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Mai Nguyen

Farming for Everyone

Founder, Asian American Farmers Alliance | *Co-founder*, California Grain Campaign
California Organizer, National Young Farmers Coalition
WORKS: Statewide | FARMS: Sonoma County | LIVES: San Diego

FIELDS: Farming, Business, Advocacy

Mai Nguyen grows heirloom grains on leased land in Sonoma County. She travels across the Golden State in her job for the National Young Farmers Coalition, where she consults with fledgling farmers on politicial advocacy and policy matters. The daughter of Vietnamese refugees, she grew up in San Diego, where she has worked on refugee resettlement projects, including school gardens, a farm incubator program, and a food pantry. A University of California, Berkeley, graduate, she is involved in social justice efforts on behalf of farmers of color, including supporting the Farmer Equity Act of 2017.

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In her seven years of farming, Mai Nguyen has encountered both sexism and racism in the fields. She's been challenged by male farm equipment sellers on whether or not she knows how to turn on a tractor, she's also had trash dumped on her property in an area where Confederate flags are a common sight. And she's endured people yelling racial epithets at her, threatening violence, or telling her to "go home." Racism isn't unique to cities; in the country—even in bucolic settings—it's also a problem and prevents young people of color from farming altogether, says Nguyen, who farmed in Mendocino County for several years and relocated, in part, because of the prejudice she encountered there.

So Nguyen knows firsthand the obstacles female and minority farmers face—especially in today's political climate. She actively works on ways to reduce such barriers, including new legislation that may bring recourse to farmers like her who are federally classified as "socially disadvantaged." That includes growers who have been subject to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice. The Farmer Equity Act of 2017 requires California officials to address challenges that farmers of color face by making access to government resources more equitable.

In concrete terms, it means creating a department-level staff position to help these farmers navigate the largely white, male agricultural world. "From land to loans, knowledge dissemination to seed restoration, racial discrimination isn't just in history books—it permeates the everyday lives of farmers of color," says Nguyen. "This act is a step toward farmers of color having a voice in state policy-making so that we can advocate for our needs and access resources to meet them."

Farmers like Nguyen want to see more equitable access to land, state funding, and technical assistance. Buying or leasing property is tougher for an Asian female farmer than her white male counterparts, says Nguyen. Ditto getting access to equipment. "People just don't take me seriously," says the 33-year-old Nguyen. "They question my experience, knowledge, and ability."

Given how isolated—but also antagonized—Nguyen has felt as a female farmer of color, she decided to reach out to other growers to create community, pool resources, and discuss common practices like sourcing seeds, cultivation techniques, and selling strategies. What started as one contact with a Korean-American female farmer grew into a network that

shares knowledge, stories, and solidarity. The group, the Asian American Farmers Alliance, brainstorms marketing opportunities, collaborates on consumer education, discusses policy, and shares best practices.

Strength in numbers is reinforced in Nguyen's current and former day jobs. Through January 2018, she worked for the California Center for Cooperative Development, where she witnessed the collective power that comes with sharing tasks and responsibilities with a group of worker-owners, many of them with a food or farm orientation. Now with the National Young Farmers Coalition, she describes a pressing need for political action to ensure successful pathways to farming for the next generation—and she's intent on organizing growers and developing leadership skills within its ranks to make that happen.

Nguyen is also active on the food side in her advocacy work with the California Grain Campaign. This group of farmers, millers, and bakers wants bakers who sell at farmers markets across the state to use locally grown grain flour in 20 percent of their baked goods by 2020. "Farmers markets play an important role in educating food producers and consumers about the wide range of wholesome grains grown in this state," says Nguyen, who is on a mission to expose eaters to the wide diversity of flavors and nutrition found in whole grains. To date, six market managers in the Los Angeles area have signed on in support.

