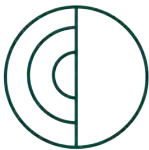


Episode 2 Transcript - Rooted Wisdom



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0:00:59.3 Aileen: Hi, there. I'm Aileen and welcome to my kitchen. I just finished baking Bibingka. It's this chewy and fragrant sweet rice cake, and it's cooked for holidays, for celebrations, for every day gatherings, or for a snack, which is why I've made it today. Making this in my California kitchen, I realised it's something more than a dessert, it's actually a blend of migrant histories. While I was making the batter, I was using a recipe from my immigrant Filipino parents but with rice grown by a multi-generational Japanese-American family-owned farm, with rice cultivated in California soil, the sticky textures of the dish make me think about lineage, which brings me to the topic that we're gonna learn about today, grounding a global mindset with local work. I brought together two leaders, with deep wisdom and insight on this topic. Martín Lemos is a farmer advocate and reformer who works to change policy, build networks and provide business services to ensure all young farmers have the chance to succeed. Ma'raj Sheikh is a community builder and strategist who works to build racial justice and food systems resiliency, focusing on local governance and systems of equitable resource allocation. Settle in and enjoy our conversation.

[music]

0:02:21.9 Aileen: Thank you both for coming together in this conversation. So I know that food work, like people carry so many different layered identities, whether we're talking about diaspora migration, interwoven history, solidarities. There's a lot of complexity there. And so when I think about grounding a global mindset with local work, I felt that a conversation between the two of you in particular would provide so much truth telling and first-hand stories around what this could look like. So before we jump into that conversation, I want to send your minds with this question. What is your favorite way to organize people around a meal?

0:03:05.3 Ma'raj: I think my favorite way to organize people around a meal is through some way of bringing people around the table with a story, with an understanding of where that food comes from, or with some kind of core values that bring us all together, so whether that's local food, whether that's food that centered with cultural significance. I think that food carries so many multi-dimensional aspects to it, that without that narrative thread, that depth and flavor of food is sort of lost.

0:03:37.9 Aileen: And can I invite you to share a little bit more about what that flavor is? I think having that visceral tangible connection can be such an important entry point into this work.

0:03:48.1 Ma'raj: I think for me, a lot of that centers around local food, around understanding where my food is coming from, whether that's food from the farmer's market, understanding the growers, understanding the cultural significance within the climate that I'm living in. Right now, I live in a little village in Chicago, and it's a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. And so every time I go down the street to my tamale lady and pick up some tamales, there's a whole story unfolding in my mind of what that livelihood means, what that connection looks like within my own community of holding on to recipes, holding on to culturally significant foods in a climate where resources have been depleted from my neighborhood, in a climate where it's complex because that food might not be coming from a local supply chain, but it still has that essence of story behind it, it still has cultural significance within the community that I'm embedded in, and so it's not a straightforward answer, I think it really is context-dependent, it's dependent on whatever meal I'm sitting down for, that story changes.

0:04:55.6 Martín: Yeah, thinking about this, I feel like I've gone through different phases. I went through this potluck phase and then swung to the other side, where like, "We'll take care of everything, you just show up, and we'll host. And I think now, maybe a little bit out of laziness, but also just out of really appreciating the participation of meals, making space for the meal to be made together and having this communal experience that was around the fire, which food and cooking and grilling was part of it, but it was really just this opportunity to gather around this fire and have conversation and dip into chopping onions and then putting those on and getting sausage and putting that on, but it's kind of this interplay between what's happening on the grill, what's happening at the table, and this back and forth. So food is core, but not the only thing, and the production of food, the processing, the making, the generating of that meal is something that happens together, and just allows folks to participate in the way they want and creates community that way.

0:05:56.6 Aileen: I love that. And I'm struck from both of you just hearing about how food and organizing people around a meal, it is about, but not just about the ingredient or the recipe, it's really about the relationships and about this dynamic interplay of stories and people and place. And so that brings me to this question. Both of you have lived across different continents, you've experienced a range of different food scapes all throughout your life and through your professional world and your personal lives, what are some of the most striking differences that have made an imprint in your work? And what are some similarities that you find yourself bringing.

