

Minnesota Unraveled

EP115 - Shared Roots: Hmong Foodways

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Chantel Rodríguez:

I've waited over a month for my reservation date to arrive and I'm finally seated at a table at Vinai, Chef Yia Vang's Northeast Minneapolis restaurant that spotlights Hmong food. Even on a work night, the dining room is at capacity. From my spot along a wall of windows, I have a view of the kitchen and nearly all of the diners. Small votive candles throughout the room cast a warm glow on diners and waiters weaving in and out of tables.

Before me are small plates, mains, and side dishes. The fresh ingredients and aromatics of them all stand out. On top of several dishes, I see herbs like cilantro, finely shredded cabbage and green onions. The sharp acidic scent of lime wafts toward me, even as a sweet and spicy aroma of coconut and ginger makes my mouth water. As I dig into my meal, I begin to notice other things in the restaurant.

Photographs of family along a feature wall. Cinder blocks used as room dividers and entryway benches. Greenery placed throughout. Vinai – the design and the dishes – felt like it was trying to do more than serve food. It was trying to tell a story.

It made me wonder more broadly about the Hmong community's connection to food, to its production, preparation, and consumption, and how Hmong beliefs, traditions, and histories shape that relationship.

The Twin Cities, especially St. Paul, are widely recognized as the “Hmong Capital” due to the nearly 95,000 Hmong who have made the Metro home. They all have their own individual stories and connections to food. To hear just a few, I spoke to three people, each with their own traditions and knowledge about Hmong foodways, from cuisine to farming to herbal.

Chef Yia Vang himself.

Chef Yia Vang:

Yia Vang, chef and owner of Vinai Restaurant.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Pakou Hang.

Pakou Hang:

My name is Pakou Hang and I am the vice president of program for the Northwest Area Foundation. But prior to serving in the foundation, I was a co-founder and the inaugural executive director of the Hmong American Farmers Association.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And Zongxee Lee.

Zongxee Lee:

I am Zongxee. Lee. I'm out in Hudson, Wisconsin. I run a little herb, a botanical garden out in Hugo, Minnesota under Mhonpaj's Garden. Mhonpaj's Garden is my sister's garden, which is called Mhonpaj's Garden. I'm also a Hmong herbalist.

I make herbs for families and friends to use. I come from a lineage of shaman, individuals, and that's where a lot of my knowledge came from. Grandma, grandpa, ancestors, moms. I am also a nurse by profession.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I spoke with Zongxee at Mhonpaj's Garden, a 30 acre plot of L-shaped land owned by her sister and farmed by the family. It is in Hugo, just about half an hour northeast of the Twin Cities nestled near a new housing development. The day I'm there, the skies are clear and the sun is blazing. Chickens are clucking. Zongxee is wearing a moss green sundress, black flats, and a hot pink floral sun hat. She is walking me through her hoop house, a greenhouse with arched metal framing covered in clear plastic sheeting. She told me about her plants and how they are rooted in her family's history and knowledge of herbal medicine.

Zongxee Lee:

This is my hoop house here, that's where we start all the Hmong herbs in here. And then we would take it out to the garden over there and we'll plant it out. So this is where we do all our plants of planting. The reason why we keep it in just this hoop house, because this is the only one that is kept heated during the wintertime. And we started like in April. And in April, Minnesota is still pretty cold. So we have to heat it up and the propane tank's right there. So we heat it up in here and we would just generate plants. We would just cut and propagate.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Zongxee told me that of the 100 plus herbs in the hoop house, several are heirlooms. They are from the original seeds her parents carried with them from Laos and Thailand to the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States secretly recruited people from Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, and other regional backgrounds to fight communist threats and support US efforts in the Vietnam War. Zongxee 's dad, Chu Sang, was one of those men. When the war ended and the communist government of Laos took control, the men who fought alongside the United States were targeted. Chu Sang, his wife May and his two daughters, including a toddler Zongxee, fled for their lives, making a three-month-long journey on foot to reach the Mekong River, the natural border to Thailand. Then they had to make the dangerous crossing. The Mekong can reach up to eight miles wide and make their way to a refugee camp.

Zongxee told me more about this when we sat down for an interview.

