

Memories of

MYANMAR

Learn about the long journey of the Karen people as they carried their seeds and culture from their war-torn country into North America.

Story and photos by Owen Taylor

WHEN HTE DA WIN first visited my farm, her eyes lit up at the sight of our turmeric plants, nearly as tall as she was. She asked me to save their leaves and stems for her community so they could make *nyar bur*, a quintessential Karen (kah-REN') delicacy. She showed me how to wrap the large tropical leaf around small fish, shrimp, and chopped turmeric leaves, like a burrito. While I was at her farm recently, she made this for me on the grill right next to the hot dogs and chicken wings. It was the perfect way to enjoy part of a plant that I would normally send to the compost. In fact, every time Hte Da Win and other Karen farmers from Myanmar visit my farm, they teach me so much: how to cook our weeds (bedstraw, purslane, and mile-a-minute); green tomatoes; and the leaves and stems of squash, peppers, ginger, taro, and spilanthes in ways I never would've imagined.

The Karen way with food plants was key to their survival and joy while living in the center of a civil war; then again while hiding in the jungle and escaping to Thailand, biding time in the tight quarters of refugee camps; and today, farming and foraging here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Their heirloom vegetables and traditional foods have become a lifeline, a heartstring, a refuge, and a delicious portal home.

LEAVING HOME

Hte Da Win's father passed away when she was about 6 years old, so she started helping to put food on her family's table. During the rainy rice-growing season, she would strap on sandals, wrap her lunch in a banana leaf, and set out from dawn to dusk with 25 water buffalo to keep them out of the rice fields. She carried a tablecloth to protect her from the rain and cold. She was "like a cowboy, but in the jungle," described our interpreter friend, Naw Ta Blu Moo—or Naw Doh, as we call her. The buffalo were her village's partners in farming, both plowing the fields and later hoofing across the rice harvest, freeing the seeds from their husks. At the end of monsoon season, the owners of the herd would pay her 30 large buckets of rice, and the buffalo would roam free in the fallow rice paddies. In spring and summer, Hte Da Win would harvest countless types of beans for market. At home, she would cook meals for her mother, Tay Aye.

Tay Aye owned their land by a river, and the riverbank was a great place to grow pumpkins, chilis, and beans for the family. But their village was in the mountains of the Karen State of Myanmar (formerly called Burma, which is what they call it to this day). As part of the Karen ethnic group—K'nyaw in their dialect—they were directly in the middle of a war for self-determination. Their people were being abused, persecuted, and massacred by the Burmese army. In 1999, when Hte Da Win was 10, Tay Aye left, promising to return, and scouted a two-day route through the jungle to Thailand. She was able to sneak back home to gather her three young daughters from three separate places and bring them to the safety she'd found. Hte Da Win says, "My mom is a hero to us." They walked all day, carrying pots, cooking utensils, rice,

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Tay Aye winnows seeds to save and propagate for future Karen farmers. 'Lemon Drop' spilanthes plants provide leaves for sautés and salads. The Karen people show gardeners at Truelove Seeds how to turn plant parts that many would discard as weeds or waste into culturally meaningful meals.



and the youngest daughter, and slept at night in the jungle. They ate their rations in addition to wild plants, and kept a lookout for the Burmese army and the Thai police. If they'd been caught by the police, they could've been forced into labor, or returned to the Burmese army where they likely would've been abused or even killed.

As soon as they arrived at the Mae La refugee camp, they did as they'd been taught for generations: spread a bundle of good earth from home on the new land, planted their seeds, and prayed they'd be able to stay for a long time.

Hser Ku (whose husband is particularly fond of the ginger leaves at my farm) had to flee in 1999 with her entire village one night when word came that the Burmese army was on its way. The soldiers arrived to empty homes, and in their anger, they burned down the village. Hser Ku was 15 at the time, and her family had been part of a Karen community that worked cooperatively. "We worked for other people, but not for the money or the rice. Your turn, my turn. I help you, you help me." Her parents moved the buffalo, particularly the stubborn or lazy ones that needed someone pulling in front and someone pushing in the rear, with the rest of the herd in between. Hser Ku sometimes helped, but mostly stayed home to take care of her younger brothers and cook for the family. They grew their own rice, had their own small herd of buffalo, and, depending on the season, they grew chilis, eggplants, pumpkins, cucumbers, beans, and ginger, and ate from the forest.

Today, the nine major refugee camps of Thailand are almost entirely populated by Karen refugees. Hser Ku's family and several others escaped through the jungle much like Hte Da Win's family, hiding from the army and the police and carrying everything in their arms. Hte Da Win spent about 11 years in Mae La, and Hser Ku was farther north in Mae La Oon for 12 years. Though only legally protected within the camps, the refugees would secretly leave to find seeds and plants that tasted like home, and would grow them in their extremely small, tidy gardens, blessed by prayers and soils of longevity. "Everywhere we move, we carry and save the seed and share it, even in very small spaces," Naw Doh explains.

SEEKING NEW SHORES

Hser Ku heard there would be no vegetables in America, no land to grow on, and no pots to cook in, so every day before she left Thailand she ate enough bitter melon leaves to last a lifetime. When Hser Ku and her family did arrive in the United States in 2012, she and her people brought pots, cooking knives, seeds, and soil. The seeds were confiscated, but as the grandparents of their grandparents required, they spread their soil and said their prayers for rootedness as soon as they arrived, and were pleasantly surprised to find that it wasn't too cold to grow crops here after all.

