SEEDS FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA SPROUT IN SUNOL'S FERTILE SOIL

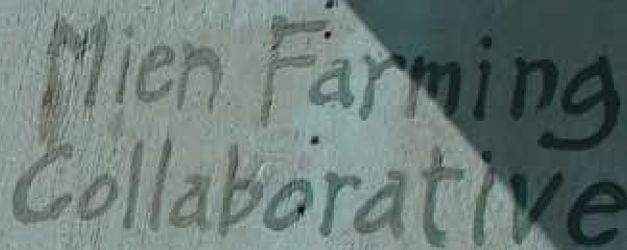
STORY AND PHOTOS BY MATTHEW GREEN

East Oakland resident Koy Saephan never went to school, but put her in a field of fertile ground and she'll make food rise from the earth like a virtuoso.

It's a Saturday in October at the Mien Farming Collaborative, a large plot of arable land off Interstate 680 near Fremont. Saephan, a small woman in her sixties, has been toiling since the early morning under the 80-degree Indian summer sun, its rays basking down on long rows of giant squash, cucumbers and Asian greens. It's one of the last days of a rich fall harvest, and she is pulling out irrigation tape and moving it to an open stretch of earth where she plans to plant strawberries and cover crops for the winter.

Saephan was born and raised in the tiny, Communist-controlled Southeast Asian nation of Laos. She is Mien, a small ethnic group of mainly IndoChinese refugees who settled in Laos and neighboring countries. At the end of the Vietnam War, large numbers of Mien people fled from Laos to escape government persecution, living in Thai refugee camps and eventually migrating to California and other west coast states.

Like many poor Laotions, Saephan was denied a formal education, and at the age of five began helping tend her family's small plot of land, gaining a deep knowledge of farming techniques. In 1975 she fled Laos with her children, and after spending four years in a Thai refugee camp, joined other family members in Oakland. Years of experience and the



rich set of skills necessary for successful subsistence farming meant little in the context of her new environs—a small apartment in East Oakland's concrete-laden, urban landscape. Many in her community live in cramped apartments where backyards are a rarity. While attention was given to raising her children and, more recently, her grandchildren, she has had much idle time over the past 28 years, a not uncommon experience for Mien women of her generation who find themselves in urban surroundings where fertile ground is little more than a distant memory.

That all changed two years ago when the two-acre plot of land in Sunol, about a 30-minute drive from Oakland, became available for use by Saephan and other members of her community. Owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and leased by the East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC), a non-profit in Oakland that provides services and programs to children and adults in the community, the plot has now been farmed for two seasons by a small group of mainly middle-aged men and women from five Mien families all living in East Oakland. When the opportunity came knocking, they didn't hesitate to get their hands dirty.

Mien families have taken the lead role in establishing other community gardens in East Oakland, including those at Peralta Historic Park and San Antonio Park.

But the Sunol project is well beyond the scope of any urban garden and the sizable chunk of land has been dutifully planted with a wide array of heirloom vegetable varieties from Laos, many from seeds that were saved and carried in-hand to the U.S. They include enormous squash, cucumbers, melons and long beans. Everything is farmed organically, in keeping with subsistence farming practices in Laos, where resources were scarce and chemical pesticides a rare and costly commodity.

"They felt like they were missing what they liked to eat, that they couldn't find in the store," says Lew Chien Saelee, the farm coordinator and EBAYC parent organizer, who worked through local schools to notify parents and grandparents about the farm. A native of Laos herself, Saelee first came to the farm as a translator and was quickly drawn in.

"They really like it, it's like a stress release," she says, describing how some participants come religiously every weekend and in some cases, several times a week. "They miss so much what they had done in Laos. When they feel sick and tired at home they come here."

Mien farmer Koy Saephan cutting one of the last giant Asian cucumbers of the fall harvest

Staying Afloat

In keeping with the subsistence farming tradition, much of the harvest is taken home by the families involved, for use in their own kitchens. But the land has provided far more bounty than can be used by five families; in 2006 alone, the first year of operation, their two-acre parcel yielded over two thousand pounds of produce. Much of this has been sold at subsidized rates through school farm-stands that are set up outside several elementary schools in East Oakland and geared towards parents picking up their kids when the bell rings. Some has also been sold at cost in local farmers markets, and in a few instances, to local stores. But this has proven a challenge, as customers are often unfamiliar with the Asian varieties and commonly lean towards the less exotic.

Project organizers are looking into ways to maintain aspects of the subsistence model while also implementing strategies that they hope will produce some revenue to cover basic operational costs and even produce some modest profits for the farmers to pocket. One approach has been to grow some more conventional "cash" crops alongside the heirloom varieties. Currently there are rows of salad and winter greens the Oakland Unified School District has agreed to purchase as part of its school salad bar initiative, a way in which grandchildren will be able to eat their grandparents' harvest in the cafeteria.