Zongxee Lee:

Along the journey, it wasn't just an overnight walk where you get to Mekong. It was days before you hit the Mekong River. So the roots are basically to keep us alive, so mom carried some of those. And she also carried some of the herbs because if the kids are sick, they would just boil it because there's nothing to eat. I mean, we're basically carrying a sack this big, like it's a handful. I know that they're not going to see us visually in this podcast, but it's like a sack, probably big as your head, right? And they wrap it in this little long cloth and they would carry it on their back or they'll put it kind of like a baby sack. They'll carry it like that. And my mom would put it in there in hopes that we will be able to plant it in the next destination.

So seeds meant a lot to them.

Chantel Rodríguez:

At the refugee camp, Zongxee's mom gathered seeds from others. When Zongxee's families resettled in Minnesota in 1979, they had to figure out how to keep their seeds alive in a climate drastically different from Southeast Asia.

Zongxee Lee:

And what mom did is she brought it here. We were sponsored by a Christian family at that time, and they put us in these project homes. They call it project homes. It was basically a bunch of immigrants that lived in this area in hopes that they would be able to help us grow here in America. We're refugees. And so mom planted it in the yard and you could see it grow. And suddenly we came in the time was like

September, October. Snow came. That's when we discovered these plants are not going to make it in the Midwest. So that year she dug it up, potted and brought it indoor. But at that time, all the Hmong people were experimenting of how to keep these plants alive because we all kind of came just like a flock all at one time.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Zongxee's family has worked continuously to keep these plants alive, both in the dirt and on the page. Since their resettlement in the United States, they have been writing down their knowledge of herbs, plants, and healing traditions.

Zongxee Lee:

You know, I have to give some credit to my younger sister. She started the first Hmong organic gardening here in America, literally her, my mom, Mayyia Lee, and my sister who started the ... She actually did the initial research. And I'm going to go back to my father. He was the one who actually wrote it down. He documented a lot of these plants down and there's a lot that comes with these tears. I think that he would have been a really great historian. He could speak six different language. He could speak Russian, English, Thai, Laos, Hmong. He was able to document a lot of these plants down and I still had the original copy. I actually framed it. I wish– I should have brought it up here so I could show you too. But it's written in Hmong. These plans were documented and he realized that he needed to document up!

You could hear the typewriter going ding and you push it back and you could hear that bell every night. And it's hard for me to talk about my father because I adore him.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Zongxee is continuing the work of her dad and sister by writing a book. For Zongxee, this process is about preserving her family's cultural traditions.

Zongxee Lee:

So when I realized that I need to document this down and really officially put it out there, was when I had my first child. It started impacting me realizing when you have that kid, these are your roots. If you don't own it, someone's going to own it. If Hmong people don't own it, someone's going to own it. I'm creating this for my children, not just for my children, your children too, and for you. It's not just for women. It's actually for everyone in the community to come and learn. I think that it's a huge secret that no one's really passing it on. I think that everyone needs to learn about it or should learn about it.

Chantel Rodríguez:

One of the healing recipes she wants to document is the one that she uses most frequently, the Hmong chicken diet.

Zongxee Lee:

For the Hmong chicken diet, it's been used religiously after you have a baby. It's a postpartum diet. There's six herbs that are very common for those that are not sick. It's like chicken boiled with herbs. That's all it is. You're not putting oyster sauce in there. You're not putting peppers in there. That was it. Herbs, and it's like a couple tips of each herbs. The combination, the recipe, you just pop it in there, boil with chicken and eat it for 30 days. And yeah, believe it or not, I did it for all my five kids. And typically you're not up moving around. It's your husband making the soup or it's either a relative that's there to take care of you to do your soup. Mainly I had my mom come a lot.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Back at the hoop house, Zongxee showed me some of the herbs used in the chicken diet.

Zongxee Lee:

Combination of six of them. And Suv ntsim is right here. This is Suv ntsim and it looks like this. It's a red fat medicine. It's called, I named that, but there's another term for it. It's right underneath the table here. Right here. I'll pick up the leaf here, show you. The reason why it's called red fat medicines, supposedly this is actually ... The Thuaj rog liab here is a Gynura, that's the name of it, and the bicolor gynura. And Koj Liab has a red side or purple side of the leaf, and the other side is green. So these are also another herb that is combined with those other two. This is the third one, Suv ntsim. And then there's another one down here. There's a green one on the green side too. And I think it's like a miracle soup that everyone should know. And so it's been my mission for almost 10 years now.

