



Kristyn Leach

Farming Honors The Past and Considers The Future

Founder, Namu Farm

WORKS: Sunol / Winters | LIVES: Oakland

FIELD: Farming

Kristyn Leach runs the organic Namu Farm in partnership with the restaurant Namu Gaji in San Francisco, owned by three brothers with a Korean background. Since 2012, Leach has grown vegetables and herbs, particularly heirloom Korean produce, for the neighborhood bistro. An avid seed saver, Leach practices traditional peasant farming methods popular in her birthplace. She began Namu Farm at the Sunol AgPark, home to small-scale farmers growing crops on the urban fringe. In 2018, Leach moved her operation to Winters. She is a member of the Asian American Farmers Alliance and active in community efforts to empower farmers of color.



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Perilla proved Kristyn Leach's gateway plant to discovering her roots. And cultivating Korean produce led her to create community with other farmers of color.

Leach first encountered the leafy Korean herb—similar to the Japanese shiso—in a community garden tended by Korean women in the Pacific Northwest. Born in Daegu, South Korea, in 1982, Leach was adopted as an infant by Irish-Catholic New Yorkers. Leach didn't grow up eating perilla, but she was raised around community gardens in Long Island, in a working-class family who instilled in her the importance of growing food and serving others.

After stints managing a lettuce farm and working as a cook in a fine dining restaurant in the Bay Area, Leach co-founded Namu Farm after an introduction to chef Dennis Lee through a mutual chef friend. In Lee and his brothers, who own Namu Gaji and fronted the money for the farm, she found kindred spirits who understand the value and history behind her growing philosophy. This is a manual labor of love: No fossil fuels are used on the farm. There's no tilling (disturbing the soil through mechanical plowing), no tractors. It's all hand tools. It's not an easy way to farm but it speaks to Leach: a

practice honoring her Korean ancestors that might also help preserve the land for future generations of farmers.

For six years, Namu Farm subleased a plot at Sunol AgPark. For just over 10 years, that farmland was managed by SAGE (Sustainable Agriculture Education), a Berkeley-based nonprofit, on publicly funded land owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

Leach tends the land in a natural way. She adds beneficial microorganisms to the soil by incorporating fungus from nearby woods. Cover crops are allowed to decompose on their own timeline. The farm welcomes weeds and wildlife: Namu is a habitat for birds and the odd volunteer plant. The focus: Cultivating the healthiest, self-regulating, self-reliant soil in order to grow the most nutritious and tastiest vegetables and herbs possible.

Her farm produce includes Korean melons, kabocha squash, okra, eggplant, gochu peppers, several varieties of chili peppers, yard-long green beans, Korean black soybeans, and an array of Korean herbs, including perilla. The farm grows about 50 different crops and harvests around 7,000 pounds a



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year. Leach sometimes has excess bounty that she shares for free, via a farm stand, with local Korean and women’s community organizations that help those in need.

The farmer-restaurateur relationship has provided Leach, 35, with a steady income stream while also giving her creative latitude to experiment with raising rare and heritage plants. It’s also allowed her to grow in homage to the collectivized natural

farm practices found in Korea, where land stewardship, soil sustainability, and plant preservation is honored and synthetic inputs and hazardous pesticides eschewed.

For Leach, reverence for seeds is key. She saves seeds and has inherited heirloom varieties from diverse sources, including Oakland-based [Kitazawa Seed Company](#), the oldest seed business in the United States specializing in Asian vegetables and the largest distributor of Asian seeds outside of Asia. Leach grows seeds for the company, as part of a project called Second Generation Seeds. “Seeds hold a lot for people beyond just sustenance,” she says. When seeds are co-opted and patented by global companies who haven’t played a role in stewarding them for centuries, says Leach, it raises concerns about imperialist motives, historic erasure, and purely transactional farming practices.

Leach is active in the Asian American Farmers Alliance to explore, among other matters, the challenge of protecting seeds, their stories, and histories. “We have to try and leverage the community we have to increase access to seeds for people who want them and provide the support and technical assistance so that people of color can grow those things,” she says.



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Seed sovereignty—saving and nurturing seeds from diverse sources—is a major concern in the food movement at a time when just a few global corporations claim ownership of most of the world’s seeds, says Leach. “The challenges that Asian farmers—or any farmers of color—face include smaller margins in the marketplace because a lot of the crops are viewed as specialty and it’s hard to reach a wider audience.”

Small-scale farmers of color also face structural barriers, such as access to land, capital, and technical assistance, as well as language hurdles and cultural appropriation, says Leach. “There’s a lot of fetishizing of things that are considered new and exotic,” she says. “There has to be some way for something to have mass appeal and not disregard the fact that it existed before white people found it.”

To help build community, in 2017 Leach ran a project on the farm called nonghwal, in collaboration with organizer Yong Chan Miller. Every two weeks or so, a group of Korean-American volunteers convened at the farm to help pick crops and learn about sustainable farming. Short for nongchon bongsa hwaldong, or volunteer work, nonghwal Namu-style combined contemporary California farm justice concerns with age-old Korean cultivation practices and social movement history.

She is particularly pleased with her efforts to adapt plants and establish systems to deal with climate change. “A lot of other farmers are curious about our vegetable production methods in light of climate change, which will disproportionately impact communities of color and poor people in rural and urban areas around the globe,” she says. “There’s an urgency here.”

Leach would like to move toward independence and develop a separate entity that distributes produce to different outlets, in addition to her seed production and restaurant crops. She’s working with the non-profit Kitchen Table Advisors to develop a plan for her next stage. Leach’s 2018 relocation to Winters is in part based on a desire for long-term land tenure and a chance to grow her business beyond what’s needed for the restaurant.

“I’ve been very lucky. I have a substantive relationship with my restaurateur partners that goes beyond growing food for a restaurant. We’ve been able to adapt the farm to different weather scenarios, making it more resilient,” she says. “And I think the farm has functioned as a hub for the community. All of that is really gratifying and feels really hopeful.”—Sarah Henry