

Hmong farmers work to get produce in stores, schools

By Maja Beckstrom
St. Paul Pioneer Press

HASTINGS, Minn. (AP) — Like many Hmong farmers, Teng Thao's family has sold vegetables at Twin Cities farmers' markets for years. Now they also sell leeks to Lunds & Byerlys, sweet potatoes to Mississippi Market Natural Foods Co-ops in St. Paul, and broccoli to public schools in Hopkins.

Thao, 32, said he and his mother, who doesn't speak English, could never have brokered the deals on their own. The institutional customers came through his membership in the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA). The four-year-old St. Paul nonprofit runs a farm in Dakota County and is aggregating produce grown by more than 30 Hmong member farmers to sell to grocery stores, wholesalers, caterers, and schools, as well as directly to consumers through weekly deliveries.

"They try to get us as close to the price that we sell at the farmers' market as possible," Thao told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. "We were looking for alternative markets. But who do you talk to? None of us really knew how to approach that, so we never did it. We didn't know where to start."

And yet relying on patrons at farmers' markets to pay the bills was not working.

"It's harder and harder for small farmers in Minnesota to make it," said Hilary Otey-Wold, executive director of the Minnesota Food Association, a nonprofit that runs a 150-acre training farm for mostly immigrant farmers in Marine on St. Croix.

The Hmong American Farmers Association is an example of small, immigrant farmers in Minnesota combining produce and resources to gain a foothold in an industry dominated by out-of-state mega farms and distribution systems, with long-term contracts, accustomed to dealing in large volumes.

"The model that HAFA has come up with is spot-on," Otey-Wold said. "It's trying to find the sweet spot through efficiencies and shared resources and improvements in training that can increase production."

Despite the buzz about "buying local," most vegetables sold in Minnesota grocery stores or served in cafeterias



HONG AMERICAN FARMERS ASSOCIATION. Mai Moua (left photo) picks flowers on the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA) farm south of Hastings, Minnesota. HAFA, a four-year-old St. Paul nonprofit, runs the farm in Dakota County and is aggregating produce grown by more than 30 Hmong member farmers to sell to grocery stores, wholesalers, caterers, and schools, as well as directly to consumers through weekly deliveries. (Photos/Jean Pieri/St. Paul Pioneer Press via AP)

are trucked in from California, Mexico, and elsewhere, where vast farms grow cheap produce. A U.S. Department of Agriculture census shows a decline in the number of farms in Minnesota growing produce: in 2012, 2,620 farms were growing vegetables, 100 farms fewer than in 2007. The number of acres planted in vegetables has also dipped slightly.

Other farmers are also finding new markets by banding together. A group of mostly Latino farmers have formed Shared Ground Farmers' Cooperative to sell to wholesalers and hospitals and through boxed deliveries to consumers on St. Paul's East Side. Eight Hmong farmers renting land in Dakota County recently formed the Minnesota Hmong Agricultural Cooperative. A new nonprofit, the Good Acre, is opening a location on Larpenteur Avenue in St. Paul where small urban growers can wash and pack produce.

HAFA is among the most successful, largely because of its energetic and well-connected founder, Pakou Hang. The second of seven children, Hang grew up helping her parents grow and sell produce for farmers' markets.

"We used to joke about how we hated farming because it's so much work," said Hang, 39. After earning an undergraduate degree at Yale University and working in



socially sustainable investing, Hang returned to Minnesota, where she worked for the Latino Economic Development Center in Minneapolis and became interested in the challenges facing immigrant farmers. She formed HAFA in 2011 with support from a Bush Leadership Fellowship.

Hang talks a mile a minute about topics ranging from the benefits of bees and cover crops to the scant handful of Hmong farmers who own their own land.

"Our mission is to uplift and support Hmong farmers," Hang said.

HAFA's criteria include working with farmers who grow on at least three acres, have farmed for at least three years, sell at farmers' markets, and carry liability insurance. The association provides access to new customers, training in Hmong, and grants and loans for equipment such as tractors.