And some hospitals are not adapting to it as a medicinal soup, but as a culturally relevant diet because it's just a diet everyone needs to know. And it's more like a modality where you use it to heal yourself.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Zongxee is making plants for her own botanical garden within the northwest corner of Mhonpaj Garden.

Zongxee Lee:

So my botanical garden will go up here and I'm going to plant a bunch of Hmong Canna Lilies up there and the Canna Lilies I have is a heirloom. I'm going to plant it in memory of my father. He loves Canna Lilies, so I'm going to do a nice Canna Lilies forest here. And I'm going to also do a couple patch of Hmong herbs in here too. And I don't know how they're going to look like. I did do a blueprint, but I'm not really disclosing that yet because like my dad say, don't show them the final product until you get it done. So-

Chantel Rodríguez:

Even Zongxee's approach to gardening is deeply rooted in family. She follows her mom's way of planting rows east to west so that she can plant with the sun.

Zongxee Lee:

Typically when I plant, I follow the sun. I don't usually just plant. And that's what mom told me. She usually wants ... When she plants, she looks at the sun and with the rows. If she was to end her day, she wants to see the plants fall on this side, it will shade the peas, the beans, whatever. But anyways, that's her way of gardening and kind of pick that from her. So my rows will be going this way because if I were to put someone right here, the sunset and that will be your golden hour. Yeah.

Chantel Rodríguez:

My next guest is Pakou Hang, one of the co-founders of the Hmong American Farmers Association, or HAFA. I spoke with Pakou about her family's connection to farming and how her role is helping the Hmong community address the challenges of farming in Minnesota.

Pakou Hang:

I'm the daughter of Phoua Thao Hang, which is my mother, and Wang Ger Hang or Vong Zoi Hang. That's my father. And we are Hmong political refugees. Many folks may know, but during the Vietnam War, there was a parallel war going on called the Secret War, and that's where the United States was through the CIA working with insurgents and Laos to support American pilots. And at the end of the Vietnam War, the communist in Laos took over and they began to target many of these Hmong soldiers that had worked with the United States. And so my father had been a captain in that insurgency and that what they called it, the Royal Lao Army. And so our family was going to be targeted. And so my mom and my dad and my older sister, they fled our village and my mom was pregnant with me at the time.

And then when we were able to escape the village and finally get to a refugee camp in Thailand, that's why I was born. And 15 days after I was born, we were able to immigrate to the United States. So now there are seven children in the family. Obviously I have an older sister and then it's me. And then there are five other younger brothers and sisters. And yeah, I mean, we were a big family growing up and I think that was advantageous obviously for farming because we did have a lot of people help.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Pakou's relationship to farming has changed over the course of her life.

Pakou Hang:

Growing up, I hated farming. I hated being outside. I hated the heat. I hated the sweat. I hated that it took all seven of us kids and my mom, my dad, to pick a field of cucumbers. So my family started farming because my parents wanted to send my six siblings with me to Catholic schools, to private schools. And my dad was working at the airport at the time and he was making like \$5 an hour. And so we couldn't afford the tuition of the private schools. And so my mom talked to a friend who talked to a friend and she found out that the St. Paul farmer's market was opening applications for farmers to join. And so that's how we got into farming. We actually started off working with Gedney pickles and growing cucumbers and then picking cucumbers and sending it to that processor.

And eventually that evolved into just growing our own vegetables and then selling it at the St. Paul farmer's market and the Minneapolis farmer's market. And so that was close to 30 years ago.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Many Hmong farmers like Pakou's family sell their produce at farmer's markets. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hmong farmers were growing mostly what appealed to the farmer's market audience. Things like corn, tomatoes, potatoes, and radishes. But on the side, they were also growing produce reflective of their palette, items like lemongrass, bok choy, and pea blossom chips, to name a few. They kept this produce behind the table. They would only bring it out when a Hmong customer asked for something particular. By the 2000s, Hmong farmers had expanded their produce offerings even further to include plants like Japanese purple sweet potatoes and ground cherries. Today, about half of the vendors at farmer's markets in the Twin Cities are Hmong, each with their own story and relationship to farming. Pakou's family traces their knowledge and connection to farming back to Pakou's mom.

