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MEET THE NEXT GENERATION OF
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA GROWERS WHO
WENT FROM NOVICE TO IN THE KNOW
BY FARMING ON THEIR OWN TERMS.

BY MEG J. MATEO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY DICKERSON

and up

grapes aplenty

Kenny Likitprakong had never considered a career in growing grapes until he took an internship at a wine marketing company in his early 20s. The office was often littered with open bottles for tasting, and after trying a glut of varieties, he developed a newfound appreciation. “I’d go home with a backpack full,” says the now-43-year-old Likitprakong, who went on to get a bachelor’s degree in viticulture from University of California, Davis.

Years later, he found himself working as a winemaker in an area dominated by huge estates and high property values. Ready to branch out on his own, he figured he wouldn’t be able to afford his own land in Sonoma or Napa County, nor would he be able to leave his full-time job right away. So to launch his Santa Rosa-based Hobo Wine Company, Likitprakong came up with a clever work-around—in 2005, he began to lease and farm parcels, starting in Healdsburg, within the very estates that would otherwise be out of his reach. The plan was not only economical, but it allowed him to tailor his cultivation practices exactly to his needs. “I’d go every day after work and spend my weekends there,” he says of that first plot in Healdsburg. “I farmed it organically and thought I could get away with less spraying, but I ended up with mildew and rot.”

Likitprakong was undeterred: “Most of my early failures came from trying to do too much with too little,” he admits. The takeaway was that he couldn’t do it all, and as his business grew into a full-time job, he hired vineyard management companies to oversee some of his parcels. Now Likitprakong farms and harvests 17 acres from a few nearby vineyards to make up roughly 20 percent of his grapes. For the rest, he sources and purchases fruit from more than 40 other properties spanning from Sonoma and Yolo Counties to the Central Coast and Santa Cruz Mountains.

The blends he produces out of this patchwork style—including Cabernets, Grenaches, and Zinfandels that start at \$15 a bottle—have been met with glowing write-ups in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *The New York Times*. “Kenny has an unbelievable talent for making wines that taste like home,” says Luke Miller, who sells grapes to Likitprakong and is the owner of Mendocino County’s Vecino Vineyards. “He takes the time to recognize the people that farm for him.”

As a reflection of the winemaker’s easygoing business style, the two have never really put pen to paper. “I do a lot of verbal and handshake agreements,” says Likitprakong. “When people give you their word, it’s more important than a written contract.”

Clockwise from top left: Likitprakong in his barrel room; Sonoma Valley vines; Likitprakong gathers samples; ripening Cabernet Sauvignon fruit; Chardonnay fruit awaiting testing for pH and acidity.



CHEAT SHEET

Name: The Hobo Wine Company

Established: 2002

Crop sampler: Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Merlot

Production: 300,000 bottles and kegs per year

Where to find: At select retailers and at hobowines.com.



“WE DON’T WANT TO BE SPECIAL-OCCASION WINE—
WE WANT TO BE THE WINE THAT PEOPLE DRINK.”



"MY FIRST YEAR OF FARMING WAS A BLUR. MOST WEEKS I WAS WORKING 60 TO 70 HOURS AND RAN ON ADRENALINE AND JOY."



CHEAT SHEET

Name: Jolee Blooms & Design

Established: 2016

Crop sampler: Dahlias, snapdragons, sunflowers, and foxgloves

Production: 250-plus bouquets per year

Where to find: Order arrangements at joleeblooms.com.

floral attraction

Growing up with a father in the U.S. Navy, Daniele Strawn, 37, moved around a lot. There wasn't enough time spent in any one place to grow plants, except for some summer trips to her grandparents' homes in Michigan and Southern California: "Both my grandfathers had sizable gardens, and they'd let me pick veggies and weed them," she remembers. "I thought gardening was something you did when you got old."

Then, in 2012, Strawn decided to quit her job as an event coordinator in Monterey, California, and move to Central America. Jeremy, her boyfriend (now husband), came along. "It never occurred to me until then that I could be a farmer," Strawn recalls of her aha moment on an organic farm in San Juan de la Concepción, Nicaragua. "By throwing everything I thought I should be out the window, I discovered that this was the work for me."