0:06:34.0 Ma'raj: So I spent significant parts of my life living in Pakistan. My family moved back and forth between the US and Pakistan a few times. And I think one of the main differences that I have noticed in my experience is that here in the United States, there isn't as much of a culture around food, it doesn't organize or structure our day in the same way. I think back to my childhood in Pakistan and thinking about when it was time to drink chai, any time somebody comes over and you prepare some chai and you bring out some snacks, and how much food just organizes our whole day, thinking about it from the perspective of when I wake up here in the US, I feel like food isn't that thread that coalesces the entire day, it's more of an afterthought, and that's something that I see with fast food, with the way that our lives are much more centered on the work day, rather than the meals we eat.

0:07:24.0 Martín: I really kind of resonate with what Ma'raj was speaking to, which I think is the use of time and how much of our day we allocate to the production of food, the procurement of food and the preparation of food, of eating food together. I think that's something that I think changes across different cultures, right? And I've seen that look differently, and that to me was always the pleasure of traveling, is to experience these different perceptions of time as manifested through the how we eat and meals, and also visiting farmers and how their production is, and how they think about harvesting and cleaning and gathering. So I think that's a really interesting thread, just to know there is just varying priorities with time relating to food, and I think that was what always struck me about leaving the US, growing up in Uruguay and then visiting my grandparents, visiting my family in Uruguay, just how much time was allocated to meals and to the procurement of things, and the community relations around food.

0:08:24.3 Martín: I remember being really awestruck by just a simple fact that gathering groceries and calling ahead of time to see if the Almacen hadn't closed yet for Siesta, and if they hadn't, running by, and then stopping by a neighbor's and saying, "Do you want anything the Almacen's

about to close, are about to take a Siesta," and then going to the Almacen, grabbing a few things and not paying for it right away, 'cause there would be a card where people would write, and then you would have a credit and then you'd have to close your tab at some point. And that whole process of both the amount of time that took, but also just the relationships that were part of it, which is very strange even now coming back to it, and it's really stark now with, everything feels so individualised, you don't talk to anybody, you don't interact with anybody. You go to the supermarket, you grab your cart and then you go to a self check out and that's it, and I know that there's varying communities within these borders, but just knowing that there's been this drive within this country, at least, to fracture that and to not allow for that kind of time and space, and that's something that definitely feels like a change across regions and across place.

0:09:32.2 Ma'raj: One thing that I wanna add to that, building off of what you just said, Martín is just how different the experience of my day-to-day encounters with food are here versus having grown up in a place like Pakistan, where accessing food is a very fluid experience, it's not going into a drive-through, you're not going into necessarily a supermarket, you can access food in open markets, you can access food through street vendors who have their daily livelihoods, you can be taking public transport and come across a chai wala and be drinking a cup of tea, which is its own entire cultural experience. And earlier I mentioned the tamale lady in my neighborhood, and I think that's something that I love so much about that, is that it's one of the few experiences that I've had living in the United States where I can still kind of happen upon food in this sort of way, where it isn't boxed in or corporatised or separated from my day-to-day movement in the world.

0:10:26.3 Aileen: I am incredibly struck by this theme that seems to lift up from both of you, the use of time, time and how it's valued, time and how food preparation and relationships are so interrelated, so much of how time is constructed is rooted in capitalism, this sense of time being broken down and trying to optimise and to try to speed things up without doing all these necessary ways of slowing down. So I wanna ask both of you, as people who have personal and communal lives have seen other ways of being that are across the global south and across communities, even within the US, do you believe it's possible to feed communities, feed the world and exist without capitalism?

0:11:06.9 Martín: Yeah, that's a big question for sure, and I think it's a tough question too as advocates, because we sometimes work in spaces where there's still a taboo around talking about capitalism, and I think a lot about that in the US context of actually arguing against that, whether or not there it is, even capitalism in our food system, from a current farm production side of things, so much of our cultural system is subsidized. Historically, we've got acreage that was stolen by the US Government and then offered to white settlers for a dollar an acre. So that's an incredible subsidy. We've had enslavement that was subsidized and sub-sponsored, and this idea of capitalism, which has often been presented as this market forces, and it's not real, it's never been real in the US, and so a lot of our work on it is to make it clear that we usually do have significant government intervention, and I think there's this false distinction that we're made to believe between this kind of public-supported system and this community-supported system.