Pakou Hang:

I think something that does make my mom's family unique is that my mom had an older brother who was able to go to a boarding school. All of my mom's brothers, and there are four of them, all of them went to school, and my mom's youngest sister also was able to go to this boarding school and get an education. But what it also meant though was that they weren't at home taking care of the farm. And so my mom and her two older sisters, even though there were seven of them, eight of them, my mom and her older sisters were really the ones that took care of their parents and took care of the farm. And I think that really had a profound effect on her. I certainly, I think where she learned how to be a good farmer and my mom had kind of an intuition about farming.

She would go to a farm and she would say, "Oh, this is good land." And I would be like, "How do you know? "

You just look at a field, how do you know it's good land? She would pick up soil and she would be able to just crumble it in her hand and she would know if it was good soil or not. But my mom was the farmer in our family. She was the one who went and found land for us to rent so that we could grow produce and sell it at the farmer's market. And my mom was a very outgoing person, so she was the one who befriended people and grew her social capital. My mom had a really entrepreneurial spirit. And I think that actually came from farming because farming is ... People think that farming is about growing stuff, that the biology of it, maybe the agronomy of it, but my mom thought of farming as the possibilities of it, you know, not just the possibility of what she could grow, but also the possibility of how she could use that income and turn it into wealth and then leave a legacy for her children.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Since the 1980s, many Hmong farmers have faced the ongoing challenges of exploitation and difficulty accessing land to farm. Pakou's family is one of the many who have experienced these barriers.

Pakou Hang:

I remember this time when I was in college and I was home for the summer and my mom asked me to go with her to pay the rent for this farmland that she was renting, and she wanted me to interpret. And when we got there, I was talking to this farmer, this white farmer, and he said she understands that if I rent her this land, that my grandma, my grandpa and my family, they can come on the land and pick whatever they want, right? At first, I was like, "Wait, I don't understand." And he was like, "Oh, well, your mom understands." And he was gesturing to me in a way that was kind of

like a coded language. And I remember in that moment, in my heart, I knew that that wasn't right. And so being this kind of arrogant college student, I turned to the farmer.

I said, "Oh, my mom is okay with that, but hey, let's put that in writing." And right away he was so upset with me. I could tell he just like, his face just changed. And he was like, "Listen, if your mom doesn't want to do this, then you guys should just leave." And I remember thinking, "Oh crap, we can't lose this land because this is our livelihood." And I remember having to be apologetic and to appease him.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Pakou learned that her personal experience wasn't a rare one. She heard similar stories from other Hmong farmers. This inspired Pakou to study and identify ways to overcome the challenges she was hearing about. She was awarded the prestigious Bush Fellowship in 2011 to support her research. That same year, she was asked by the Latino Economic Development Center to organize a panel of about 10 Hmong farmers to discuss the ways funders could support immigrant farmers.

Pakou Hang:

And afterwards, I was debriefing with the farmers and I said, "What did you learn from this? What went well? What could be improved?" And an older Hmong farmer said, "Well, they need to create a foundation or a nonprofit or some type of organization that helps Hmong farmers." And he was going on and on about how all the different programs that would be useful and helpful for Hmong farmers. And then an older Hmong lady stood up and she says, "We can't wait for people to come and save us. We can save ourselves." And literally for me, that was the impetus to start the Hmong American Farm Association. And literally that was a Thursday and then the following Tuesday I was at the Minnesota Secretary of State, filing the paperwork to formally incorporate the Hong American Farmers Association. And all the people that were part of that panel, they were the co-founders.

And so that was really important that it wasn't just one person's idea. It was a group's idea and it was an idea that was born out of a sense of self-determination, a sense of like seizing their own power and their own agency.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Hafa is a membership-based, community-centered, equity-driven, nonprofit farming collaborative. Its mission is to assist Hmong farmers in meeting five challenges, land access, new markets, training and capacity building, financing, and research and data collection. Since Hafa's founding, they have helped over 100

farmers. Pakou told me that Hafa is invested not simply in the farmer as an individual, but the farmer as a family unit. HAFA programming is geared toward intergenerational wealth building. This is something that Pakou learned from her mom.

