent in what their customers might want, is actually hard. You can't just pick up a book or watch Youtube tutorials. Other people should be intimidated by that stuff, because that's only obtained through a lot of experience and relation. You can't just pick it up. Sarah tells them that they can do any of that, and that that stuff is all for them if they want to do it. They've got the real goods.

1:05:13

Sarah didn't think a ton about her Asian American identity when she was farming during high school. At the first farm she worked on before going off to college, she remembers the owner giving her Assata Shakur's book. Sarah has only ever worked at super small-scale organic farms with a lot of lefty-ish people. At a couple of farms, she was the only person of color, but she was definitely looking for other people of color. She's had great experiences working on crews with other people of color.

At some point, Sarah very consciously decided that she wanted to work with other Asian farmers and sought out Potomac Vegetable Farms in northern Virginia. Hiu Newcomb, the founding matriarch of that farm, is a Chinese American from Hawaii. Her daughter, Hana, co-runs the farm with her now. They were the farm in the organic world that had visibly Asian people at the helm, and Sarah really wanted to work with them.

She worked there one day a week for two seasons, and it was totally transformational. In the early days, Sarah got to work some with Hiu directly, and she felt some sense of home. Sarah and others just started a group of emergent AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) farmers, and Hiu and Hana graciously joined them.

Knowing that Hiu and Hana are there is really important. It's an orienting thing for Sarah knowing that they're part of the constellation that exists. They were recently talking about the Grace Lee Boggs quote, "The most radical thing I ever did was to stay put." In relationship to the Newcomb's farm, Sarah says the impact they've had is in many ways less to do with particular things they said, and more to do with them being a fixture in the farming community for close to sixty years. It's interesting to think about the number of people who went through that farm and what the impact was of having Asian women running it. It feels massive to Sarah.

1:11:43

In relation to the larger BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) community, Sarah's Asian American identity is very front-of-mind in her role as a service provider. The farmers she is working with are way ahead of her in their analysis and thinking about the fundamental changes that need to happen in order to move us collectively into right relationship with land. Sarah thinks she can be of service by recognizing that she is in a position of power, even as she is also experiencing discrimination and marginalization as an Asian American person. She knows there's a lot of impact she can have, and that has been important for her to recognize and take seriously. In the farming world, there's a lot of identification with powerlessness, even amongst white farmers and white farm service providers. Sarah thinks it's important to shift that, and she finds that to be a place where she can have solidarity with other people of color, particularly Black farmers in her area.

There has always been anti-Asian sentiment, and it's always a threat. During this time, people that Sarah is supposed to be teaching (other farmers of color) have reached out to her to offer support. Farmers are really accustomed to providing mutual aid, and there are a lot of nonverbal ways of showing up for each other.

There is something about working towards land back, land reparations, and a vision where more BIPOC farmers will actually be on land. Sarah feels that they could be those fixtures in each others' lives in the way that Potomac Vegetable Farms has done with its longevity. It's a different depth of solidarity that imagines we could do this over the course of our lifetimes.

With the term "neighbor" in mind, Sarah thinks about how that can be a model for multi-racial solidarity, especially Black and Asian solidarity. Having grown up in Detroit where there's a very segregated Black/white dynamic, Sarah had to try to figure out where she fit into that as an Asian person. Sarah has a vision for neighborliness where Black and Asian people don't have to reduce and flatten their experiences as being the same, or say that one means more than the other. Instead, she envisions them recognizing that they're neighbors and bound in that way. Sarah believes the farming community can help us get towards that vision.

1:20:44

To other people of color who are trying to get into farming, Sarah says: "We need you." She understands it's daunting, but she advises trying to find other people of color. That is ever more possible, even if you're the only person of color where you are. For all of its downsides, Sarah thinks Instagram is great as a means for connection. Knowing there are people out there, even if you're only connected digitally, is significant, but Sarah still wouldn't underestimate the alienation you might feel.

Sarah also advises trusting your gut. If you interview in a super rural, totally white area, even if you don't see any blazing red flags, trust your gut if you feel uncomfortable. Sarah talks about a story that Anita Adalja relayed about being the only brown person at one of her first farm jobs. Don't discount or dismiss the concerns you might have. There are a lot of farms out there, and even if it takes a while, you have the right to be in a learning environment that you feel safer in. Trust the internal wisdom you have about that.

If capital and finances are a concern, take advantage to whatever degree you can of the free services in your area, but also, know that some of those spaces might feel unsafe or gross because of the cultural presumptions in them. Take your gut seriously and don't settle for an environment that feels gross.

1:26:31 Sarah believes that BIPOC farmers are going to come up with the solutions or new ways of thinking and being with the earth that we need. We need you, even if you feel like you know nothing. We need you, and we need each other. It seems like everyone is farming now, but it's not true. If you feel called to this, and it feels right to you, in whatever form that is, do it. There is no real or unreal farmer. Whatever way you interface with this is real and necessary, and we need you.

1:28:24 End of interview