0:12:09.4 Martín: And this communal agriculture system exists, but that's supported by the work of communities, by the volunteer work of communities, by the investment of communities, there's a whole public-supported agriculture system, which to me oftentimes is in direct competition, and it's our role to talk about the ways that that community model and our public model should be one and

the same. And it's purposely not transparent, there's a motivated irrationality to not let us see how our policy determines who gets food and who doesn't, who suffers and who doesn't. And I think there's already a huge machinery there, we've got a public Agricultural model that is primarily funded by the state, we as people within the state have the right and deserve to have the state mirror and reflect our wishes, and if we're proposing a community supported agriculture model, we need a public government investment behind it.

0:13:03.0 Martín: So that's been my approach to thinking about that capitalism question, is to say like, "Well, you know really, we don't have this pure competitive winner of best ideas, no, we have an agriculture system that is entirely dictated and entirely distorted by government investment and public investment, and that's not a bad thing, that's the role of government, is to subsidise things and to provide funding and investment in things, the problem is that it's not directed where it needs to be, it's not distributing wealth, it's not promoting the common good, it's not supporting farmers and farm workers, and it's not prioritising public health. There's enough models both in this country and across the world of community supported agriculture models, the problem is that they don't receive the support of the public state and public investment. And so they're existing despite government efforts most times, and so our work is to really try to reconcile that and making that really clear to folks, that this is the model that exists, this is what we can do to make things better.

0:13:59.6 Aileen: Thank you, Martín. Ma'raj, what does that spark with you, how do you find those connections yourself, and what would be your take on that question?

0:14:07.1 Ma'raj: Yeah, I think what Martín is pointing out, which is that we don't have a system that's driven by markets, that we actually have a system of what should be mechanisms that support public benefit, actually being allocated towards supporting corporatization, consolidation of power and of resources in an extractive way. And so I think that community-driven, community-supported agricultural systems, food systems are very much possible, but that this isn't a conversation that happens separate from the larger conversation of, what are the systems that uphold our capitalist economy, and how can those engines and drivers of support for capitalism be reoriented to actually benefit communities.

0:14:48.8 Aileen: Knowing that both of you in a lot of ways are bridges, you've been bridging your work in land and agriculture and you're forming policy, and these are so big, these are incredibly complex worlds, I wanna bring it maybe down to an example, or a model, imagining someone listening is entering into the question of food maybe for the first time in their life, or new in this path. And I wanna invite you to share, is there a community that you were or consider yourself a part of, where you've seen some really drastic changes in how people relate to their food, where have you seen drastic changes that can take us into somewhere that's gonna be more whole?

0:15:24.8 Ma'raj: So I think I've seen the most radical transformation happen in spaces where people actually are able to encounter land and food production and proximity to their living space. I had the opportunity to live on a community land trust in Madison, Wisconsin, called Tri-gardens, where Madison, Wisconsin, it's a city, but within the city, there was this little oasis of a land trust, a five-acre diversified vegetable farm along with affordable housing and community gardens. Just witnessing people who lived on that land, who prior to living in the space had never really grown their own food, or never really encountered an agricultural system, the ways in which their understanding was able to flower and develop through engaging with the soil and engaging as part

of that ecosystem of nourishment, I think that that is one of the most transformative experiences that anyone can have.

0:16:17.1 Ma'raj: And I think that's an experience that can be available to folks in the city through being involved in a community garden, through talking to farmers at their farmers market, through growing herbs in your window cell, but just being part of that direct experience of linking your nourishment in a way that engages all of your senses, in a way that really makes it immediate, is so important, because we live in this world of obstructions and for so many of us food is several obstructions away from actually arriving at our plate, I think as soon as we sort of close that loop in any way that makes clear sense to us, then those mechanisms, those ecological interactions, that meaning with which we're able to access nourishment in a relational way, I don't think there's any substitute for that.

0:17:05.8 Aileen: I'm hearing that. And Martín, what do you see from your vantage point?

