



[theme music plays]

Twilight Greenaway: You're listening to JUST FOOD, a podcast brought to you by the Berkeley Food Institute and University of California Berkeley.

Edmond Allmond: I'm Edmond Allmond.

T: This season, we're exploring the complex web of people and places that provide us with our food. We're talking to the people who grow it, prepare it, and work hard to repair the broken parts of our food system.

The small family farm is an iconic American institution. And across the country, people are chasing the dream of farm life. It's the back to the land ideal, right? Find some land and feed the world. Well, not so much. New farmers face a lot of challenges and uncertainty. For instance, a lot of them don't own their land. They lease it, and most of that is owned by non-farming landlords. Their tenants often shoulder the cost of a lot of the upgrades needed to work the land with very little security. What happens when they put in a \$20,000 well and then their landlord decides they want to sell.

E: Here to help us make sense of all of this is Adam Calo. He's a graduate researcher at UC Berkeley and his work focuses on this broken system of agricultural land ownership and use. Adam, tell us about your work here at UC Berkeley.

Adam Calo: I'm a graduate student in the Department of Environmental Science Policy and Management. And I study California's food system. So I do interviews with farmers in California. I study agricultural policy that influences these types of farmers and I look to building solutions around this problem of land access for beginning farmers.

E: Tell me, what is a beginning farmer?

A: That's actually a really good question. So the USDA defines beginning farmers as farmers with less than 10 years of experience managing an existing farm operation but other groups think about beginning farmers as maybe someone who is young, who's younger than the national average a farmer who's starting out. And I think that when we think about beginning farmers are, we hear one narrative of beginning farmers I see in kind of marketing advertisements maybe young college educated, but that might not cover all the types of new entrants into the agricultural system.

E: I know a lot of people would think this is a bit of an esoteric topic, but it has great importance. How did you come to this? What was your interest, what was your passion?



A: My research has been about interviewing farmers who are starting their career in agriculture here in California. And the first thing they told me is the problem is not about how to farm. It's about ability to gain access to land. And that if we want to transition agriculture into something more just and sustainable, farmers need to have a secure tenure arrangement. And with the way land value is in California the challenges with gaining access to land, that threatens to kind of throw the whole sustainable agriculture question on its head. It's a problem that kind of threatens to dead end the aspirations of what I see as a beginning farmer movement.

E: You're telling me of a situation that sounds pretty much like a landlord tenant situation for everyday people. Almost like renting an apartment or a house. True?

A: Absolutely. The same challenges I have with my landlord apply to the stories I've been hearing from farmers in my interviews. Landlords that have landlord discretion, in which they're choosing some farmers over others to gain that lease. Predatory landlords who may describe the quality of a piece of land only to find when the farmer enters into that lease that it's not so. I think viewing farmers especially new farmers as vulnerable tenants is in a compelling way to think about the problem.

E: How much prep work does a beginning farmer have to do? Is it months, is it years? What happens before they see the first yield that they can take to market?

A: Well that's a really interesting question, because it relates to the problem of being a tenant farmer. The labor that a farmer puts on to a new parcel only increases in value as they add their labor. Whether it's improving the soil adding some capital improvements like a well or a barn for processing. But if you're a tenant imagine doing these improvements to your own house that you're renting, then the landlord wants to move in, the landlord evicts you. You can't take that value with you. It's sunk in the ground.

E: So a farmer goes in leases how much land, maybe an acre, ten acres, one hundred acres? Give me an idea of the size of some of these farms.

A: In California, if you are beginning farmer, your finances probably aren't set. You can try and make a go at it anywhere between half acre up to about 10 acres depending on where you are renting in California. The rent could be as low as 800 dollars per acre per year up to a complete turnkey operation, around four thousand dollars per acre per year. So this type of agriculture is happening on very small scales and often on the marginal lands that have been overlooked by industrial agriculture. It's in these peri-urban environments, because they're chasing these niche markets that urban consumers in the coastal cities are buying. The niche market created by farm to table creates that space for beginning farmers to work on small acreage and yet still perhaps work on razor thin margins and be able to stay in the black.



