



Nikiko Masumoto

# Art, Activism & Agriculture

*Farmer, Masumoto Family Farm*

WORKS: Del Rey | LIVES: Del Rey

FIELDS: Farming, Activism, Art

**N**ikiko Masumoto is a fourth-generation farmer in the Central Valley town of Del Rey. The daughter of acclaimed Japanese American writer and seasoned organic peach farmer Mas Masumoto, she has apprenticed with her father full-time for seven years.

The transitioning of the farm from dad to daughter is the subject of a 2015 PBS documentary “Changing Season” and a book of the same name. A University of California, Berkeley, graduate, Nikiko’s storytelling and performance work frequently documents valley life, in particular the internment of her farming family during World War II.

She has never missed a harvest.





*“All of the people who deeply care about our food systems need to come to places like the valley.”*

---

**F**or Nikiko Masumoto, self-described feminist farmer and agrarian artist, there is no separation between agriculture, creativity, and community. They're related and inform each other. For instance, her storytelling performance pieces weave together the Central Valley, farm life, and her family history.

When Masumoto left home for college, she had no intention of coming back to continue the family legacy. The [Masumoto Family Farm](#) is known for its sustainable, slow food practices and sought-after heirloom peaches (Suncrest and Elberta, among other varieties), along with nectarines and raisin grapes. The family farms on 80 acres in Del Rey, about 20 minutes south of Fresno.

But a guest lecturer in an undergraduate environmental class at the University of California, Berkeley, set her soul ablaze. In that classroom discussion, Masumoto says she grasped for the first time the destruction pesticides have wrought on ecosystems, soil, water, plants, and people. All of a sudden, Masumoto says, the place she grew up in looked really different from a global, environmental, political, and social justice perspective. It took courage, she realized, to farm the way her family had for generations.

“The most radical thing I could do was come home,” says the 32-year-old, who, following graduate school, has worked fulltime since 2011 alongside her father, who has farmed for more than four decades. “Radical means of and from the roots.” That phrase is tattooed on her foot. She also sports a peach stamp on her ankle and a spray of peach blossoms on her shoulder.

Working with a parent is not without its difficulties. “I think I've learned how to take things in and ask questions and offer things back and still be respectful of the experience my father has, which I think is an art in and of itself,” says Masumoto. “I feel very respected by my dad. There's a kind of rigor to the Masumoto process. The vision is the easy part, but how to match resources to needs, how to adapt in the face of climate change, how to communicate—those are all real challenges.”

Her jiichan (grandfather) is never far from mind. “He returned to the Central Valley after surviving American concentration camps, one of the 120,000 Japanese-Americans from the West Coast who were imprisoned during World War II without due process and denied the rights they held as citizens, including land ownership,” she says. “Just three years after being released, he had the courage to buy 40 acres and decided to raise a family in the place he was ripped away from,” says Masumoto, who lives in her grandparents' former home with



her fiancée. “He had such resilience and tenacity to overcome the racism he endured; he reclaimed a place of belonging in American soil, and he grew the sweetest peaches for everyone to enjoy. His legacy inspires me every day.”

“He loved the labor, he loved to sweat. I think he found refuge in peaches,” she adds. “How could I not want to be part of that?”

As a politically progressive, educated, mixed-race, female, queer, small-scale organic family farmer, Masumoto encounters plenty of doubters in the Central Valley, which she says is dominated by large conventional farms run mostly by conservative white men. “We’re in this political moment of reckoning. And I think the valley is one of those places that’s emblematic of the country,” says Masumoto. “What happens here, the direction the valley goes, is symbolic of how the rest of the country goes.”

Running for public office is a no-brainer for this peach grower. “I have to run. If women don’t run we’re never going to have even close to equal representation, same thing for people of color, same thing for queer people.”

She remains hopeful that change is possible. “So many of the inequalities that persist here are maintained not by consciously nefarious people but by well-intentioned people who aren’t awake,” she says. “When these people are your

*Running for public office is a no-brainer for this peach grower. “If women don’t run we’re never going to have even close to equal representation, same thing for people of color, same thing for queer people.”*

neighbors, you have to think about ways of building power differently. I look for a leverage point. Sometimes the road to change isn’t about open conflict.”

Farming multigenerationally, she says, demands that you take the long view. “That doesn’t always mean to be patient, but it does mean thinking not just about the urgent need or desire for a near win but what comes after that,” she says. “I struggle with that because there are so many things I want to change in the world right now.” Chief among them: Giving voice and power to people who work in the fields, and preserving and healing the earth for all its inhabitants.







*“So many of the inequalities that persist here are maintained not by consciously nefarious people but by well-intentioned people who aren’t awake.”*

The Masumoto Family Farm has experimented with different models to educate the peach-loving public about what it takes to grow fragile, flavorful varieties. These include its 14-year-old Adopt a Tree Program, which brings hundreds to the farm during peak stone fruit harvest time; the O, U Fab Program (Organic, Ugly & Fabulous), which matches juicy imperfect fruit with willing mouths; and the 2017 pilot campaign Eat Small Fruit, a partnership with Real Food, Real Stories, tasked with finding homes for tiny Gold Dust peaches. “We’re the outliers in the valley. We live our values and are defiant in the face of false narratives like ‘you have to get big to survive’ or ‘you have to spray,’” she says.

Masumoto wants to expand the experiential part of the farm. “There’s something transformative about this place; it’s a gift and I want to share that with people. Figuring out how to do that isn’t always easy. The human experience is both wonderful and messy,” says this farmer, who acknowledges how fortunate she is to be a relatively new, young farmer working a property that is owned outright.

The act of physical labor informs her creative process. “When you’re on the tractor, walking, picking, there’s this porousness of your mind that is super juicy,” says Masumoto, whose creative endeavors including the Yonsei Memory Project,

The Valley Storytellers Project, and the one-woman show “What We Could Carry,” an excerpt of which she performed at the White House in 2016. “It was heart-wrenching and beautiful. I got to be the living incarnation of my grandparents, at the center of power that caused so much pain and suffering. Let’s not forget it was an Executive Order that allowed for the imprisonment of my family.”

She takes comfort in something she learned from her paternal grandparents: “What we need, we already have. I have the stories and the inheritance in my body [from people] who were not broken by the most oppressive of circumstances,” says Masumoto, who still wears her baachan’s (grandmother’s) old work pants. “We’ve got a long haul. I don’t want to do the easy thing.”

There’s more. “All of the people who deeply care about our food systems need to come to places like the valley,” she says. “If some of the progressive-left food activists could come into conversation with some of the people who are actually feeding the vast majority of Americans—we aren’t, we’re too small—and see there are shared values there beneath the conservatism, then we might make some headway on the structural inequalities that make farming so difficult.”

—Sarah Henry