0:17:09.0 Martín: There's a lot that exists right now, and a lot that's growing. I think the challenge is that it's sometimes struggling to be born and a little bit obstructed, but there's a lot of really amazing experimentation that's happening around these things, there's folks that are awake to really the complications of food production, as this mainstream conception of it has been in the US, and developing really curated in the sense of being localised and specific to the relations of that land, of that space and of that community. Part of my job is just to keep attuned to these projects, and there's just so many across the country, there's just so many people who are developing farms and sliding scale production, or worker collectives, or they are thinking about revitalising landscapes.

0:17:56.3 Martín: There's just all these different perspectives on food, and I think the scarcity of these stories in the media make it really hard to know. And if you follow the common narrative, you don't get a sense of the depth of experimentation, of newness, there's just some really amazing things that are happening, and so it is really hopeful, and I don't know if that hope is about one model that works everywhere, but I think it's more of just like, folks when they have the space, when they have the access to land, when they have the security of being in those spaces, when they have the security of resources can do really exciting things that may not work in other places that are super effective and powerful and impactful in the community that they're in, and creating the kind of communities that they want, where they're at. So it's exciting, I think there's just so much out there and in our landscapes, that doesn't get as much attention, doesn't rise up as much in the mainstream narrative.

0:18:50.3 Ma'raj: I love what you just said Martín, about the multiple ways in which this work is happening, I'm just thinking about a bag of potato chips. 'Cause I love root vegetables, just thinking about that embeddedness within the soil, the function that many root vegetables serve, and the nutrient cycle of the plant, and how rich that is, but then when you chop it up and put it into a little potato chip bag all of that meaning, all of that understanding is just totally lost. I think there are many ways for us to kind of get back to the soil, get back to understanding the connections of our food, and that there is no one way of understanding these things or one right path of understanding these things. I think Dr. Vandana Shiva, who is an activist and a thought leader who I really respect alludes to this in terms of monoculture of the mind, the fact that there are so many different ways and so many different things that are happening in the world. Given the limitations and given the context that we live within, that there is no right or wrong way, start wherever you're at, because

whatever that perspective is, it needs to have a multiplicity to it for the sake of resilience.

[music]

0:19:57.7 Mark: Peace y'all. I'm Mark Winston Griffith, an alumnus of the Castanea Fellowship Program. As the Executive Director of the Brooklyn Movement Center, I was looking for a community of peers who also saw a world where food truly became a source of health, equity, and well-being for all. Castanea brought those very leaders together and invested in us to make it happen. Since then, I've collaborated with a cadre of Castanea fellows on a national initiative to hold philanthropy accountable, and I've tapped into game-changing support from my food systems work here in Central Brooklyn. So I'm looking forward to what's ahead in my professional, as well as my personal journey, along with following the impact I know my friends from the program will continue to make. Learn how Castanea can support your journey. Visit castaneafellowship.org. That's C-A-S-T-A-N-E-A-F-E-L-L-O-W-S-H-I-P.org.

[music]

0:20:57.7 Aileen: On the theme of changing the narrative, these spaces for radical transformation really ask for people to come up-close to food systems in their day-to-day life. From your vantage point and your roles and your work, do you see taking on that role in educating and changing the narrative from your work? I know both of you as people working in advocacy, policy and strategy, you might be taking on the role of educator in both formal but also informal ways, and we just love to invite you to share some more of that work in educating and passing skills and knowledge along.

0:21:28.8 Ma'raj: I guess for myself, I kinda wanna turn that question a little bit on its head because I don't necessarily see my role as an educator. I see my role as more of a conduit, and so much of that has to do with just holding space and being open, being receptive to the experiences of the communities in which I'm most immediately embedded, but also adjacent communities, and also understanding where my own perspective lies within hierarchies of privilege and what the limits of my perspective are. I think any advocacy work is not necessarily about informing or educating. I mean in one sense it is because you're delivering a message, but that message isn't coming from me. It's a message that I am acting as a conduit for. And I can't be a conduit for that message unless I'm open ears, open eyes, open understanding, and allowing that to sort of mobilize the work that I do.

0:22:22.4 Aileen: I love questions being turned on their head. I think that's so important and part of the depth of this conversation.

