

Michelle Weeks, ǵast sǵit Farm, Gresham, Oregon

Interviewee: Michelle Weeks, Indigenous Farmer

Interviewer: Amanda Flegel

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I visited a farm in Gresham, Oregon, this past May to interview Michelle Weeks, a sngaytsktx (Sinixt) tribal member of the Arrow Lakes Peoples (Colville Reservation and farmer /owner of [ǵast sǵit](#) Farm. The farm's name means Good Rain in English. The name is in the traditional language of the sngaytsktx (Sinixt). Michelle explained that using her tribe's language and bringing it to life it is important to her to, as the language is currently endangered.

I begin by asking how the farm started. Michelle explained that after the 2016 presidential election, she was gravely disappointed in the direction our country was headed. "I wanted to do something real with my time and energy. I liked growing food. I grew up with a garden, with all sorts of plants, foods included. I was like, why don't we grow food? So, we started growing food."

In the spring/winter of 2017, Michelle began growing organic produce, emphasizing foods indigenous to Turtle Island, first foods. She started with a half-acre of land in western Washington. She grows such crops as Hopi blue corn, gourd seed corn, and Makah Ozette, a type of potato listed on the Slow Foods Ark of Taste. She had no master plan at this time other than to grow good, quality, organic food! Then a restaurant heard about her first foods project and reached out to make some purchases. This was an aha moment for her, the moment she realized this could be a viable business. She began to have a vision of producing foods for restaurants, Native Americans, and other BIPOC individuals. Unfortunately, many Native Americans and BIPOC do not have sufficient access to high-quality fresh produce for reasons ranging from redlining to other acts of structural racism.

In addition to growing crops, Michelle raises a French heritage breed of meat rabbit named Champagne d'Argent or "Silver of Champagne." Being of French ancestry in addition to being Native American, Michelle felt raising rabbits honored her heritage. Rabbits are a loved dish among both the Native Americans and the French. Native Americans ate wild brown rabbit breeds. "One of my favorites is a nettle pesto rabbit dish. There are European nettles and North American nettles, so it's like fusing those ancestors in a dish and getting to celebrate both sides [of my heritage.]"



Photo by [Jamie Thrower \(@jamie_thrower\)](#)

Michelle has prepared rabbits for Native American events. People often shared fond memories of the last time they had a rabbit dish. Sometimes they recollect where they were and who they were with when sharing the rabbit meal from thirty to forty years ago. Michelle's work is vital to making traditional foods available on Tuttle Island to Native Americans and BIPOC individuals, strengthening memories and cultural connections so for future generations have these same relationships with first foods.

Two years ago, with the success of her farm in Western Washington, Michelle began looking to expand her operation. She successfully secured land at the [Headwaters Farm Incubator](#) Program run by the East Multnomah County Soil & Water District. Incubator farmers have the use of land, tools, machinery, washing, cooling facilities, and classes that help them build and run not just a successful farm but a successful business. Michelle is currently farming on an acre and a half at her Gresham location. Farmers have five years in the incubation program to build up their clientele base and expertise before they go out on their own. Unfortunately, farm incubator programs are rare. Michelle moved to the Portland metro area to take advantage of this opportunity.



Good Rain Farm near Gresham. Photo by [Jamie Thrower \(@jamie_thrower\)](#)

Ŷast sŷit Farm runs as a Community Supported Agriculture or CSA model. She described how a CSA farm operates and why she chooses to utilize this operating model over a more traditional farming model:

Most farms operate on a calendar year annual budget. On the first of January, they go to their bank and say, I need an operations loan. They secure a loan for 50k or 100k or whatever they need. They use the money to do the work, pay themselves and pay the

mortgage. And then when they finally have a crop to sell they use that money to pay back that loan. And the problem is [the structure] is predatory. There is lots of interest, and farms have issues making enough money. The way that we value food in our society has been based on stolen land and stolen labor. We expect food to be super cheap. That is how our economy was built, and it just doesn't add up. If we were to pay people fair wages, it doesn't work, it doesn't add up. Farmers end up losing money in the end and owing money. So, they will sell parts of their land, they will sell crucial parts of infrastructure like tractors and then do it again, all over. We slowly chipped and chipped and chipped away at America's farmland, based on this kind of predatory operational loans.

Consumers become CSA members by purchasing shares of a farm's harvest early in the spring. When the farmer harvests produce through the summer and fall, they distribute the food to the shareholders. Each farm chooses its schedule. Ǻast sǵit Farm offers a spring and fall shoulder season in addition to the traditional summer CSAs. Michelle realized many of her clients often already enjoyed the bounty of their summer gardens. Yet, they struggled in the spring and fall months accessing quality fresh foods. She added spring and fall shoulder seasons.

Currently, Ǻast sǵit Farm offers different buy-in options for CSA members according to a family's needs. For example, a small CSA box feeds roughly one to three people weekly or a standard CSA box provides approximately up to five people weekly. In addition, Michelle's CSA members can add products from other Native American producers and farmers. Offerings include Native American roasted coffee, Takelma, named in the traditional language of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe and roasted in Umpqua territory. Other offerings include artisan baked bread, free-range organic eggs, herbs, pepper mixes, swiss chard, edible flowers, and many more! In addition to honoring first foods in her CSA box, Michelle offers scholarship programs for those who cannot afford to her CSA boxes. Ǻast sǵit Farm also provides payment plans and takes coupons from the WIC and SNAP programs.

In addition to buying produce and goods, Ǻast sǵit CSA members also have options to buy a Save Our Seed or SOS box. Michelle and her crew began to harvest and save seeds to reduce farming costs. She wanted seeds for use at the farm, for CSA members, and for other seed-saving banks serving BIPOC individuals. Seed saving is a lot of work in addition to all the other work at the farm. Michelle had this to say about the SOS program: "Many hands make light work. We are getting the community involved in a way that they can learn how to save seeds. We want them to know what seeds look like. Talking about it is different than when you are standing there in the garden. Our goal is to harvest [seeds stalks] fresh from the field, not remove any of the plant matter, throw that in the bags and CSA boxes. When the [member] pulls it out, they can see how the head [looks], how it has bolted and bloomed into these various seeds. They see the seeds need to dry a little bit more before they can be saved. [We] take the mystery out, which seemed to be the missing part." When members have dried their seeds, they save a seed packet for their own use and send the rest back into Ǻast sǵit Farm. These SOS boxes are set up on a buy one give one model: purchase a box, and a box will be donated to a BIPOC individual in the community.

I asked Michelle what her advice would be for the non-native community to support natives in controlling their food? She replied, "Support native farmers, support native makers, support native fishers. Those would be like the first people I go to buy our everyday foods. You are going to have to search out [Native producers], but it is out there. We have a list on one of [my blogs](#) of all the local [Portland Metro area] restaurants and makers. I've been putting that together and re-editing it here and there."

I wrapped up my hour-long interview by asking Michelle what food sovereignty, the right of people to healthy, ecologically sustainable foods that are culturally appropriate, means to her:

I think it means what we are doing. I feel like meeting people where they are at. And asking, we send out surveys annually to everybody so we get a sense of what they liked, what they did not like, what they are looking for with how we can improve. It is a little bit of asking what are your prayers and what do you need?