In addition, at least one acre is being devoted to strawberries, with the expectation that come early spring, the harvest can be sold at farmers' markets and possibly to larger local retailers like Farmer Joe's, Monterey Market, and large organic distributor Veritable Vegetable. In addition, they've sold some crops to a number of local restaurants, including Breads of India and Champa Gardens, a Mien restaurant in East Oakland. There has also been talk of inviting customers to visit the farm and pick their own strawberries.

"Hopefully that will raise enough money to pay the costs," says Grey Kolevzon, a project coordinator with EBAYC, who has been involved with the farm since its inception. He notes though, that the business component is challenging, as many of the participants lack a basic understanding of commercial farming. For them, the nuts and bolts of farming is a breeze, it's the marketing part that's tough to grasp.

"They have a very deep understanding of how to work on the land to produce food in a local economy. They're natural farmers"

water table yields rich silt soil perfect for farming.

Two years ago, Sibella Kraus, the head of Sustainable Agriculture Education (SAGE), a Berkeley-based organization geared towards developing sustainable agricultural projects that are closely connected to urban environments, convinced the SFPUC to grant her free access to the unused land for a one-year trial period. In exchange, her organization would seek various sub-tenants whose operations would directly benefit nearby urban communities. Along with the Mien farm, a plot was also allotted to People's Grocery, a West Oakland food justice group that provides nutritional food to that community and trains local youth to grow their own. Baia Nicchia, a small farm and nursery specializing in heirloom tomatoes and a range of seasonal vegetable starts, which has also begun training students from Hayward public schools, was also granted a plot.

he says. "The learning curve for them is adapting to the American system of bureaucracy, the relationship of money to land, and having predictable production."

Kolevzon hopes to tap the knowledge of commercial Mien farmers in the Central Valley, and intends to request their assistance in drawing up plans that would effectively balance the various farming paradigms—subsistence and commercial—at play in the fields. In 2007, the project's second year of operation, the farm doubled in size. And while four acres means a lot more production, it obviously also requires a lot more work and money to sustain. In addition to water and materials costs, EBAYC currently pays the market rate of $1,500 per acre per year for the plot, a challenge to afford when making a profit isn't the primary focus.

Creating an Urban-Rural Bridge

The 4-acre plot is actually part of a larger 18-acre parcel known as the Sunol Water Temple Agricultural Park. Owned by the San Francisco PUC, whose water pipes run directly beneath the land on their long journey from Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Reservoir to the City, the area is home to the majestic and slightly peculiar Sunol Water Temple, a nearly century-old monument to the 600 square-mile watershed that helps hydrate San Francisco. From the viewing platform, beneath a stately dome covered with a plethora of engraved biblical verses heralding the taming of nature and greening of the desert, visitors can peer down and see Sierra water flow directly beneath them on the final 40-mile stretch to San Francisco faucets.

The land surrounding the temple, while largely dormant in recent times, has been an agricultural site since the late 1800's, providing a variety of crops, including strawberries, onions and tree fruits, to Bay Area markets. Long a local destination for picnics, hunting and social gatherings, the area is an alluvial plane, sitting at the confluence of Alamo and Alameda Creeks. Its high

The first year a success, Kraus secured a nine-year lease agreement with the SFPUC, who also granted the project $65 thousand to cover basic infrastructure costs. Enlisting the technical assistance of one of the founders of Green Gulch Farm in Marin, SAGE is now attempting to create a management plan that would guide all sub-tenants on the land and is looking into organic certification, a costly process, but one that would allow growers to sell to a variety of higher-end markets and create a more sustainable business model.

The Mien farm, like the other projects, is a very apt demonstration of SAGE's vision—bridging the ever-widening gap between urban areas and the food production centers that feed them.

"It's a great model," says Kolevzon, emphasizing how fundamentally unsustainable it is to have cities devoid of productive land and detached from open recreational spaces. Mien farmers, he adds, seem to perfectly embody the principle of a direct connection between where food is grown and where it is consumed.

"We need to have people taking care of the land where they live ... The ultimate goal is to have living systems be part of our everyday lives. That's part of what our local food movement is all about—becoming closer to the life that sustains us."

But back on the farm, Koy Saephan can't be bothered with such sweeping discussions. The days are getting shorter now and there are countless tasks to do in preparation for the winter season. Wielding her machete, she cuts through rows of wilting corn stalks, unearthing the drip tape that sustained the fall crops and will now be used for the strawberries. Around her are a handful of other community members, mainly middle-aged men and women, all silently, diligently working their way through the fields. Occasionally, someone will rest for a moment, find a perfect melon-sized cucumber, overlooked during the harvest and hack it open

with the machete, biting into the water-saturated flesh.

"This is their way of having something to do, to maintain what they really want to do," says Nai Saephan, Koy's son, who came out for the day to help his mom. A man in his late 30's, Nai expresses little interest in farming, but recognizes how important this project is both for his mom and for ensuring the knowledge is passed on.

"When my parents pass away, I don't think anyone's going to know how to (farm) anymore," he adds. "It's important for us to learn."

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