0:22:27.3 Martín: Yeah, I really agree with what Ma'raj is saying, and I think, especially that question around education, I think it's recognizing that there is a common sense that exists, and the work of advocacy is like to raise that common sense and to elevate it and to give it power and to say that there's wisdom in communities that have been disenfranchised or barred from the resources that they need for self-determination, don't have access to the Capitol, access to land, whatever it may be, that prevents their actualising what they see as important for their community, for their well-being. I feel like there's a core part of advocacy that is less about trying to educate constituents and more about encouraging them, encouraging to say, "You have every right to demand this. You have every right to not compromise and to receive what you want, because it's your government and it's accountable to you." It's not that I know any better. It's not that the lawmakers know any better.

0:23:26.1 Martín: I'm in the position I'm in because the privileges I've had and the privileges I've been able to gain. Lawmakers are there because of privileges they've had. It's our role to really challenge that and to make clear that, yeah, there is that common sense and that opportunity that we should have to influence and to advocate and to receive what is in the public good. So it's difficult, but I definitely feel like it's an important part of our work as advocates to really challenge that instinct to educate and tell folks like, "This is what it should be." Even on the strategy, sometimes it's not really our role to do that. Our role is just to provide the resources and that opportunity for folks who are working class, folks who aren't gonna get paid immediately for the work they volunteer in terms of political advocacy.

0:24:08.1 Martín: I love the way Ma'raj is thinking about it. You've gotta turn that on its head and go from thinking about our task as advocates and rather support their organizing that already exists, working class, marginalized communities already organized, they're organized for their protection. They don't need us to organize it. There's networks of strength there and networks of resilience. Our work is really to resource them and to elevate them and to give them all the opportunities to challenge power and to receive the benefits and the respect they deserve.

0:24:36.4 Ma'raj: I really like that word "challenge". I think that we do hold a space of privilege working in this policy world, and how do we actually allow ourselves to be receptive and shaped by the experiences of working class people, of farmers, of those who are closest to the soil, those who are closest to the systems that we are looking to transform and actually challenge and hold space? Because I think about all of the different conversations that I'm a part of in my day-to-day life, and there's a lot of ideas, there's a lot of words, there's a lot of language, there's a lot there, a lot of educating happening on all ends, and what is frequently missing is holding space, allowing for what is actually grounded to emerge.

0:25:21.2 Aileen: So Ma'raj and Martín, we have covered a lot. You've taken sense on this journey from global to local, and I wanna impact that some more, 'cause I think that this question of how do we actually live in those connections, how do we make those threads between local and global perspectives real in our day-to-day.

0:25:41.8 Ma'raj: Yeah, that is a really big question, Aileen, and I think that in some ways, the answer really lies within our own identities, right? Each of us is not only embedded within the communities that we live in, but each of us bears witness in one way or another through our own experiencing of life. And so when I think about the ways in which local action connects to my own perspective in a global way, it is through my identity, it is through thinking about where my ancestors come from, where my food comes from, that I'm eating. And so I think that that's sort of the key. Even if you're not somebody who has had experience living multi-nationally or across continents, maybe you're the child of immigrants, maybe your parents were first generation, maybe you live in a neighborhood that has ties to another cultural group. And so really understanding how these things play out within our local communities while still maintaining a focus on local action, I think that there is something there that there is a more complete picture to understand through that investigation that will create a pathway of really understanding this concept of how my liberation is tied into your liberation.

0:26:50.7 Martín: What's also coming up for me is I think there's a really important part of

participating in our world that involves not being afraid and recognizing and acknowledging that machinery that accumulates power, accumulates opportunity, accumulates wealth and the impacts of that and how it functions through government and the allocation of resources and the allocation of opportunities, the allocation of land. There is this opportunity within the US to have really a local action and to create this counter-narrative through projects that support community resilience. And I think it's also really critical to, as you're engaged in that local action, to not shy away from that machinery and not to disengage from that, because that machinery is still working, whether or not you find pockets of resistance in the US. That's machinery that is working in overdrive across the world to Hoover up opportunities and wealth and capital and to displace people. And so thinking about local action, to me, has always been a challenge as an immigrant too, 'cause I'm new to this country, and I still have the sense of being a visitor to this country.

