

Taking Root

A family of Hmong immigrants brings centuries-old agrarian wisdom to California's Central Valley

by Andrea Nguyen photographs by Barbara Ries





A bowl of Chinese mustard greens soup. Facing page, top, a ripe bitter melon, whose seeds will be used for the following year's crop; bottom, John Xiong's three-year-old daughter, Diana, holding a bunch of yam leaves. Previous pages, Jenie Xiong, 13, harvesting cilantro.



H M O N G F A R M E R S

TO FIND JOHN XIONG's farm, where I am headed on this hot summer morning, one must drive past downtown Fresno, California, beyond the Walmart and its vast parking lot on West Shaw Avenue, to where new tract housing gives way to lush farmland. I slow down at the unlikely sight of a group of Asian women in conical, wide-brimmed straw hats tending to manicured rows of vegetables. Figuring that I'm close to my destination, I roll down my window and ask them whether they know of Xiong's whereabouts. The women confer in a mellifluous language I instantly recognize to be Hmong (pronounced "mung", with a barely aspirated *h*). Then, in halting English, one of them tells me to follow the dirt road toward the back of their plot. "You'll see him there," she says with a smile.

As I drive, trellised rows of long beans rise up on either side of me; moments later, a yellow panel truck—Xiong's, I deduce—comes into view. I pull up alongside it and get out. Xiong, 47, a stocky man dressed in jeans and work boots, greets me with a reserve that I've found to be typical of the Hmong, a semi-nomadic people who have inhabited parts of China and Southeast Asia for centuries. We shake hands, which feels a bit awkward, so I bow slightly to communicate respect. At that, Xiong suggests we take a tour of his five-acre parcel, one of two where he grows an array of Asian produce and more. In one small field, he shows me bushes bearing six kinds of purple-green Asian eggplants; in another, strawberries are thriving.

Xiong has invited me to spend a few days with him and his family so that I can learn about California's Hmong farmers and their foodways, subjects that have fascinated me since I started buying produce years ago from Hmong vendors in San Luis Obispo, where my sister used to live. I remember being amazed by both the variety and the intense flavor of the fruits and vegetables those farmers were selling. There was just-picked daikon and snow peas, as well as unfamiliar items like whole branches of thai chiles still festooned with ripe fruits.

Together Xiong and I walk down densely planted rows of squash, including angled luffa, a vegetable that, Xiong tells me, is wonderful stir-fried. I point out how healthful everything

looks, and Xiong beams with pride. He works as we stroll; at one point he opens up a yellowed, mature bitter melon and removes its bright red seeds, casting them onto a pile of other seeds drying in the sun—stock for next year's crop.

XIONG, LIKE ALL HMONG people, is descended from an ancient ethnic group who once inhabited the fertile valleys of the Yangtze and Huang (Yellow) rivers in China and, later, the Chinese provinces of Guizhou, Hunan, Sichuan, and Yunnan. In the early 19th century, fleeing oppression wrought by the Qing dynasty, a large number of Hmong migrated southward into the remote mountainous regions of what is now Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, where they were able to live with relative autonomy as farmers and gatherers. Beginning in 1975, when the Communist government came to power in Laos, where many Hmong had eventually settled, tens of thousands of them fled to Thailand to avoid persecution. After years in Thai refugee camps, many were allowed to enter the United States, bringing little with them except their agricultural traditions, their language (which is phonetically and tonally expressed in a Romanized alphabet system), and a strong ethnic identity born of years of wandering and isolation.

Central California contains the largest concentration of Hmong in the nation; these Southeast Asian refugees constitute roughly 20 percent of the certified farmers in the Fresno area. Of a total Hmong population in the United States of about 200,000, roughly 1,200 are farmers in and around that central California city—a number that does not take into account family dependents, who often help out in the fields and at the markets. Most of Fresno's Hmong farmers share tools and equipment as well as seeds brought over from Laos, and most of them cannot afford to buy

farmland. Instead, they lease plots, frequently on land that other people don't want, either because it's located far from town or has difficult soil. Should a landowner end the lease, a Hmong farmer starts over elsewhere. This type of itinerant tenant farming is not incompatible with the Hmong's traditionally mobile lifestyle, which evolved in the mountains of Laos and other areas, where a field is worked constantly until it is no longer efficient, at which point it is left to grow fertile again while the farmer works a new piece of land.