"We want to attract people who want to do something better with their farm," she said. "If farmers don't adapt, they're not going to stay in business."

Many Hmong farmers barely eke out a living, and it's been getting harder. The number of farmers' markets in the state has nearly tripled over the past 10 years, to 182 this year from 64 markets in 2005, including more than 60 in the Twin Cities area. At the same time, competition increased after some Hmong who lost manufacturing jobs during the recession turned to selling vegetables.

"The idea of local foods is really hot right now, the recession is over, and I'm like, 'You're at the forefront of the local-foods movement,'" Hang said. "What's going on? How can we be prosperous?"

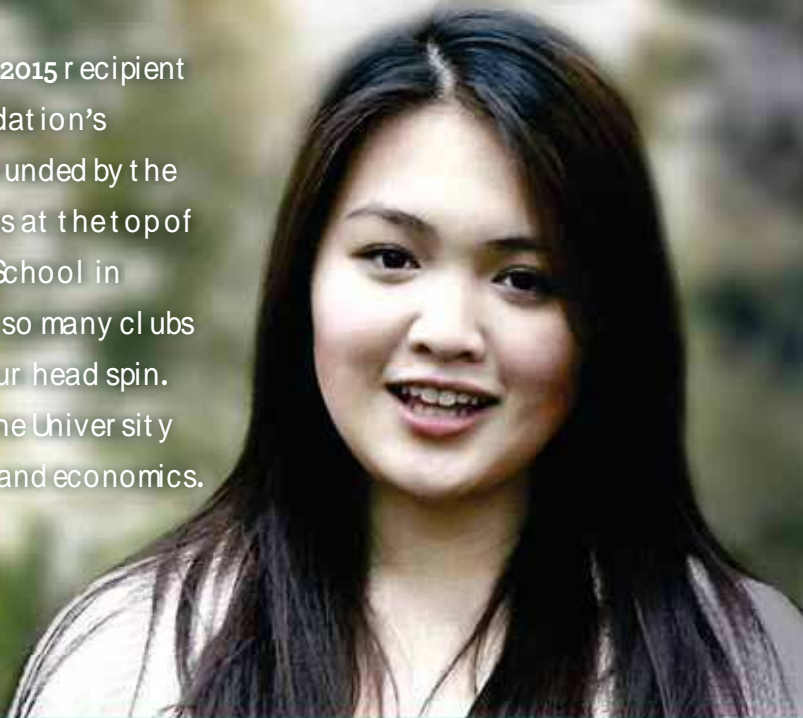
Hmong farmers surveyed by HAFA three years ago averaged sales at farmers' markets of \$5,000 per acre, compared with non-Hmong farmers who averaged \$8,000 per acre, and up to \$20,000 per acre for organic and specialty crops.

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Education Matters

Just ask Christina. She's the 2015 recipient of the Asian Reporter Foundation's \$2000 Scholarship Award, funded by the Oregon Lottery. Christina is at the top of her class at Franklin High School in Portland and is involved in so many clubs and activities, it'll make your head spin. Christina plans to attend the University of Oregon to study business and economics.

Christina Kuang
2015 Asian Reporter Foundation
Scholarship Award Recipient



Congratulations
Christina!



30 Years of Doing Good Things

LOTTERY GAMES ARE BASED ON CHANCE AND SHOULD BE PLAYED FOR ENTERTAINMENT ONLY

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4				5			9	6
1					9	2		
	9	6				5		
	1		7	5				
2								4
			1	3		5		
		4				9	3	
		1	9					5
9	8			6				2

Difficulty level: Medium

#45961

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last week's puzzle

Puzzle #42174 (Easy)

All solutions available at www.sudoku.com.

6	4	7	9	1	5	8	2	3
1	8	3	7	2	4	5	9	6
9	2	5	8	6	3	4	1	7
8	5	1	6	4	7	2	3	9
4	7	9	2	3	8	1	6	5
2	3	6	1	5	9	7	8	4
3	6	4	5	8	1	9	7	2
7	1	2	4	9	6	3	5	8
5	9	8	3	7	2	6	4	1