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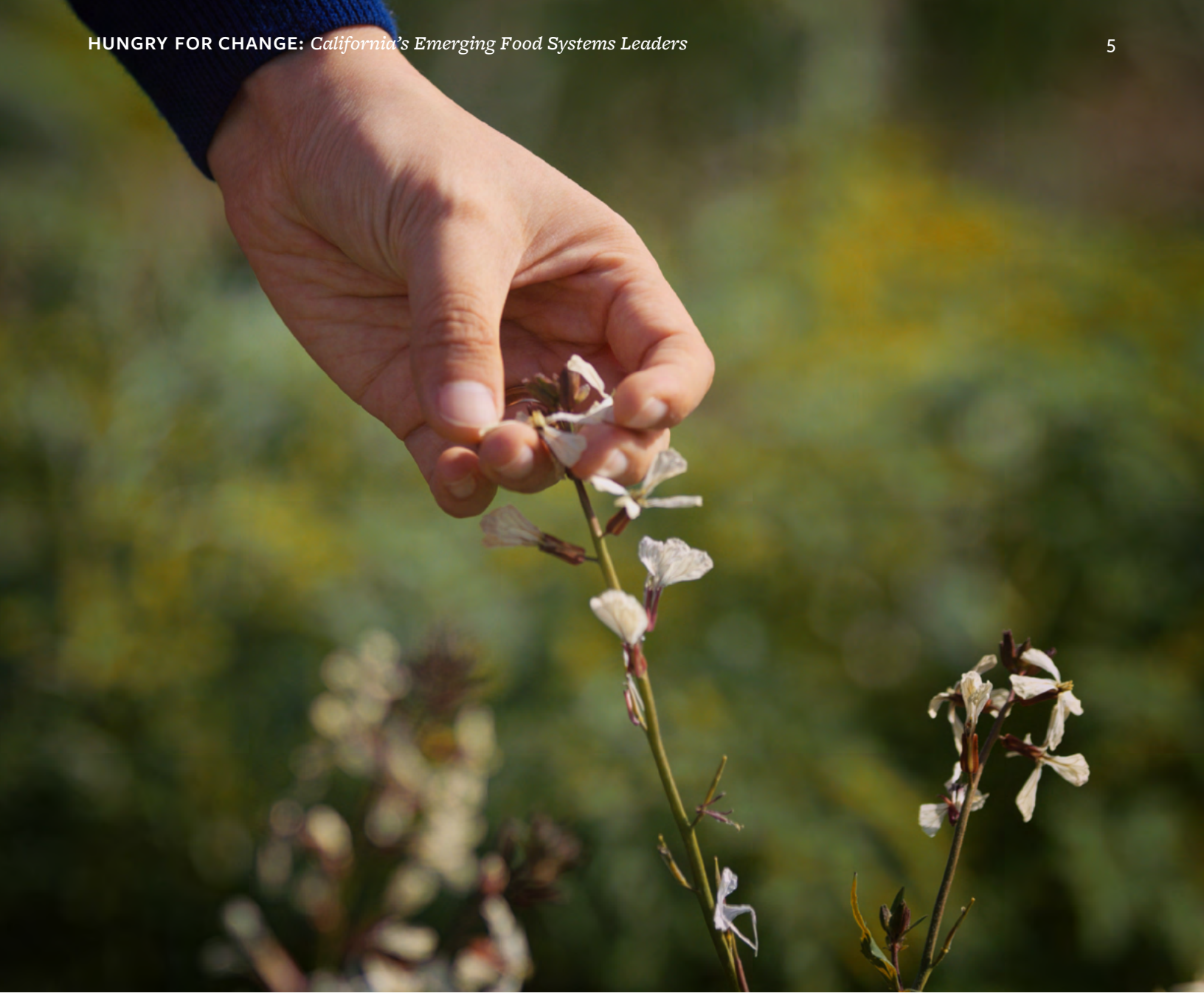
Nguyen has produced two catalogs for the campaign, championing California grain growers and highlighting heirloom varieties, such as Sonora wheat, spelt, purple prairie barley, red fife, emmer, and durum farro. The publications, she says, are modeled more on fashion look-books than seed catalogs. She wants to get producers and consumers jazzed about hearty grains.



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Advocacy is important, but farming is what feeds Nguyen. She grows grains, currently heritage wheat and quinoa, using environmentally regenerative methods including no-till (tilling disrupts the soil through mechanical plowing), and dry-farming techniques. "When I first started farming I sought out heritage wheats like Sonora because they are so well suited for the conditions where I grow," says Nguyen. "The genetic diversity of heritage/heirloom wheats means they can adapt to varying conditions, including drought."

Such varieties, says Nguyen, can be tough to source via commercial seed stock companies. That's where saving seeds is vital to maintaining diverse grain crops. "The farmers invested in bringing back heritage and specialty grains operate on a small scale, making them the most vulnerable businesses in agriculture," says Nguyen, whose farming plans on one plot were set back by the devastating Wine Country fires of 2017. "Yet, small farms are essential to all of us. They nurture unconventional crops and help diversify our food base."

As a child, Nguyen's maternal grandmother taught her how to grow plants and save seeds. "She would tell me when the weeds would grow what it would mean about the soil. She helped me understand the role of all plants, not just the ones you purposely cultivate." Growing food and cooking at home was an economic necessity. "Everyone says food is medicine. But we didn't have health insurance," she says. "Eating well was always a focus in my family."

Her whole grain farming philosophy is not just about culture, history, and sustainability. It's about taste too. "For thousands of years there were all these different types of delicious-tasting grains but now there's just mostly white, bland, no-flavor flour in the grocery store."

As a child of Vietnamese refugees, Nguyen says it's no coincidence that she became a sustainable farmer. Sharing traditions like growing and cooking food is a way of keeping a culture alive in a new place, even when one's home has been destroyed and one's country lost. "For me, farming is a way to keep in contact with the present while honoring the past."

Humanizing all aspects of the food system—which has been dictated by Big Ag and Big Food—is key to making it fair, accessible, equitable, and environmentally sustainable, says Nguyen. "I don't want people to see me as just a producer of a product. I'm not a factory. I'm a person who has developed knowledge and skills. That's not something that is easily replaceable."—*Sarah Henry*

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