Four months later, she and Jeremy returned to America and landed in Petaluma, where Strawn joined her friends Lisa Murgatroyd and Ariana Reguzzoni at a small floral business. Strawn had never grown flowers, but what she initially thought would be a part-time gig turned into a full-blown love affair. "She worked really hard and learned fast," says Murgatroyd. "Plus, she was a natural at making bouquets."

Emboldened by the experience, Strawn went solo in 2016 and established JoLee Blooms & Design, a tribute to her grandfathers Joseph and Lee. She now raises more than 50 floral varieties including dahlias, lisianthus, and roses on a fourth of an acre in Sonoma County's Occidental. She leases this sliver of ridge-top land—plus space in a greenhouse and studio—from the fruit and vegetable growers at Animalitos Farm.

Running her own business hasn't been seamless. In her second year, Strawn planted ahead of schedule, intending to be an early season producer, but an unusual late-April frost killed all her tender annuals. So she regrouped and set out new crops. "I've learned to make room for nature's unexpected twists and turns," she says. "My endurance training for marathons has also helped!"

For her clients, the majority of whom are brides and grooms to be, Strawn creates arrangements that are diverse and wild, and that reflect the season's offerings. They include foraged foliage from her neighborhood, as well as blooms from her home garden, where she often tests small batches before growing them in the field. Says Strawn, "This is the culmination of everything I've done. It all makes sense now."

Clockwise from far left: Strawn with a bundle of amaranth; clippers and drying seeds; cut flowers ready for transport; neat rows of colorful cosmos, dahlias, sunflowers, and zinnias; arranging blooms.



finding roots

Although she was born in Daegu, South Korea, Kristyn Leach didn't taste food from her birth country until she was a teenager. As an infant, Leach was adopted by an Irish-American family on Long Island. But as an adult, she began to explore her heritage by growing crops from the Asian peninsula on a small patch of a vegetable farm she worked for in Bolinas, California. "For a long time I would go to Korean restaurants or markets feeling nervous and guarded," says Leach, now 36 years old.

Yet nothing could be further from chef David Lee's first impression of Leach. Alongside his two brothers, Lee is the co-owner of San Francisco's Namu Gaji. "She showed up at our restaurant unannounced and introduced herself with a big smile," he says. "Then she gifted us with all this perilla she had grown." That perilla—a prolific and much-loved herb in Korean cuisine—turned out to be the beginning of Leach's relationship with the restaurant.

With eager buyers at Namu Gaji, Leach continued to cultivate Korean produce even after she moved on from the Bolinas farm to work with a tomato breeder in Sunol, more than 70 miles away. Selling to the Lee brothers proved so mutually beneficial that when the tomato breeder offered an affordable acre for lease, Leach jumped on the opportunity with the Lees' financial backing. Most of Leach's harvest—50-plus varieties of Korean produce including chamoe, chiles, and soybeans—heads straight to the restaurant's kitchen, while the rest she donates to nonprofits and community groups.

Last fall, Leach relocated Namu Farm to a larger plot in Winters, outside of Sacramento. Namu Gaji is still her primary buyer and backer, but the move has allowed her to expand into seed preservation and breeding. She's working with Oakland's Kitazawa Seed Company—known as the oldest American seed provider specializing in Asian crops—to create an heirloom line of Korean heritage seeds, such as the prized Lady Hermit pepper.

Always seeking to improve her skills, Leach returned to South Korea to visit and work with small growers—her first time back since she was adopted. "It was validating for me to see that my farm looked similar to the ones there," she says. "At one, they asked to see my hands—they wanted to make sure I was really a farmer! Consider this spread living proof." 🌱

Clockwise from top left: Eggplants, kabocha squash, and tomatoes; bitter melons; Leach at her former plot in Sunol; tangy-sweet poha berries; tools of the trade.



CHEAT SHEET

Name: Namu Farm

Established: 2011

Crop sampler: Napa cabbage, mustard greens, and shiso

Production: 25 tons over 6 years

Where to find: Taste Leach's produce at San Francisco's family-owned Namu Gaji restaurant (namusf.com).

"THIS IS THE PLIGHT OF THE TENANT FARMER. A PLAN ISN'T LAID OUT FOR US, SO WE MAKE UP A NEW WAY OF DOING THINGS."