Pakou Hang:

So my mom saw farming as a means to an end. And so in that way, she had a huge impact in my life. She was teaching me so much about having a good work ethic and having to be able to be self-sufficient by knowing how to grow your own food because if you could grow your own food, then you're never hopeless. I just remember growing up when we would be picking cucumbers, every kid had their own line. We wouldn't break for lunch or we wouldn't end the day until the line was finished. And if you finished your line, there was just an understanding that you would turn around and help another sibling or another relative finish their line. And I always thought that that was having a good work ethic. I mean, on the surface I learned, "Oh, that means working hard." But when I reflect back on it, she was really teaching me a way to live, to work hard, obviously, but then to take care of other people and don't forget that there are other people behind you.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As Pakou talked about her mom, she reflected on what it means for her to be Hmong immigrant with cultural ties to food and farming.

Pakou Hang:

But I think one of the struggles of being an immigrant and coming from an immigrant family and immigrant community is that you feel like you don't belong, that you're not enough, and that the practices in your traditional culture, the food that you eat, the way that your mom and dad maybe interact with you at home is so different from your peers. And I remember growing up, because we farmed, because we were such a large family, because my parents didn't speak English, I was the one who was interpreting for them at conferences. I really felt like being Hmong was such a burden. And I think that my parents were teaching me. Growing up, I was thinking they have no value, and I was so wrong. And we were like organic farmers before it was cool to be organic farmers.

Chantel Rodríguez:

My final guest is the award-winning chef, Yia Vang, the person behind the restaurant, Vinai. For him, Hmong food is deeply connected to his family's story.

Chef Yia Vang:

My mom grew up in this little village in Northern Laos where there's this all Hmong people spread out in the mountains. And it's really cool because a few years ago I had a chance ... We were filming a show in Laos, and I actually had a chance and found some cousins of a cousin who took me there. And so I got a chance to go into the village where my mom grew up in, go into that village where my grandma and grandpa comes from. It was the village that 120 years of our family lineage from my mom's side is from that village. So it's super cool. I literally walked and stood on the grounds of where my mom's and my grandma and grandpa, where their house was to walk down. There's a little path, beaten path that I walked down. I actually even collected the dirt and put it in a little bag and brought it home.

And to be able to do that is really cool to know that, wow, I was there and all the stories my mom would tell me growing up.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Just like Zongxee and Pakou, Yia's family fled Laos and sought safety in a Thai refugee camp.

Chef Yia Vang:

When the war came and the US pulled out and there was the genocide of our people, what started my mom and them, they tried to escape Laos to get to the refugee camp. And for a lot of them, it wasn't like, "Hey, here's this thing on the map and let's go to it." It wasn't that at all. It was literally like, "Let's just run and if we can get to Thailand, if we can get to the river and cross the river, maybe we'll have safety." That's what it was. And so they were caught, they were put in these prison camps, they were in there for a while, ended up at Vinai, the refugee camp, and that's where she met my dad. And by that time, she was already widowed. She had three kids, and then those children were taken by the husband's side, and they said, "Hey, you're still young enough.

Go back and live with your parents. We'll take care of the kids." And so she was taken away from them and actually didn't see them for almost like 20 years.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Ban Vinai, also known simply as Vinai, was the largest refugee camp run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Southeast Asia. Many Hmong refugees ended up at Vinai and four other camps in Thailand. Vinai was 400 acres in operation from 1975 until 1992. At its peak, it had a population of roughly 45,000. While some housing was provided, many Hmong ended up living in houses they

built themselves out of tin, bamboo or thatch with small gardens planted alongside them.

Yia's family lived in the Vinai refugee camp for 10 years. He and all but one of his siblings were born there. Yia was younger than five years old when his family resettled in the United States. Yia shared with me what it was like to grow up as a Hmong immigrant and the role food played in his childhood.

Chef Yia Vang:

Growing up, food was just what we did, right? It was part of survival, it was part of chores. It was, "Hey, dad worked first shift, mom worked second shift," or, "Hey, you have about two hours when you're home by yourself. We're going to show you how to make food or survive." Or sometimes it would be, "This is all we have and we have to wait two to three more days because that's when dad gets paid." And we're going to make it work. A lot of the food I grew up with at that time came with a lot of shame and guilt. I don't want my white friends to know these are the things we're eating because we're afraid that we'd be made fun of. So I remember going to the store once and all my friends, they had lunchables. They bring lunchables and I didn't know what this thing was.