E: How small are the margins of these farms up to work on?

A: It's very tight. So for an acre of organic strawberry production, it could cost maybe 30 thousand dollars to prepare for that yield and if everything goes well then they can make maybe 40000 dollars on that acre. So that's if everything goes well. So then you can imagine the potential loss if you have some pest damage or you know perhaps something with marketing that that leads to rejection of produce. There's this idea that's passed around in the Central Coast that if you see a piece of land with organic strawberries on it the next thing you're going to see the next time you drive down it's going to be a condo development. And the idea there is that farmers chase high value products and there's only a certain limit into which the next valuable thing is housing development and that's the main driver of a lot of this agricultural land loss which only increases the value of these agricultural lands without any form of legal protection that restricts development. A farmer who's dealing on these margins, they're going to sell. They're going to sell to development and that's going to lead to agricultural land loss.

E: How did the farmers get beyond that? I know they have to improve that they have to increase their margins at some point. How do they do that?

A: Well there's good data that the space for direct marketing is plateauing, that farmers markets are becoming saturated. And farmers in this space turn to a variety of strategies, but one strategies that that lead they leave the sector that they try for a couple of years they might amass some debt and then they can no longer continue. They seek an alternate career. This is especially true for farmers who might come from a college education who are aspiring to do agriculture as more of an aspirational choice of how to how to influence a political system. They don't agree with and then have a finding that risk of losing their nest egg in agriculture, they return to different sectors. I think the other the other type of farmer is one who has additional income right. I think it's about 60 percent of farmers have some outside source of income. And what I see in the beginning farmer space and in the in the farm to table space is that farmers are relying on either inherited land to get over that land access barrier they're relying on funding from institutions and grant money. They're relying on perhaps farming as a second career in order to do agriculture as more of a hobby perhaps in order to reach those niche markets. Some of these farms do an incredible job at stewarding the land, implementing alternative practices, experiments and intercropping, the pollinator diversity is amazing. They're great to learn from. But that model perhaps if you come in from a position of wealth and privilege that model is not replicable to sustain the aspirations of this larger beginning farmer movement. Some of the farmers I've worked with in the central coast of California come from farm labor backgrounds. They tell me that after being a farm laborer perhaps working in conventional fields that they see farming as ... a way of gaining autonomy in the workplace where they don't have to



listen to a labor boss. They have a way of practicing agriculture that they feel safe in. Perhaps without pesticides these farmers deal a lot with this problem of land access because they perhaps don't have the cultural credibility to negotiate with the landlord. We know that 98 percent of all agricultural land in the US is owned by someone who identifies as white and the landlord discretion that I was talking about is a racialized aspect of the beginning farmer experience.

E: So one of these people I'd like to meet is Mai Ngyuen. Tell me about her.

A: When I met Mai, I was impressed about her ability to tell the story of that beginning farmer who is not represented in these kinds of dominant narratives. She does that herself as a farmer of heritage grains, dry farm grains in Sonoma County, but also in countless other venues constantly advocating for the stories of all farmers to be heard and their struggles to be addressed by policy reform not just by consumer choice.

[chickens clucking]

Mai Nguyen: I'm Mai Nguyen and we are currently in Petaluma, California on a property that I lease. It's seven acres, and then we're adjacent to another ten acres that I lease. I'm a grain farmer. I've specialized in heirloom varieties that are not patented. I also grow southeast Asian crops for seed.

[sounds of footsteps in the field]

M: So, right now we're walking up this slope that is mostly ground of sandy loam, so it's actually really good for farming. And even though it's on a slope, we're able to grow grains on it because we actually put in a lot of cover crop. Now, we're heading into a field of Chiddam Blanc deMars. So, this field is about four acres and then we have the break with the barn and the house and then below is another three acres. I grow about eighteen different varieties of wheat. I have two that are on commercial scale of production, so it's enough volume so that I can sell it to bakers and millers. But I also grow out heirloom varieties for seed because these are the wheats you can't find in seed catalogs.