Xiong speaks sparingly of his own past. He came to the United States from Laos 28 years ago, after having spent four years in a Thai refugee camp. For 19 years he worked in apartment maintenance and automobile repair, before deciding to return to farming. Today he lives with his second wife, Bee; his 63-year-old mother, Kia Yang; and nine children, ages three to 20.

"In Laos, we lived and farmed in the mountains," Xiong tells me, as we continue to walk between rows of vegetables. "We waited for rain to grow things. It was easy to work and pick. In Fresno, everything is flat and you have to bend over so much. It hurts when you get up."

Nevertheless, Xiong's farming methods are not dramatically different from those he learned in Laos. "I don't use pesticides or chemicals," he says. "Everything is natural." He explains that his customers—many of them Hmong immigrants hungry for familiar produce but also other Asian and non-Asian people from every economic tier—are picky about quality, so he believes that his techniques must be clean and honest. "In Laos, we grew vegetables just for the family to eat. Here we farm to sell. We have to grow a lot more and think of customers." As in Laos, Xiong works the soil only minimally

John Xiong inside his greenhouse, facing page, holding a bunch of fresh-picked basil.

M E T H O D

Zaub Ntsuab Hau Xyaw Nqaij Npuas Sawb

(Chinese Mustard Greens Soup)

For this soup (pictured on previous pages, left), the Xiongs use young, tender chinese mustard greens, which have a pleasing bite. Chinese cabbage or Western-style mustard greens or swiss chard can be substituted. Put 2 qts. water into a large pot, cover, and bring to a boil. Add 1/2 lb. Hmong smoked pork (see page 104) or smoked slab bacon cut into 1 1/2" x 2" pieces and salt to taste. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer until broth is lightly smoky and pork fat is translucent, about 20 minutes. Add 2 lbs. gai choy (chinese mustard greens; see page 104 for a source), trimmed and roughly chopped. Cook, stirring often, until greens are bright green and tender, about 5 minutes. Season to taste with salt and ladle soup into bowls. Serve with steamed rice, if you like. Serves 4.

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and, as a quick glance around me confirms, occasionally lets weeds grow freely. He farms a huge variety of fruits and vegetables, but in small quantities, and sticks almost exclusively to produce he knows intimately.

The clearest measure of the success of this approach is how good his produce tastes. I take a bite of a jicama root he's just dug up and peeled for me. The tennis ball-size tuber is too young for market, but its flesh is already crisp, refreshingly juicy, and slightly sweet. One of my favorite purchases at Hmong vendor stalls has always been fresh thai basil, but I haven't seen any on Xiong's farm. When I inquire, he walks me over to a greenhouse located at the edge of the field. Stepping into the sweltering heat inside, I'm instantly intoxicated by the heady perfume of thai, lemon, and italian basil. Then he shows me his chile plants, which look like pygmy Christmas trees decorated with a

zillion brightly colored ornaments of various shapes and sizes. I see thai, jalapeño, serrano, and italian sweet chiles and a fiery, squat Asian kind whose name Xiong can't remember. It was cultivated from seeds he got as a gift from a fellow Hmong farmer.

Xiong's wife, Bee, a round-faced woman with a cheery countenance, arrives at the farm in the late afternoon with the couple's youngest child, three-year-old Diana. Xiong playfully sweeps his daughter off the ground and onto his shoulders, much to her amusement. Later, I watch Diana and her mother, bathed in the golden late-day sunlight, dance and sing amid chest-high stalks of lemongrass, which Xiong is harvesting for the weekend market. With speed and precision, he digs up a cluster of stalks with a shovel, gathers them into bundles, trims them with a broad-bladed knife, and secures them with a rubber band. He hands me a trimmed stalk, and I bite into it, releasing its tart, citrus-like juice and awakening my appetite.