It's awesome. It's like a little box. And I remember I was like, "Mom, dad, I want that." And they didn't know what it was. And I got to this huge temper tantrum with my mom.

I was just horrible. I was like, "You hate us. You would never let us have anything." And all she could do is we have food at home. And I'm like, "What are you talking about? I don't want that." So to be honest, growing up, food was a sense of shame. It wasn't a sense of pride. It wasn't a sense of accepting who we were. Food actually reminded us how different we were from all the other kids. And so I tried to get as far away from it as possible. But growing up, it was the four of us, kids, and then mom and dad. And mom and dad always had this little kind of a farm or garden, if you want to call that. And then we would always work it. I hated it. I hated it so much. I was just like, on Saturday mornings when most kids were doing tee ball or basketball camp, we were out there doing that.

And it frustrated me so much. I'm like, "This is so dumb. What am I going to learn from this?" And then we grew up getting our meats and our produce from farms. And when I say our meats, it would be like mom and dad would go and there'd be 30, 40, 50 chickens and we would harvest them. And you know what I mean by

harvest them. Same thing with pork, same thing with beef. And so by the time I was 10 or 11, I was more comfortable holding a boning knife, breaking down proteins than I was trying to hold a baseball to throw a curve ball. I was more comfortable taking whole cuts of meat, breaking it down and wrapping it up and putting it in our freezer than I was shooting a free throw. And I thought this was just normal life for us.

I thought all kids did this.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yia's journey to becoming a chef was not straightforward. He explained that during his early adulthood, he really struggled to find his purpose in life.

Chef Yia Vang:

Yeah. I never wanted to do this. It was like a plan D or E or F or G. So Mark Twain has this quote and he says, "Two most important day in every person's life. The day you are born, the day you find out why." And I think I remember myself going, "Hey, I want to find out why I was born. What's my purpose?" And I was like, "Okay, this is what I have. I know how to cook. I love cooking. I think it makes sense to me. What fuels me? Well, I really want to sustain their legacy. I want to be able to pass this legacy down. Well, I want to do it through the vessel of food. How do we do this? " And so yeah, that's kind of where it came to be.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The it that came to be is his restaurant, Vinai, and its deep connection to his family and their legacy.

Chef Yia Vang:

The crux, the core, our core values in Vinai is this little phrase, "Always moving forward together." The three words that our foundational value is moving forward together. I learned that from listening to my father tell stories about how they got out of Laos. I wanted this restaurant to be a love letter to my mom and dad. And so I asked myself, "What does that even mean? What's a love letter to your mom and dad?" So I literally, I'm a literal person. So I wrote a letter and five years ago I wrote this letter and I just put everything into it. It was like late night. I think it was like midnight. I started crying. I was typing it out and I was like, "Oh my God." And then I reminisced all the times of my pre-college, during college days of being rebellious, thinking I knew what the world was all about and why mom and dad was telling me all these things.

And I felt so guilty, but then I remembered what drew me back to them was not their lectures or feeling rejected. It was actually their unconditional love. It was this thing my father would say to me, he said, "You are my son and I love you. And no matter what happens in life, your mother and I were always your homes." And dad would always say, "The day you were born, I held you and I love you to the max and there's nothing you can do to make me love you more. And there's nothing you can do to make me love you less because you're my son. That's all you had to be is my son." And I remember that and I knew that if I screwed up really bad or if I failed in life, I can always come back and maybe I don't win a James Beard.

Maybe we don't get these accolades, but at the end of the day, I'm still your son.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Yia, the next step was figuring out how to make the love letter a reality.

Chef Yia Vang:

When we chose an architect, I gave this letter to this architect and I said, "Hey, how do we build this into a restaurant?" And he's like, "I have an idea." So he started extracting things from this letter and by extracting it, he was able to build different pieces and put different pieces in this restaurant where if you come in, we could tell you the stories of why these pieces are here and how this represents part of this letter. When you come in on the wooden trestle, looks like the ceilings made out of wood. It looks like the ceilings of these refugee homes that we grew up with. And my mom, when she first came in and she saw it when we were building through it, she goes, "Oh my gosh, that looks like the roof of the homes that we grew up with in our little hut in the refugee camp." And to me, that represents the home my mom built for us where literally it was pieces of wood thrown with a few tin stuff on top.

