

# In Defense of Farming

By David Mas Masumoto

**W**e've all heard it: The Valley needs to diversify the economy and stop being so dependent on agriculture. We need better-paying jobs, get people out of the fields, and stop the exploitation. The Valley must develop other resources and create another identity; we need to be something more than cows and critters, vines and cheap vino.

I hear the message: We'd be better off without farms and farmers.



DAVID MAS MASUMOTO

I am defensive. We in the Valley already have a powerful economic identity called agriculture. Yet people seem to want to discard it, ignore it, and forget it.

Agriculture in our Valley is a multibillion dollar industry. When compared with the flash of the film industry or the sizzle of high technology, we don't stand a chance. We aren't sexy enough.

Valley agriculture is rarely seen as a dynamic force that combines human capital with the latest technology and cutting edge innovation. We're dull, dumb hayseeds still stuck with old-fashioned traditions.

At best, we squander natural resources like water and pollute the air with our practices. At worst, some will claim the environmental degradation caused by farms can't be off-set — there is no common ground for compromise.

Clean up the Valley's air by cleaning out farming. End California's water problems by disposing farmers. Stop the oppression of poor, unskilled immigrant and undocumented workers by destroying agriculture.

Many will condemn the practices of big ag operations and trivialize the efforts of small family farms. The public sees images of poverty and we farmers are classified as oppressors of the oppressed, not as employers and employees.

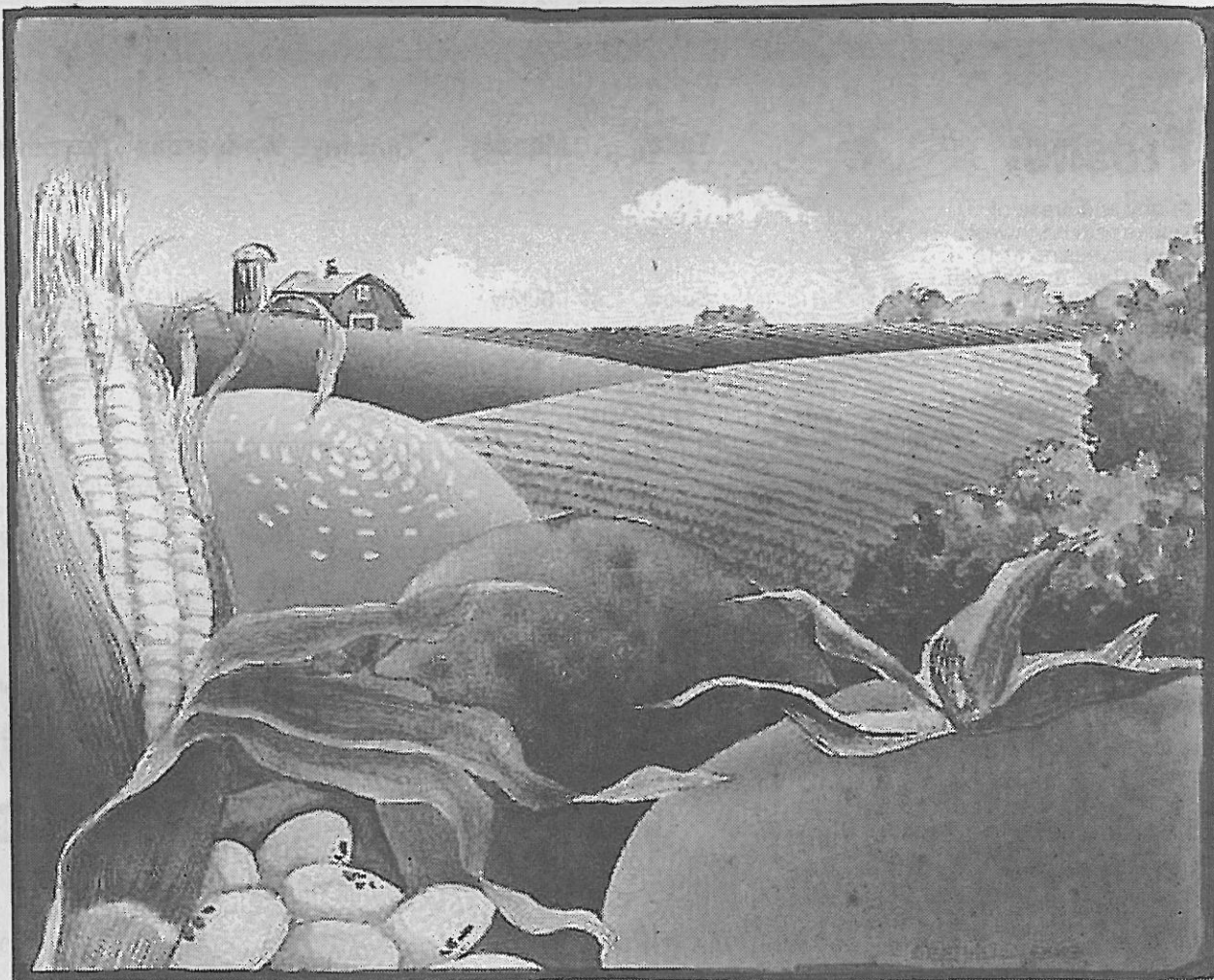
Lost in such a class debate is the ethnic and cultural diversity of our rural communities. Historically, our Valley farms have been the point of entry for immigrants. But no one pays attention to the bottom rung as individuals and groups work their way up to things better.