0:28:04.3 Martín: And we have to recognize that our communities are gonna change. Our borders are gonna change. There's gonna be movement in this world. And so I think local action requires us to also engage in that global level and engage with that machinery that works and is often counterproductive, if not destructive to communities across the world, but also recognizing in our local actions that we've gotta be ready to be welcoming and think of our communities as things that are moving in flux, think about land access is not just a matter of securing land for the community that's here now, but for generations ahead, for the communities that are still to join because their farm land has turned into desert, because they're fleeing violence that's been a result of struggles of wealth accumulation and imperialism.

0:28:53.7 Martín: And so this important action that we need to take on is understanding the place for local resilience and community-building, but not to think of that as something that means we disengage with the political system or disengage with the global machinery. It's unfair to communities that don't have that option. And it's also just short-term, right? Because at some point, any privileges that we have for local action are also going to be on their jeopardy. Our security is also gonna be in the jeopardy. Like that machinery is not gonna stop on its own, and because we can create a moment of resistance, a moment of resilience, that resilience will be on their thread until that global machinery is really challenged. I know we feel it as immigrants of having seen it, and seeing the importance of global action and also the importance of local action, and feeling like we can hold both of these things in our mind. That's kind of the imperative that we have, things that we need to do locally, grow things where we can, but we also need to be ready to engage with the larger systems and mechanisms that are a threat to not only to our communities, but to communities around the world.

0:30:04.4 Ma'raj: This is big work ahead of us, because as we're entering this time in which climate is going to make climate refugees out of many of us, it's going to disrupt the ecologies within which we live, the communities within which we live in one way or another. I think that's a really important point that you made, Martín, that our communities are permeable. This isn't some static thing. And in many ways, this sort of temporal, spatial delineation, isolation is a figment of the very system that we're up against. It serves to divide and conquer us. And so how do we prioritize local action and that attention and awareness which very much needs to expand on a local level, while still really understanding that we are part of a global collective, and that no utopia is safe? We can build our utopia, but that utopia is not gonna be safe until we start creating the global utopia.

0:31:01.1 Aileen: I'm hearing that, and I appreciate you both sharing the importance, the value of shifting power, shifting privilege, holding space, being a conduit. And I'd love to get, whether it's advice or just encouragement that both of you would want to impart. What's something simple that anyone could do that could make a huge difference in our own home communities?

0:31:23.1 Ma'raj: I think there's a lot of confusion in the world, because we live in a world that is becoming more and more globalized, where the idea of, what does a global food system look like, or what is a global perspective informing our food system look like. Honestly, I think the biggest thing that anyone can do is to really be as local and to understand issues on a local level to the best of their abilities, because the forces that are supporting corporatization that are supporting consolidation and extraction of resources are the same globally. And the same forces that are causing land resources and other kinds of resources to be unavailable to our farmers, that those same forces are at play on a global level. And so it's hard to engage with these global problems, but I think that the biggest challenge to that is actually localizing and to really bring our attention to what's right in front of us. What supports my neighbor? What sustains my community? What is life-sustaining? What is allowing for nourishment to exist within my own community? And how do we protect that while still maintaining that perspective and understanding that what is happening in front of us, what is undermining our systems of nourishment, access to resources, access to land, worker's rights, farmer's rights, are the same things that are at play on a global level?

0:32:48.9 Aileen: And Martín?

0:32:50.7 Martín: Grow what you can and where you can. That relationship to the natural world that comes through cultivating and having this relationship that isn't simply human to human, and thinking about the natural world, I think that comes through growing. And I think the grow where you can is where it's important to think about the politics of things and getting involved around local action where you can is really critical. And I think, something I think is important for those of us who work in food is to also open up to folks to organize and act on things that maybe don't seem to be squarely about food production or food at all. Just organize around the things that are important in your community. organize around the things that are unjust in your community. organize around supporting those in your community that are being marginalized, that are being demonized, that are being attacked or vulnerable. And that often has relationships with food, but sometimes doesn't. It involves reform around the way that we think about criminal justice system, reform around healthcare access, reform...

0:33:52.3 Martín: And so farming is really about being attentive to your world, which is both the natural world and the political world, and I think that's what I would suggest as just a general call-to-action is grow what you can, where you can, and that what you can will allow you to feel that connection, but knowing where you are and knowing the way things work in your neighborhood and investigating that will unearth some things that need change, and you have the opportunity to change that.

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