They took scraps and they built something for us. There's a beauty in it for me. There's a lot of greens around here, my mom's green thumb.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yia made another intentional design choice in Vinai that reflects his journey and his family's relationship to food.

Chef Yia Vang:

There's this middle section that's all built out of cinder blocks. Cinder blocks. Literally, one of these blocks is like 78 cents at Home Depot. It represents the first time my father taught me how to grill and it was with the cinder blocks in the back of the house. And I think that they were part of the project of the previous homeowner and

he turned into this little grill and he put it grate on top and he would grill on there and he taught me how to grill off that grill, made out of cinder blocks.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Vinai is not just about preserving a legacy. His family is actively involved in the restaurant.

Chef Yia Vang:

They have a 10 acre garden. They call it a garden, but it's a farm.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yeah.

Chef Yia Vang:

And they grow produce and products for the restaurant. And every year they grow it, just my mom, my dad, and my aunt, and they'll go out there and harvest everything. I take the truck up, we load up the truck, we bring it back. If you come to the restaurant and you've eaten any of the hot sauces, all those chilies come from their garden. It comes from their hands. They handpick every single one of those chilies.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yia told me that an important thing to understand about Hmong cuisine is that it is not fixed. It can adapt to meet the needs of the moment.

Chef Yia Vang:

And so that is the movement of the Hmong people, regardless of what we do. We do it as a group, we do it moving forward, and we're always moving. That is the way of the Hmong food movement. So if we're in the mountains of Laos and all we have is pork bone, mustard greens and water, we're going to make some grazed pork with Hmong mustard greens and we're going to eat it with some rice. But we're here in Minnesota and we have all these great produce from root vegetables. We all have these great produce and products from our pork farmer, our chicken farmers, our beef farmers. We're going to glean off of that. People always talk about fusion, right? Like fusion food, and I don't like it. So I don't like using the word fusion. I like the word foraging where we forge these cultures together.

Hmong food is made of four elements. Protein, some kind of protein, rice, some kind of vegetable or broth and a sauce. Now, if you look at any food out there from any culture, those four elements are actually part of it. Some kind of protein, some kind of ... Instead of rice, let's just say some kind of carbs or grain, right? There's a

vegetable involved. Sometimes that vegetable is in a broth or soup and there's always a sauce. Sometimes the sauce is mixed with the rice. Sometimes the sauce itself is mixed with the protein, but all four of those elements are always there. Now, how do we use those four elements and connect with people who have never had Hmong food before? That is the whole part of the communicating. We're using that vernacular to speak to people and tell the stories.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yeah. And you're talking about how all of your dishes tell a story and you can trace back. Would you mind giving a very specific example of one of your dishes that you can sort of ... The narrative threads that you trace back?

Chef Yia Vang:

There's two ways of looking at this one dish. And then I think one of it is this tongue and cheek way of looking at it. It actually means a lot to me. My grandmother, my dad's mom, she grew up ... I don't know what we grew up, we were born in the camps and she was kind of like our second mom. She took care of us and my grand ... I was a bigger kid, baby. I was a bigger baby. And grandma would ... She died like 10, 12 years ago. And so when we were kids growing up, to give you a little background when kids growing up, grandma would always give us ... When we left her house, she'd give us hard boiled eggs. And I would get so mad. I'm like, " Mom, what the heck? "All my white friends, their grandma gives them banana breads and cookies and brownies, like the good stuff.

Hard boiled eggs. What the heck? It smells like farts. And I remember mom said, " Honey, do you understand that in our culture, eggs? It's a blessing. It means it's a life. It's your way of grandma blessing you. It's grandma saying that when you leave my house, I can't see you anymore, but I want to send a blessing with you. "And then 10 years ago, grandma got really sick. And I remember I went to visit her and I didn't realize how sick she was. She said, " You're so big and strong. "And she's like, " When you were a little baby, I would always carry you on my back. Look at you. You're so big and strong now and you're so handsome. "That's what she would always say. "Maybe since you're so big and strong, can you carry me now?" We have these little deviled eggs and at the end of the day, Chantel, they're deviled eggs.

