

# Hmong Farmers in Minnesota

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Hmong American farmers play a huge role in providing Minnesotans with fresh and local produce. Many Hmong American families resettled in Minnesota as political refugees after the Vietnam War and have since relied on farming for their livelihood, becoming one of the driving forces behind the availability and renewed interest in local foods in Minnesota.

Though we heavily rely on Hmong American farmers for much of our local food, these families face numerous obstacles that limit their ability to participate in our food system to their fullest potential.

In an effort to address these issues, support each other, and change the local food system to benefit all communities, a collection of Hmong American farming families created the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA). Since its founding in 2011, HAFA has grown to 23 members families, many of whom live in or near the Twin Cities.

“HAFA draws its membership from a large pool of established Hmong farmers in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, including hundreds of farmers who are long-term members of the growers associations connected to the Saint Paul and Minneapolis farmers markets.

“The typical HAFA farmer is someone who has been farming for over 20 years on less than 10 acres of land and resides in the Twin Cities but farms in Washington or Dakota County. Most HAFA farmers grow a variety of vegetables and flowers for the local farmers markets.”

-from the *Hmong American Farmers Association*  
[website](#)

## Hmong American Farmers in Minnesota



Hmong American farmers occupy a unique place in the history of Minnesota’s local foods movement. Since Hmong refugees began resettling from Laos and Thailand to Minnesota in the 1970s as political refugees after the Vietnam War, many families have relied on their agricultural heritage to make a living growing produce and flowers for local farmers markets.

By the late 1980s, Hmong farmers had revitalized the Saint Paul and Minneapolis Farmers Markets, transforming them into some of the most vibrant markets in the country, while also changing Minnesota’s taste buds for Thai chili peppers and Chinese bok choy. As hard working farmers, they provided the fresh produce that fueled the exponential growth of farmers markets into suburban communities and urban corridors, and greatly increased the supply of nutritious, affordable food.

HAFAs model centers around five interconnected programs based on a whole food model that tackles many aspects of food production simultaneously. Their holistic model aims to build intergenerational and community wealth while also working to break down barriers that prevent Hmong farmers' success in Minnesota's food system. Some barriers and solutions HAFAs has identified are:

**Land Access:** Obtaining long-term access to farm land is one of the most difficult challenges Hmong American farmers face. Often, they are forced into short-term leases that prevent them from investing in farm infrastructure (high tunnels, irrigation systems, and deer fences to name a few) and specialty crops that would generate higher profits.

To increase access to land for Hmong farmers, HAFAs works with both public and private entities to purchase and secure long-term leases to farm land. In 2014, they started the HAFAs farm in Hastings. This 155-acre farm is conveniently located near the metro area where many of their members live. Members can farm five- to ten-acre parcels and have access to equipment, refrigeration, and washing stations. Five acres are the minimum acreage believed to be necessary to make a living.

**Alternative Markets:** The goal of HAFAs Alternative Markets Program is to increase Hmong farmers' access to largely untapped markets like schools, hospitals, grocery stores, and direct-to-consumer through community supported agriculture (CSA). Typically, many Hmong farmers will only sell their produce at farmer markets, making them vulnerable to unexpected events like a rained out or slow day at the market. By diversifying their markets and selling to businesses, institutions, and other avenues, they become more resilient to changes and shocks in a single market.



*Teng Thao | age 32 | farms eight acres with his family*

*“In the past I lost many sales because the farmers market was not a good flow. The CSA has helped me recover from those losses and support my family and business. I’m excited to see where the HAFAs CSA can take us in the future.”*

*(HAFAs/Mike Hazard)*

HAFAs started its own CSA in 2012 with produce grown by members. They’re dedicated to making their CSA accessible to all communities by offering a variety of share sizes, options for shorter share seasons, and cultural produce. In your share you might find traditional Southeast Asian produce like edamame, lemongrass, or Chinese broccoli alongside your potatoes, making for a delectably diverse CSA! Not only do they have summer and fall shares, but also offer a Thanksgiving share complete with fall season staples like squash and sweet potatoes! By offering fall and Thanksgiving shares, HAFAs farmers have a secure market and income later in the year when farmers markets typically wind down and the weather becomes cooler. Learn more about HAFAs CSA shares [here](#).



Photo courtesy of HAFA/Mike Hazard

**Business Development:** In 2014, HAFA partnered with the Eastside Financial Center and created a program for HAFA farmers to cultivate their skills in business and finance. With the ability to undergo credit and financial assessments, management trainings, and receive instruction for writing business plans, invoices, and other necessary business documentation, HAFA members gain new access to the credit and capital essential for investing in their operations. This program also gives farmers an opportunity to save money in an Individual Development Account (IDA) and have up to \$2,000 of it matched! This allows members to use that money in conjunction with microloans to make investments in their farming operation and purchase equipment.

**Research:** HAFA partnered with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, and the Minnesota State College and Universities system to conduct various research projects on cover crops, market data, and other specialty crop studies with much of the research being done on-site at the HAFA Farm.

**Training:** Along with their community partner, the Latino Economic Development Center, HAFA develops and tests bicultural and bilingual training programs in an effort to further immigrant farmers' expertise and understanding of business and farming in Minnesota. Funded through a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture, their training program has conducted over 20 workshops and trained over 500 individuals in a variety of topics from soil health to food safety.

Interested in learning more about the Hmong American Farmers Association and its members? Look into some of these options:

- Visit *Seeds of Change: A Portrait of the Hmong American Farmers Association*, a multimedia exhibition at the Minnesota Museum of American Art showcasing a collection of video, photographs, and artist books by Mike Hazard that document the life of HAFA's farmers. This exhibition ends on July 31, so get there while you still can! Find more information [here](#).



Photo courtesy of HAFA/Mike Hazard

- Tour the HAFA Farm on July 16 as a part of the [Eat Local Farm Tour](#) or attend their [3<sup>rd</sup> Annual HAFA Farm Open House](#) on September 11.
- [Volunteer](#) alongside HAFA members and staff.

# Kohlrabi "Papaya" Salad

Swap out traditional papaya for kohlrabi in this fun and local take on a classic Hmong recipe!

**Ingredients:**

- 4 c shredded kohlrabi
- 2 to 4 cloves garlic (depending on your taste)
- 1 to 3 hot Thai chili peppers (depending on your taste)
- 1 to 2 tbsp fish sauce
- ½ tbsp shrimp paste (optional)
- ½ tbsp crab paste (optional)
- 1 tbsp sugar
- Juice of 1 lime
- 6 cherry tomatoes
- Mortar and Pestle

In a mortar, pound the chilies and garlic with a pestle. Add the shredded kohlrabi, tomatoes, fish sauce, shrimp and crab paste, and sugar. Squeeze the lime juice into the mixture and stir with a spoon and pound it with the pestle. Continue stirring and pounding the mixture until the flavors are fully mixed.

*Recipe courtesy of Hmong American Farmers Association*