**I** take this personally. When younger, I grew confused and even questioned the value of my profession. In the past, I have been shamed into silence. It's been a long time since I've heard outsiders taking public pride in farmers and our agrarian foundations.

Over the past few decades, brutal economic forces have humbled us. Few get filthy rich in farming today, empires are rarely built from working the land. A farmer's wealth is now reduced to the value of his or her water or the potential off-sets of pollution.

Few see food as part of the information and technological revolution. Our biggest fans may be those who play a computer "FarmVille game" and enjoy a virtual connection to caring for neighbors' crops, bringing in harvests and tending the land.

Yet we farmers may be our own worst enemies. Many have felt isolated and hurt. We've been ignored and abused, losing political capital. We



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begin to distrust our city neighbors, lash out at anything that sounds like it came from San Francisco, and demonize environmentalists. We manifest the same absolute thinking as those who condemn us.

**S**o what is our agricultural identity? Do we sit back and get angry, protest over lack of water, yell louder in order to be heard. Yes. But I also hope we ask: What do we want to be known for?

We now live in a fragmented state: There doesn't seem to be a "one" California but instead many regions, each with their special interests, political leanings and cultural realities. There's an opportunity today for us to be no longer overshadowed by other regions if we define ourselves.

What does that mean for farming in our Valley? Can we construct a new collective identity based on our shared agrarian roots? Instead of trying to be something else, why can't we put agriculture on the top of the list and accept that reality?

We can grow a new agricultural identity for our Valley that blends the past with the present and future. We share a geography. We are connected by a common history.

There is value in our work — we provide jobs and are the economic backbone of this region. Yet our real worth lies in our stories: authentic stories of good hard-working folk who choose to labor in the earth. And the significance we seek is found in acknowledging, expanding and promoting our sustainable values: stewardship, independence and a belief in family and community.

I find hope in a "show me" attitude that's part of a farming culture. We thrive on trial and error practices and should accept some failures as we start to solve both small and big problems. Historically we thrive when we adopt a "can do" identity.

We must be clear about our strengths. We have a long history of cooperation and collaboration — such as cooperatives and marketing orders. Competition — to drive your neighbor out of the market — has not been the dominant business model.

But the new currency of information may determine our success. We can no longer rely on a public relations campaign to tell our story.

With a food safety scare, an informed public does not want to see a smiley face saying "don't worry, be happy." Consumers are demanding to know more — they want to hear authentic stories of our work, our products, our livelihood. Our audience is now national and global.

Recent food revolutions — organic, local, sustainable — all incorporate this new currency that goes beyond economics: A public demands to know where food comes from, how it is grown and who the faces are behind daily meals. As new social media dominates the landscape, more and more want to learn these stories and test their authenticity.

Farmers can join this transformational wave and surge forward. First we have to earn people's respect. We must then purge the negatives and confront those who simply don't want us around. Yet at the same time, we must challenge ourselves, including other farmers who refuse to be self critical.

We can still determine our identity, but only in partnership with others. It begins with a transparency of information.

I cannot farm alone: My challenge is to discover my allies and collaborate with accomplices.

► Award-winning author and organic farmer David Mas Masumoto of Del Rey writes about the San Joaquin Valley and its people. He is author of new book "Wisdom of the Last Farmer: Harvesting Legacies from the Land." Send e-mail to him at [masmasumoto@gmail.com](mailto:masmasumoto@gmail.com).