By sunrise on Saturday morning, the Xiongs have already set up their stall at the farmers' market in Vallejo, a Bay Area town 190 miles from Fresno. John and Bee, most of their chil-

dren, and even John's mother picked eggplants until sundown last night and finished loading the truck by midnight. Then John, Bee, and three of their children began the nearly four-hour drive to market. As the sun comes up, I watch the children, sleepy looking but alert, efficiently and meticulously stack and arrange the produce for display.

The Vallejo market officially starts at nine, but early birds start arriving sooner. At half past seven, two Filipina nurses just off from the graveyard shift buy a bagful of bitter melon vines, which they tell me they will use to make ginisang mongo, a mung bean stew. A short while later, an older man of Mexican descent who introduces himself to me as Rafael Vega carefully chooses a handful of chiles for his homemade salsa. Next, a Punjabi couple load up on okra; they're followed by a middle-aged white woman who buys a few pickling cucumbers and some bumpy-skinned Indian bitter melon (also known as karela). The Xiongs complete each sale with a smile and a "Have a nice day"; if a customer attempts to haggle, they remain politely silent. At half past noon, the Xiongs pack up and start the drive back to

Above, from left, chile-scallion relish; Bee and John Xiong preparing dinner in their Fresno kitchen; stir-fried yam leaves with red onions; 63-year-old Kia Yang Xiong and her grandson Cakou in the family's living room.



Fresno, where they will pick vegetables in the afternoon before loading the truck again for the Sunday market in San Rafael, north of San Francisco.

I ask Bee whether she thinks her children will become farmers too. She admits that farming in the United States is difficult, but she teaches her children practical Hmong traditions. “I tell them, ‘This is the first job I’ve trained you for,’” she says. “If you go to school and get good grades, you may not have to farm.”

A FEW DAYS LATER, John and Bee invite me for supper at their three-bedroom house in a working-class section of Fresno, about three miles from their closest field. When I arrive, John is sorting ingredients on the counter in their small, neat kitchen: fresh chicken wings, a top round beef steak, and pieces of locally made Hmong-style smoked pork rib seasoning called *nqaij npuas sawb* (pronounced *guy bu-AH sher*) that’s used in a number of dishes.

“It’s easy to feed a big family like ours,” John says. “We grow the vegetables and buy some meat and a big bag of rice. That’s all we need.” Indeed, (*continued on page 61*)

METHODS

Kua Txob Tuav Xyaw Dos

(Chile-Scallion Relish)

This pungent condiment (pictured on facing page, at far left) is served at virtually every Xiong family meal. Stir it into soups or stir-fried dishes, like the stir-fried angled luffa with beef (see page 61), or serve it on its own with rice. Vary the amount of chiles according to your tolerance for heat. For moderately hot results, put 18 small stemmed and roughly chopped green thai chiles and 1/2 tsp. salt into a mortar (alternatively, use a small food processor). Working the pestle in a circular motion, crush chiles and salt against the sides of the mortar until a coarse paste forms. Add 3 roughly chopped scallions (green parts only) and 1/2 cup lightly packed chopped cilantro leaves and, switching to an up-and-down pounding motion, work the pestle to combine the ingredients well, transforming the mixture into a wet, rough-textured relish. Transfer to a small bowl and serve. Makes about 1/3 cup.

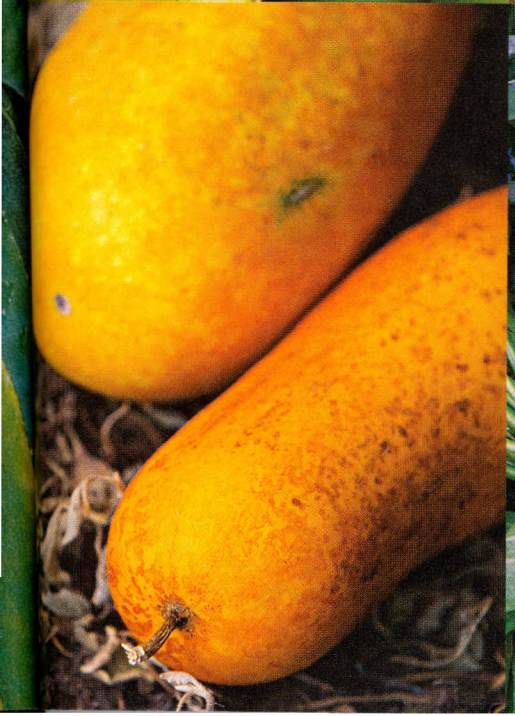
Hmab Qos Liab Kib Xyaw Dos Thiab Qej

(Stir-Fried Yam Leaves with Onions)