But, despite living close to many grocery stores and various Asian markets, approximations of Karen cuisine aren't substitutes for the real thing. So in 2010, with help from Nationalities Service Center at Growing Home Gardens on 6th Street, and continuing in 2013 at Novick Urban Farm in south Philadelphia, they began to find and sow the correct plants to suit their tastes. Their farm today is within view of the Philadelphia Eagles' football stadium and was started by the Novick Corporation, which is a family business that's provided produce to the region for nearly a century. Novick has helped them find their traditional seeds in this country, find healing through the joys of growing their treasured foods, and adjust to farming in shorter growing seasons and smaller urban spaces.

RECLAIMING CULTURAL CUISINE

As they've always done, the Karen farmers give their first harvests to the elders of their community as a way to receive blessings. They save seeds from the following harvests and exchange their vegetables with each other, as they did back home. "I help you, you help me."

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Bitter ka eggplants are often used as an alternative medicine. Nyar bur, made with turmeric leaves, is a quintessential Karen delicacy. Naw Doh (left) and Hte Da Win (right) delight over large turmeric leaves. Naw Doh gathers squash leaves, which are regularly used for soups. At the back of the grill, traditional nyar bur is cooked alongside chicken and hot dogs. Naw Doh proudly presents rows of chin baung, a roselle grown for its leaves to be eaten at the Karen New Year. Hte Da Win (left), Hser Ku (middle), and Naw Doh (right) display their harvest of Karen food plants.





Karen farmers are frequent visitors of Truelove Seeds, where some of their beloved plants are grown.

On their farm, you can see the way their persistent seed-hunting efforts have shaped this landscape, one plant and one row at a time. There's a 30-foot-long squash and gourd tunnel, where fruits hang from above and the leaves are regularly harvested for soups. At the end of the tunnel, you'll find yourself in a 7-foot-tall jungle of pea eggplant greens covered in marbled green-to-red bitter fruits, which are sold by the berry carton. Across the farm, you'll find shorter plants covered in white fruits that could pass as hen eggs. In another corner still, it seems that miniature green pumpkins hang where more familiar eggplants should be.

They call this eggplant that looks like a tiny green pumpkin *ka*, which simply means "bitter." Naw Doh explains, "Some people in the countryside don't have medicine, so they use this bitter eggplant. When they have malaria or when they have a fever, they eat this and they get well!" Naw Doh saw this particular variety growing at an African farm in New Jersey. She asked our friend and fellow seed fanatic Adam Forbes to track down the seeds and it's now part of the Karen community seed bank, which Adam helped organize.

At the Karen New Year, it's important to eat *chin baung* (meaning "sour leaf") sautéed with bamboo shoots. *Chin baung* is a type of roselle or hibiscus that's grown for its leaves instead of its flowers. Ten years ago, Karen refugees had to pretend that spinach cooked with tamarind powder was their *chin baung* during holidays and celebrations. Later they tried African and Thai roselles, which were closer, but the cooked leaves created too much liquid and didn't have quite the right flavor. Finally, Naw Doh was able to find a small-leaved Burmese cultivar that was exactly right. Since this cultivar requires a long season to go to seed, we at Truelove are collaborating with farmers in Florida to regenerate Naw Doh's seed stock and hopefully share it widely through our seed catalog, as we do with their 'Burmese Rat-Tail' radishes, 'White Garden Egg' eggplants, and pea eggplants.

Hte Da Win says spilanthes, or "toothache plant," is her favorite Burmese vegetable. I was previously only aware of *Acmella oleracea* as a mouth-numbing medicinal yellow or red-and-yellow flower in the shape of a fuzzy thimble. At first, the Karen farmers made their sautés and salads with 'Lemon Drop' spilanthes leaves, until Naw Doh visited another Karen community in Ohio that shared a cutting of what's most likely *A. ciliata*. This cultivar has a milder taste and smaller yellow flower with ray florets "like a sunflower." Naw Doh carried the cutting back home, kept it in a vase over winter, and rooted it in their soil come spring. While cleaning seeds together at Novick recently, we took a lunch break of curried chicken with delicate sautéed spilanthes greens on top. After that meal, I could fully appreciate her obsession with the plant.

STAYING ROOTED

As Hte Da Win, Nah Doh, and I finished our sit-down interview, Tay Aye walked in, beckoned by her daughter via text message. She carried a container of taro leaves cooked with tamarind in exchange for having carried armloads of fresh taro, turmeric, and ginger leaves from my farm. I thanked her and told her we were going to tell her heroic story, to which she affirmed simply: "I am a hero." She didn't only lead her daughters to safety, but her entire Karen culture, which lives on through her children and grandchildren who travel home with each bite of *chin baung*.

I get excited about fruits and vegetables that I meet for the first time, especially when I can learn about them from the people who love the plants like family. Bitter pumpkin-shaped eggplants, sour-leaved hibiscuses, rat-tailed radishes, and mouth-numbing spilanthes are not novelties or exotic new foods; for the Karen of south Philadelphia, these strong flavors and particular textures are cherished gateways to a mountainous home half a globe away, lost through violence and fear. With hands in the soil, may we all continue to stay rooted here for a long time. 🌱

Owen Taylor is a seed keeper, farmer, and founder of Truelove Seeds. Find him @SeedKeeping on Instagram, and peruse truly beloved seeds and plants at www.TrueloveSeeds.com.