



T&G Staff/PAULA B. FERAZZI

Menou Yang washes vegetables before cooking them up for a group of visiting agricultural dignitaries yesterday.

U.S. officials see farm as model

FARM/From PREVIOUS PAGE

the Vietnam War. Fitchburg, which attracted Hmongs because of inexpensive housing and nearby factory jobs, is thought to have the largest Hmong community in the state, with more than 600 people.

SOLACE

Working the land holds significant meaning for Hmong emigrants such as Menou Yang, 40, of Fitchburg, for whom it provides solace and a feeling of self-sufficiency. He lost his parents when he was a child in Laos.

"Just like the tiger, you have to learn to survive for yourself," Yang said as he used a propane-heated wok to stir-fry greens and vegetables that he had picked moments earlier.

Yang said farming also provides good exercise and an inexpensive source of chemical-free vegetables, including Chinese long beans, small sweet pumpkins, lemon grass and

Chinese broccoli, that are staples in the Hmong diet.

Yang's farm-fresh stir fry competed for attention during a cross-cultural feast that also included a spread of Maria Moreira's Portuguese cheese and linguica, rolls fresh from a Portuguese bakery in Hudson, and plump peaches from the Nashoba Valley Winery in Bolton.

In addition to area farmers and agriculture officials, the gathering attracted visitors from Brockton and Lowell who want to emulate the approach of matching Southeast Asian immigrants with agricultural opportunities.

While many of the Hmong farmers grow a small patch of crops in Lancaster for their own family's use, some have cultivated larger plots to sell produce to Asian markets in Worcester and Lowell, said Kip Graham, county executive director of the farm service agency at the U.S.

Department of Agriculture service center in Holden.

Some local farmers are being paired with Hmong growers to advise them on prospects for selling vegetables at farmers' markets in the area, Graham said.

Such opportunities are excellent, he said, since Worcester County ranks second nationally only to Lancaster County, Pa., in the value of local agricultural products sold directly to people for eating.

Graham said the owners of a farm in Oxford, Molly Hill Farm in Westminster and Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School in Fitchburg have expressed interest in pursuing collaborative projects with Hmong farmers.

"There's a gold mine of opportunity," he said, since very few of the vegetables sold in Asian markets are grown locally. "This is a catalyst. We'd like to see more of this on different farms."

[← Back](#)

IMMIGRANT FARMERS GROW SUCCESS

August 18, 1998 Publication: Worcester Telegram & Gazette (MA) Page: B1 Word Count: 745

LANCASTER - No stranger to the challenges of farming, Maria Moreira was sympathetic when a Hmong woman knocked on her door and asked if she could grow vegetables on a tiny plot of unused land. Eight years later, about 100 Hmong families from Fitchburg are cultivating basil, Asian lettuce, fuzzy squash and a bounty of other traditional crops on 25 acres leased by Moreira and her husband, Manny.

The arrangement was hailed yesterday by federal officials as a national model of how farmers can help immigrants maintain their agricultural heritage.

"In Worcester County, farmers themselves have taken a lot of leadership on this," August Schumacher, undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said during a gathering under a tent near the fertile soil of Bolton Flats. "I think the Moreira family has been absolutely outstanding."

Natives of the Azores, the Moreiras settled in Chelmsford before moving to Lancaster 15 years ago to pursue Manny Moreira's dream of running a dairy farm. Using milk from their herd of 200 cows, Maria Moreira now makes Portuguese-style cheese that is sold to markets in the Boston area.

WORD-OF-MOUTH

The Hmong's extensive cultivation of unused fields along Route 117 began after an older Hmong woman, Xai Vang, tapped on the Moreiras' door and asked if she could work a 100-square-foot patch behind their barn on Brockelman Road. Through word-of-mouth, similar requests soon followed.

"I think it's great," Maria Moreira said. "We keep doing it not because it's a money thing," but because she and her husband appreciate the Hmong's passion for farming. "If we can share, why not? It's very hard for them to acquire any other land."

In time, U.S. Department of Agriculture officials hope that such practices will help Southeast Asian immigrants own their own farms and preserve open space.

Hundreds of thousands of Hmong, natives of the highlands of Laos, Burma and Thailand, came to the United States after the Vietnam War. Fitchburg, which attracted Hmong because of inexpensive housing and nearby factory jobs, is thought to have the largest Hmong community in the state, with more than 600 people.

SOLACE

Working the land holds significant meaning for Hmong emigrants such as Menou Yang, 40, of Fitchburg, for whom it provides solace and a feeling of self-sufficiency. He lost his parents when he was a child in Laos.

"Just like the tiger, you have to learn to survive for yourself," Yang said as he used a propane-heated wok to stir-fry greens and vegetables that he had picked moments earlier.

Yang said farming also provides good exercise and an inexpensive source of chemical-free vegetables, including Chinese long beans, small sweet pumpkins, lemon grass and Chinese broccoli, that are staples in the Hmong diet.

Yang's farm-fresh stir fry competed for attention during a cross-cultural feast that also included a spread of Maria Moreira's Portuguese cheese and linguica, rolls fresh from a Portuguese bakery in Hudson, and plump peaches from the Nashoba Valley Winery in Bolton.

In addition to area farmers and agriculture officials, the gathering attracted visitors from Brockton and Lowell who want to emulate the approach of matching Southeast Asian immigrants with agricultural opportunities.

While many of the Hmong farmers grow a small patch of crops in Lancaster for their own family's use, some have cultivated larger plots to sell produce to Asian markets in Worcester and Lowell, said Kip Graham, county executive director of the farm service agency at the U.S. Department of Agriculture service center in Holden.

Some local farmers are being paired with Hmong growers to advise them on prospects for selling vegetables at farmers' markets in the area, Graham said.

Such opportunities are excellent, he said, since Worcester County ranks second nationally only to Lancaster County, Pa., in the value of local agricultural products sold directly to people for eating.

Graham said the owners of a farm in Oxford, Molly Hill Farm in Westminster and Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School in Fitchburg have expressed interest in pursuing collaborative projects with Hmong farmers.

"There's a gold mine of opportunity," he said, since very few of the vegetables sold in Asian markets are grown locally. "This is a catalyst. We'd like to see more of this on different farms."

Worcester Telegram & Gazette (MA)

Date: August 18, 1998

Page: B1

Copyright (c) 1998 Worcester Telegram & Gazette Corp.