I guess if people look at it, it's kind of a fun snack, but it's a hard boiled egg that we turn the inside, we add a little Thai basil and we make a little sauce, make a little dressing with it, and then we put a fried shrimp on top. And I think that when we created this menu, it was my way of saying, grandma, I want to still keep carrying you.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Yia, Vinai is a means of telling a deeply personal story about his family. I asked Yia why he decided to name his restaurant after the refugee camp.

Chef Yia Vang:

I chose the name Vinai because this is where our story started. Mom always said Vinai, the refugee camp, is not where our story ended, but as a family, this is where our story began. And so we pushed hard on it. And yeah, I mean, I think that when we first started, I'll be very honest, the idea of Vinai was like, we wanted to grill meats and make sticky rice to share it to people. That's all we want to do. I want to dream bigger in a way where, can you imagine that a restaurant that is named after a refugee camp that has a lot of tragedy and atrocities and horrible memories that most people that come out of there don't ever want to remember, but we can be happy with the name now that we're not disgusted with the name. So this wasn't my idea. This is actually my mom and dad's hope.

This is their legacy and I'm just a curator of it. I didn't come up with it, but I'll be a steward of it and hopefully after I'm gone, we can find somebody else to keep storying this. When I look at my parents' generation, I look at literally the war they went through. I think about my grandfather who I never met who died in this war. I think about family members. I think about people that I know that died with the hope of maybe this will help our seng zu, our ancestors, or our children's children's children move forward. I want to make sure that we honor that.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Speaking with Zongxee, Pakou, and Yia, made clear the richness and complexity of Hmong foodways. They each connect to a different facet of the foodways, from herbal medicine to farming to cuisine, but they all shared similar stories of what it means to be Hmong. Stories of adaptability, sacrifice, and resilience.

Chef Yia Vang:

One thing I love about being Hmong is our adaptability to our atmosphere around us. The other thing that I love about being Hmong is that history or the world, the condition, the geopolitical, whatever of the world will toss and turn us, push us around, but our strength is not in the condition of the world, but our strength is in the hearts of the Hmong people. When I look at my mom and dad, I say to myself, when you realize that somebody has given up their life so that you can have life, it changes the way you talk to people, it changes the way you love people. And for me, it changed the way I cook. One of the greatest things I love about food and the way I

view food is food is a universal language that we can use to speak to each other, and you don't have to be Hmong to understand that.

You just have to be human.

Pakou Hang:

My mom was the main farmer in her extended family, but she was feeding everybody in the family. When my mom passed, my cousins would tell me stories about my mom and one of the things that always came up about how in the summertime they were always excited to get produce from Auntie Oa. And I have my own memories of my mom as a farmer, and at the same time, my cousins do too, because she was feeding them as well. So yeah, food is obviously a financial resource, and it's something that you can transform to access other opportunities like an education or money to buy a house. Food is a language that you can speak, so we would trade produce from other farmers. And then food is definitely an expression of love and a way to strengthen really dense kinship ties.

Zongxee Lee:

When you really think about it, we're all one people. We're all one people, regardless of what ethnic you are, it's all comebacks down to humanity, human. It's not about the colors. It's not about how much money you make. It's about the roots of where we truly come from and we all come from roots. It's basically keeping humanity, healing alive. Plants is there to kind of speak the language that this is what keeps it alive. We need to share these greens to stay alive. It's not about how big your garden is. Whatever you have, you share it. My story is basically, yes, don't forget your roots of where you came from, but also share out what you have for healing and sharing across the world.

Chantel Rodríguez:

My conversations with each guest made clear that food is so much more than sustenance, so much more than basic nourishment. It's a bridge between past, present, and future that can connect us to our culture and our history. It creates memories and social ties, and it can be healing, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

For the Hmong community, food ways reflect a diversity of traditions, knowledge, and stories. The hardships and challenges of fleeing their home and resettling in an unknown place have profoundly shaped how the Hmong participate in their food ways. The Hmong community's adaptability and resiliency have forged an evolving food culture and ongoing efforts to preserve cultural traditions.

Special thanks to Kimmy Tanaka and Ari Fields for their help on this episode.

Minnesota Unraveled will be back with season two in the fall. Thanks for listening.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodriguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and Minopedia articles at our website, Mnhs.org/unraveled. Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People. Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chaisson, Angela Yih, and Brett Baldwin, and sound design and editing by Carter Wogan.

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