Yam leaves are a leafy green vegetable available at most Asian produce markets (also look for bunches labeled as sweet potato leaves); they are unrelated to the tuber of the same name. John Xiong likes to add red onion to this stir-fry (pictured above, left) for the sweetness it imparts. Cut off and discard the main stems from a 1-lb. bunch of yam leaves or chinese water spinach, so that you are left with only the leaves with their small, tender stems attached. (You should have about 1/2 lb.) Heat 3 tbsp. peanut oil in a wok over high heat. Add 1 small halved and thickly sliced red onion and 1 thinly sliced clove garlic. Stir-fry quickly until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add yam leaves and salt to taste and stir-fry until leaves are just wilted and onion is crisp-tender, 2-3 minutes more. Transfer to a large platter and serve promptly with steamed rice, if you like. Serves 2.



Harvested long beans and angled luffa at John Xiong's farm in Fresno, California. Facing page, a bounty of Xiong's vegetables: top row, left to right, chinese bitter melon, cherry tomatoes, sweet peppers; middle row, left to right, ope squash, Hmong pumpkin, lemongrass; bottom row, left to right, yellow cucumbers, yam leaves, small round Asian eggplants.





John Xiong's daughters (from left) Pahoua, 15, Jenie, 13, and Maiyer, 12, holding buckets of just-picked eggplants. Facing page, John Xiong harvesting lemongrass, top; bottom, stir-fried bitter melon with chicken wings.





HMONG FARMERS

(continued from page 55) the refrigerator and cupboards are nearly bare; the only things on display are an electric rice cooker, the meat on the counter, and a pile of freshly picked vegetables. The Xiongs own their home, which gives their lives a measure of permanence, but the décor is minimal, as if they might pick up and leave tomorrow. In fact, Bee talks eagerly about moving to Oklahoma, where John's older kids live and the family has already purchased property, to grow Asian vegetables and fruits like jujubes and persimmons.

When it comes to cooking, it would be understating things to say that the Xiongs accomplish much with very little. While John steams sticky rice, I watch Bee pound thai chiles with salt, scallions, and cilantro to make a dish called kua txob tuav xyaw dos (koo-AH za too-AH sher daw), which is similar to sambal, the spicy condiment eaten in Indonesia and Malaysia. John samples some, taking a ball of rice, dipping it into Bee's mixture, and popping it into his mouth; he invites me to do the same. It delivers an intense jolt that is mellowed by the sweet, chewy rice.


Now Bee is using a rustic, machete-like knife to whack the chicken wings into small pieces for her favorite dish, dib iab kib xyaw koojtis qaib (dee ee-YIA gee sher kong-TEE guy), a Laotian Hmong classic made of chinese bitter melon with chicken wings. "It is a Hmong knife," John tells me. "You can use it to chop a tree or cut up meat." As an accompaniment to that dish, Bee also prepares hmab qos liab

kib xyaw dos thiab qej (ma gaw lee-AH kee sher daw tee-AH kay), a stir-fry of yam leaf, red onion, and garlic, stirring the ingredients with disposable chopsticks. Hot from the wok, the yam leaf has a substantial, almost plush texture. Bee is a fan of the ingredient, but John is not. "Here I grow it because so many customers like it," he says. For the soup known as zaub ntsuab hau xyaw nqaij npuas sawb (zow choo-AH how sher guy boo-AH sher), which is part of many Hmong meals, Bee simmers smoked pork for a few minutes in an aluminum pot; then she grabs a bunch of chinese mustard leaves, twists them vigorously to tear them in half, and drops them into the pot. A short while later she gives me a taste: the meat's smoky richness perfectly balances the greens' tangy bite.

As his children start to come home from school, John minces top round to use in a dish called xwbkuab kib xyaw nqaij nyug (sin-QUA kee sher gigh nee-U), stir-fried angled luffa with beef. "The kids like my cooking more than hers," John says loudly enough for Bee to hear. She smiles.

