

Hmong farmers work to get produce in stores, schools

Continued from page 8

"It's challenging for farmers' market growers right now," said Paul Hugunin, who promotes local food as the Minnesota Grown program coordinator at the state Department of Agriculture. "Many are struggling with the fact that they have to go to more markets now than they did five years ago to make the same dollars in sales."

Last year was the association's first full season on its new 155-acre location, a former corn and soybean farm that straddles U.S. 52 in Dakota County, tucked into a curve of the Vermillion River. It was purchased for HAFA in 2013 by an anonymous benefactor interested in sustainable agriculture and was leased for ten years to HAFA.

"The land was critical," Hang said. "If you don't have land tenure, you don't have certainty. If I don't know I'm going to have this land for several years, how can I plant perennials or invest in organic practices and get certified?"

HAFA raised grants to dig a well, set up irrigation, and erect a fence to keep deer from wandering up from the river. The group renovated a pole barn to create an outdoor washing station and indoor cold storage where farmers rent pallets. Half the farmer members rent five- or 10-acre plots on the farm, and about half rent elsewhere.

HAFA has helped its farmers diversify sales. Over the past three months, HAFA delivered boxes of fresh produce to 140 people who signed up for its community supported agriculture program. Deliveries were dropped off at various worksites, including St. Paul City Hall.

HAFA broke into institutional sales in 2012 when the new food service director in Minneapolis Public Schools wanted more local, fresh foods on the menu. The district asked its vendor, Russ Davis Wholesale, to buy some produce from small, immigrant local farmers, including HAFA.

"Our first year was quite the challenge," said Cricket James, who manages school accounts for Russ Davis. The company arranged for a food-safety consultant to help Hmong farmers free of charge to establish the protocols to sell commercially. HAFA installed handwashing stations in the food-packing area, built chilled storage, and taught its farmers to fill out paperwork, keep pests out of the fields, and regularly clean vehicles. After an initial delivery of cucumbers arrived in a jumble of boxes and came up short on weight, Russ Davis ran a class to show farmers how to pack standard commercial-sized cases of vegetables.

"Now, I can't say enough good things about HAFA," James said. "They're passionate and committed. And they provide great produce. Part of why they taste different is the freshness. I hope they continue grow."

Minneapolis aims to buy one-third of its produce from local growers, said Andrea Northup, the district's farm-to-school coordinator. Local produce costs on average five percent to 10 percent more, she said, and there are still challenges working with small suppliers. But the payoff is in the fresh, healthy food, such as HAFA's cauliflower roasted with olive oil.

"We didn't know if the kids were going to like it, but it literally flies off the line," Northup said. "It tastes so much better than the cauliflower that has been sitting on a truck for a week coming from California, which is a variety that is grown for storage and for whiteness and for



GROWING IN MINNESOTA. *Teng Thao of St. Paul, Minnesota checks the quality of little potatoes while washing them on a farm south of Hastings, Minnesota. The farm is owned by the Hmong American Farmers Association, which has helped the Thaos broker deals to sell their vegetables to grocery chains such as Lunds & Byerlys and Mississippi Market. (Photo/Jean Pieri/St. Paul Pioneer Press via AP)*

beauty. The varieties that HAFA grows are for flavor. It's completely different."

HAFA this year has also sold produce to local food co-ops, Lancer Catering, South Washington County Schools, and the Head Start programs run by Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties. Head Start preschoolers even took a field trip to the farm to see where their lunch came from. Lunds & Byerlys is also a major customer.

"Over the last four or five or six years, people have really wanted to know more about the story of their food, who is growing it, where and how many miles has it travelled," said Rick Steigerwald, vice president of fresh foods at Edina-based Lunds & Byerlys, which has bought Asian long beans, Brussels sprouts, and leeks from HAFA. "We've tried to expand our network of local growers. If it's Minnesota grown, we call that out in the description in the store signage."

Friday evenings at dusk have a party vibe at the HAFA pole barn, as farmers trickle in from the fields to wash produce on the concrete pad.

"Before, we took everything home and washed it outside our house in St. Paul," said Pa Thao, 24, as she swished bunches of baby mustard greens in a black plastic tub the size of a high-sided bathtub. "This is a lot easier and we get done a lot faster. It used to take us four to five hours. Now, it only takes two to three hours, and we can go to bed at 11:00pm."

Nearby, her mother, Soua Thao, rinsed beets and bunches of lemongrass. Xeng Thao, 27, who works in a Target electronics department during the day, washed magenta sweet potatoes. Two other brothers loaded vegetables into two cargo vans they would drive to the Saturday morning markets in Burnsville and Apple Valley.

The Thao family, which farms 10 acres on the HAFA farm and rents five acres nearby, sells produce at eight farmers' markets during the week and contributes to the association's commercial orders. By the end of this season, HAFA estimates that member farmers like the Thaos, who also sell to institutional customers, will average \$7,200 in sales per acre, a couple of thousand dollars more per acre than they sold just three years ago and close to the sales of non-Hmong vegetable farmers.

"That's a total success," Hang said. Teng Thao wants to sell even more through HAFA next year.

"We're all still trying to figure out how all things work, and they're still trying to figure out how to distribute," he said. "But it's going good."



GAMBATTE! "Gambatte! Legacy of an Enduring Spirit" is currently on view at the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center in Portland. The exhibit reveals, through the power of photos and documentary video, a generation's triumph over their incarceration during World War II. Pictured in the left photo are Helene Nakamoto Mihara (center left) and Mary Ann Yahiro (center right) at age seven reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at Raphael Weill School in San Francisco, before being sent to the Topaz Internment Camp in Utah in April of 1942. In the right photo, Mary Ann and Helene are photographed again, at the age of 72, on January 20, 2007.

"Gambatte!" on display at ONLC

A new travelling exhibit, "Gambatte! Legacy of an Enduring Spirit," recently opened at the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center (ONLC) in Portland. The display features historic images shot in 1942 by War Relocation Authority staff photographers Dorothea Lange, Tom Parker, and others juxtaposed with contemporary images of the same individuals taken by *Sacramento Bee* photojournalist Paul Kitagaki Jr.

The exhibit explores the Japanese concept of *gambatte*, or to triumph over adversity, to discover the ways in which multiple generations of Japanese Americans persevered through their incarceration during World War II.

Over the past ten years, Kitagaki has documented more than 30 of the individuals originally photographed by the War Relocation Authority staff, or their direct descendants, living in California, Oregon, and Washington.

In one set of photos, second-generation


Japanese Americans Helene Nakamoto Mihara and Mary Ann Yahiro, both seven years old, are seen reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at Raphael Weill School in 1942 in San Francisco, California, before they were sent to the Topaz Internment Camp in Utah. In the companion photo taken by Kitagaki, Mary Ann and Helene are again photographed, this time at age 72, on January 20, 2007.

Mihara's father owned the American Fish Market in the Japantown section of San Francisco. He was arrested by the FBI, but reunited with the family in Topaz.


Yahiro's parents were split up. Her mother, a teacher who taught Japanese, was arrested and sent to a separate camp. She never saw her mother again.

"Gambatte!" is on display through January 17 at ONLC, located at 121 N.W. Second Avenue in Portland. To learn more, call (503) 224-1458 or visit <www.oregonnikkei.org>.


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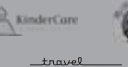

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