

The Tet table

On Lunar New Year, a restaurant family reflects on its tough path to success

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At the Huynh family's five Vietnamese restaurants in the Bay Area, hundreds of customers sit down each day to get their fix of crispy shrimp cupcakes, tender sea bass seared in fragrant garlic and lemongrass, and cavernous bowls of steamy beef noodle soup.

Over the decades, the Huynhs have provided countless fellow immigrants a much missed taste of home and introduced newcomers to the vibrant flavors of this spectacular Southeast Asian cuisine.

In the process, they have become one of the most prominent, most successful and most enduring Vietnamese-American restaurateur families in the Bay Area.

At a time when only a handful of Vietnamese restaurants and markets existed in San Jose, they opened the then-tiny Vung Tau downtown 23 years ago. It eventually begat two other Vung Taus, one in Milpitas, the other in Newark. Those were followed by the modern Tamarine in downtown Palo Alto, and the even more glamorous Bong Su in San Francisco.

The Huynhs have always considered food an integral part of their heritage. And like other families of Vietnamese descent, they will celebrate the beginning of the Vietnamese new year, Tet, on Thursday with an elaborate potluck feast of favorite dishes, many of them rarely made at other times because they are so laborious.

"It's Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's all rolled into one," says Tammy Huynh, 45, executive chef and co-owner of Tamarine and Bong Su. "It is the most important holiday."

Every year for Tet, about 30 family members gather at the Fremont home of the family's matriarch and patriarch, Chac Do, 72, and Thang Huynh, 74. It takes days of preparation to make the dozens of dishes that will vie for space on the large dining room table.

Candied sweetmeats - coconut, ginger, lotus seeds and plums - will be arranged prettily on decorative plates for ancestral altars and for guests to nibble throughout the day. Big bowls of chicken curry will be served with baguette slices - a nod to the cuisine's French influences. There will be a refreshing salad of shrimp, mint and spritely pomelo, and a comforting dish of rice heaped with shiitakes, Chinese sausage and chicken, all cooked in a clay pot. And for dessert, airy squares of banh bo nuong, a honeycomb sponge cake with a jade-hued interior colored by pandan leaf.

On a recent afternoon in her Fremont home, Do ladled out slabs of tender pork shoulder stewed in sweet coconut juice, a dish without which no Tet celebration would be complete. Earlier in the day, she had carefully stuffed banana leaves with glutinous rice and fluffy sweet mung beans, then boiled the pyramid-shaped bundles for three hours until they softened. She slices off a sticky morsel for a guest to try. And then another for herself. She smiles, pleased with the results.

A time to reflect

For the Huynhs, Tet is a time to reflect on the year that was, and the one yet to come. And it is a time to revel in abundance, because it wasn't always this way.

Do was a seafood exporter in the resort town of Vung Tau in Vietnam. When the communists took over the country in 1975, Thang Huynh, a South Vietnamese police lieutenant, was thrown into a prison camp. Do was left to care for their seven children alone.



Tammy Huynh, center, helps mother Chac Do prepare sticky rice wraps stuffed with mung beans as sister Jan Nguyen, left, watches in the Huynh family's Fremont home last month. (David M. Barreda / Mercury News)

Tammy Huynh, Do's third eldest child, was only 13 then. She remembers waiting in long lines for meager rations of bread and rice, and trying to acquire more on the black market so her brothers and sisters wouldn't starve.

At the end of 1976, the family - 12 members, including Thang Huynh, who had been freed - managed to flee Vietnam on a fishing boat. After four days at sea, they landed in Malaysia, where they were given food and fuel but turned away. When they reached Singapore, the family - including the children - were thrown into jail overnight because they were illegal immigrants. The next day, they were put back on the boat and forced to resume their journey.

When they finally reached Indonesia, they were put into a refugee camp. They stayed there for a year, until they received permission to immigrate to the United States, thanks to the sponsorship of a relative in Lodi.

But life in Lodi was anything but easy.

"We had nothing. We got clothes from Goodwill and ate Ramen noodles almost every day," Tammy Huynh recalls. "The young ones went to school, while the older ones got jobs. My mom worked in a cannery, canning tomatoes."

Making a home in S.J.

Drawn to its larger community of Vietnamese immigrants, Do decided to look for a job in San Jose, a city that would soon boast the largest Vietnamese community of any city outside of Vietnam. Do had never cooked much in Vietnam. Like most upper middle-class Vietnamese households then, hers had hired help to handle those duties.

But in the United States, it was one job she could excel at without knowing English. So she cooked at various restaurants, including one of the first soup noodle joints in downtown San Jose, Pho 13.

Her daughter Tammy Huynh urged her to open her own restaurant rather than keep working for others. The family pooled its money; Tammy Huynh even contributed \$5,000 from a loan she had taken out to attend pharmacy school. With the funds, Do opened the original Vung Tau on San Carlos Street in 1985. It had all of 32 seats.

"People would wait in a long line in the cold to get in," says Tammy Huynh, who used to come home on weekends from her studies at the University of California-Davis to help out as a cashier. "It was small, but it thrived."

Indeed, in the first month, she says, it did \$17,000 worth of business.

Two years later, the restaurant moved to its present, larger location on East Santa Clara Street, at North 12th Street. In 1996, Victor Huynh asked his sister Tammy Huynh to help open a second Vung Tau in Milpitas. She started working part time at that restaurant while working full time as a pharmacist. It wasn't long before she quit the pharmacy and devoted herself entirely to the family business.

Meantime, her niece Anne Le Zibblatt, daughter of her older sister, Nhan Huynh, was making her own career in marketing for a Silicon Valley high-tech company. She traveled frequently. "There were no caps on expenses back then, so I was getting introduced to some fine restaurants," she says with a laugh.

It got Le Zibblatt to thinking. "I believed Vietnamese food had so much to offer. It has so much finesse. I wanted to put together a more fine-dining restaurant because our family had been so successful at more casual restaurants."

The result was the elegant Tamarine, which Le Zibblatt and Tammy Huynh opened in 2002. Four years later, aunt and niece followed up that success with Bong Su in San Francisco's hip South of Market neighborhood.

Today, Tammy Huynh's older sister Nhan Huynh, 52, cooks at Vung Tau in San Jose, while younger sister Jan Nguyen, 42, cooks at Vung Tau in Newark. Brother Duc Huynh, 38, manages Vung Tau in San Jose, and Victor Huynh, 41, another brother, oversees Vung Tau in Milpitas.

Family pitches in

It's no surprise that so many women in the family are involved in the restaurants, the Huynhs say. "My mom is a strong woman," Tammy Huynh says. "We're all like her."

Although many restaurateurs hope their children do anything but follow them into this grueling industry, Tammy Huynh, who learned to cook from her mother, says her mom was pleased when almost all of them did.

"She knows I love being in the restaurant," Tammy Huynh says. "I love to think about new recipes, and to see people enjoy the food. We all love what we do, and it shows."

Perhaps no more so than on Tet, when all the Huynhs will gather in Do's kitchen to pickle crunchy vegetables, stir simmering pots and painstakingly form banh bot loc, the irresistible chewy tapioca flour cylinders filled with prawns and pork. So much of their lives are spent cooking for others. But on this day, they do it just for themselves, and relish every last bite.