Maiyer, the couple's 12-year-old daughter, chimes in: "My dad is great. I learned to cook from him. Now, sometimes my older sisters and I make dinner for the family."

Finally, the family is called to the dining table, at the center of which sit a huge bowl of long-grain rice and a bowl of sticky rice. The rices are surrounded by a colorful array of all the other cooked dishes. As the meal progresses, I notice that the bitter melon dish stays at the adults' end of the table—some of the kids, born and raised in the States, do not like the forceful taste of certain traditional Hmong foods. But they set to the others eagerly. Daughter Pahoua, 15, reaches for a portion of Bee's chile condiment. Her 17-year-old brother, Chao, plucks pieces of smoked pork right out of the soup pot.

In the room beyond the kitchen, the television blares. Around the dinner table, though, there is animated talk, in English and in Hmong, of school and work. Eating contentedly, I picture similar scenes in the other houses on the Xiongs' street and in millions of houses across the country, as the families of America sit down for their evening meal. 

John Xiong at work, facing page, top; bottom, stir-fried angled luffa with beef.

THE PANTRY, page 104: Sources for Hmong smoked pork, chinese mustard greens, chinese bitter melon, and angled luffa.

RECIPE

Xwbkuab Kib Xyaw Nqaij Nyug

(Stir-Fried Angled Luffa with Beef)

SERVES 4

Angled luffa (also called sinqua) is easy to spot at most Asian produce markets: look for a round, long, and dark green squash with tapered ends and thin ridges running its length. Select specimens that bend slightly; if they're stiff, they're probably old. The Xiongs use a sharp kitchen knife to cut away the skin; you may use a vegetable peeler. Some Hmong cooks don't stir this dish while it cooks, but John Xiong swears that doing so releases more of the squash's mildly sweet flavor.

- 2 large angled luffas (about 1³/₄ lbs.; see page 104)
- 5 tbsp. peanut oil
- ³/₄ lb. coarsely ground trimmed beef top round or sirloin
- 4 scallions, white and light green parts only, coarsely chopped
- Salt
- 1 stalk lemongrass, ends trimmed (leaving a 5"-6" piece), lightly crushed
- 2 sprigs thai basil

1. Using a vegetable peeler or a sharp paring knife, remove only the rough, ribbed green skin from each angled luffa to reveal its spongy white flesh. Cut each luffa into 1/4"-thick slices on the bias and set aside.

2. Heat the oil in a wok over high heat. Add the beef and stir-fry, breaking up the meat into small pieces, until almost cooked through, about 1 minute. Add the scallions and salt to taste and stir to combine. Add the reserved luffa and toss well. Add 2/3 cup water and stir again to combine. Cover the wok and bring to a boil.

3. Uncover the pot, add the lemongrass, and reduce heat to medium. Cook, stirring often and mashing the luffa against the side of the wok from time to time, until the luffa is very soft, 4-5 minutes. (The white inner core will have mostly melded into the sauce, leaving behind spongy, firmer pieces of flesh.)

4. Add the basil sprigs and continue stirring until they are slightly wilted and fragrant, about 15 seconds more. Transfer the dish to a shallow bowl and serve with steamed rice and chile-scallion relish (see page 55), if you like.

METHOD

Dib Iab Kib Xyaw Koojtis Qaib

(Stir-Fried Bitter Melon with Chicken Wings)

John Xiong tames the astringency of bitter melon by massaging the sliced vegetable in water until it turns cloudy. To learn more about that vegetable, see page 100. Trim the ends off of 2 chinese bitter melons (about 1 lb. total) and halve each lengthwise. Using a spoon, scoop out and discard the seeds and spongy insides. Cut each bitter melon half into 1/3"-thick slices on the bias and transfer to a large bowl. Cover with water and swish the slices around with your hands until the water is cloudy; drain well and set aside. Heat 5 tbsp. peanut oil in a wok over medium heat. Add 6 whole chicken wings (each cut into 4 pieces) and cook, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, 8-10 minutes. Carefully add bitter melon and salt to taste and stir-fry until crisp-tender, 3-4 minutes more. Transfer to a large platter and serve hot. Serves 4.