I've been farming for six to seven years. The assumption is that you can only be served, your products can only get to market, if you're big. And a major issue for young, beginning farmers such as myself is that I don't have the capital to access that land. My family came as refugees, so they didn't have money or certainly not land to pass on to me. Having enough capital to start up a farm is critical, not just for land access, but also for the tools that we need, the seed, building a greenhouse, the infrastructure. It's a very capital-intensive process, especially the way that we've set up the farming system where there's this notion that each farm is supposed to have its own set of structures.



And we've really moved far away from the systems that really help build our agricultural systems, which was through cooperatives.

I've been at this property for two years. Prior to that I had farmed at other places for eighteen months to a year and had to move each year. Moving every year, you know, it's kind of like when you find a house and you finally settle in and then it's time to move. The crux of the problem for farmers is land. We need that as our foundation, and from there we can grow. And as people have gained political rights, voting rights, it's not as substantive until you own land.

[sounds of birds chirping slowly fades out]

E: It appears to me that in this beginning farm world we're looking at tenants rights problems, land ownership problems, loan problems—all these different things from other parts of our economy that intersect right here in the middle of farming.

A: Absolutely, the most recent survey from the National Young Farmers Coalition, which surveys beginning farmers many years in a row they describe that access to land as the primary problem for beginning farmers. But also this survey also talks about access to capital. They talk about access to health care, access to housing. So from my standpoint I see a lot of these problems not as agricultural problems, but the way our economy and our policies are situated. It's an equity issue and I think that's why I to meet the beginning farmer issue is so fundamental is because if this movement can address some of these broader structural issues then it has the potential to be really transformative.

E: So we've gone through these very strong obstacles that stand in the way of these beginning farmers these new farmers, farmers trying to transition you know from let's say an older owner to a younger owner. What are the solutions for these people what do we put in their hands to make them successful so that we can all be fed as we should be?

A: I feel like there's an impulse, sitting here from Berkeley, my mind immediately goes to being consumer what can I do as a consumer. I'd like to think about this to push that impulse away because I think relying on our consumer ability to support farmers through market channels only reinforces that idea that a beginning farmer in order to succeed has to be a business person, a savvy marketer, someone who can do a handshake with a realtor and negotiate through these channels. If we just focus on consumer action then I think that status quo is upheld and so that turns what what can we do not as a consumer, but as a citizen. And I think for me that I immediately turn to regional and municipal policy. Something optimistic I've seen is that land use zoning and planning can have huge effects on these types of market arrangements that this land is valued at. And this isn't something that we have to change at the federal level. We don't



need a federal food policy a pro small farmers farm bill, all right? Simply getting more farmer voices more concerned eaters voices in some of these housing boards in zoning boards that decide what percentage of our county's land should be preserved in agriculture can alter the dynamics of this land access dilemma. When I looked at the beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, that all this grant funding was going towards training farmers in entrepreneurship and marketing. What if those funds were transitioned to a different type of education to maybe supporting farmers who normally would have to be taking care of their children or working in the fields to sit on those housing boards? What about educating farmers about their rights as a tenant? What about challenging the existing lease laws that are favorable towards landlords. If some of that funding transitioned to a more policy awareness within the constituency of beginning farmers, I think that would provide tools that would be address some of the policy concerns some of the structural concerns that beginning farmers face.

E: Adam Calo, thank you for joining us on JUST FOOD to talk about this important issue.

A: Thanks for having me.

[theme music plays under voiceover]

E: Thanks for listening to JUST FOOD. I'm Edmond Allmond.

T: I'm Twilight Greenaway.

E: JUST FOOD is a project by the Berkeley Food Institute at the University of California Berkeley and was created in partnership with the Berkeley Advanced Media Institute. Muna Danish did the field reporting. Graelyn Brashear was the producer, with editing from Ben Manilla. The music was created by Blue Dot Sessions. You can find JUST FOOD on Apple Podcasts, PodBean, or wherever you find your podcasts. You can see photos and learn more about the episode topics on our website, food.berkeley.edu.

[theme music slowly fades out]