GROWING UP WITH gai lan

Making a path to the American dream in the dirt.

BY HARRY MOK

The author, looking not too happy, stands on the edge of his family's farm in the early 1970s.

WHAT I REMEMBER most is the dirt. It was everywhere, dusty and dry on hot summer days or muddy and cold during the winter. It would wind up on my clothes, on my arms and sometimes even on my face. I suppose that's why I don't enjoy camping or hiking very much now. A childhood spent in dirt will do that to you.

I spent my youth picking gai lan and yu choy, pulling weeds and digging irrigation trenches. Our family business is a Chinese vegetable farm in Woodland, CA, just outside of Sacramento. We started farming in 1968, the year I was born and two years after my family emigrated from Hong Kong to the United States.

Some of my first memories are of sitting in my baby carrier on the fields of the first farm we had in Colusa, CA, a town of 3,000 about 50 miles north of Sacramento. We rented a small plot of sandy land next to the Sacramento River. Everything was done by hand. Our biggest piece of farm equipment was a used roto-tiller. We found our path to the American dream—in the dirt.

Back when my family started farming, there were probably a few hundred Chinese or Asian vegetable farms, mostly supplying the big Chinatowns around the country. It wasn't an easy way to make a living then and it isn't now, either. Thousands of Asian farms have cropped up in the last 25 years, mostly due to rising immigration, particularly from Southeast Asia. Most are family

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farmers who eke out a living on an acre or two of land, much like my family did 35 years ago. On the other end are companies like Lucky Farms of San Bernardino, CA, which started small but now cultivates 5,000 acres in three states and Mexico, selling produce in 40 states and Canada.

No national statistics are kept on the number or acreage of Asian farms, but in California's Fresno County alone, an estimated 20,000 acres of Asian vegetables are being grown on farms of between one and 500 acres, according to Richard Molinar, farm adviser for the University of California Cooperative Extension Service.

The author's parents, in the mid 1980s, made a living from growing Asian vegetables.

California has the climate, available land, and—with its large number of Asian Americans—the customers to support a large Asian farming industry. In 1998, about $18 million in revenue was generated from Asian produce in neighboring San Bernardino and Riverside counties in California, according to a study by the Riverside Agriculture Commission. The state's Asian vegetable farms produce $75 million to $100 million worth of crops a year, estimates Aziz Baameur, a UC Extension farm adviser for Santa Clara County.

"In addition, there is a large population outside the Asian community that consumes these products," Baameur says. "It makes sense [for farmers] to be in California."

The West Coast may produce the most Asian vegetables, but farms can be found in the Northeast, Florida, Illinois, Texas and almost anywhere a sizeable Asian American population resides. But the industry has been in decline in recent years due to tough economic times, higher costs and stagnant prices, a trend that mirrors non-Asian agriculture, Molinar says.

"There is more competition. Some of the large farmers are getting into crops that only smaller ones had been in," Molinar says. "There's competition from other states and countries. Everything has come into play to make it tougher."

My family was fortunate to have gained a foothold when there were few Asian farmers, though we never grew anywhere close to the size of a Lucky Farms. Today, my brother Check runs the show, delivering produce several times a week to San Francisco's Chinatown. Nobody else in the family works in the field anymore, and like the rest of the agriculture industry, Check hires migrant farm workers to do the picking, pulling and digging that my siblings and I used to do.

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We moved from Colusa to Woodland in 1973 after buying a 15-acre parcel just outside of town. By that time, I was old enough to do some real work. I spent many days after school and most weekends in the field, loading vegetables into boxes. As I got older, I spent long hours learning how to pick the right-sized gai lan or yu choy stem and to cut it at the right spot. I learned how to twist string beans so they would snap off the vine cleanly. I learned that weeds are insidious, with some varieties able to take root again if exposed to water—even after they've been plucked from the ground for several days.

Usually the whole family would be out in the field working—my parents, my sister, my two brothers and my cousin. I guess it was no different from other immigrant families whose children worked long hours in the family business.

I'm reminded of this every time I come across a Chinese restaurant or liquor store owned by Asian Americans in the middle of nowhere. Running a restaurant or store is as hard and tedious as working in the dirt of a farm.

I can sense the entrepreneurial spirit that has driven generations of immigrant families. I can also sense the loneliness and isolation of being one of the few, if not the only, Asian American families in the area.

For my parents' generation, that was the price for economic prosperity. Check's teenage kids don't seem interested in farming, so when my brother calls it quits, this chapter of the family's American dream will close.

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