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## Vietnam Restaurant wins a James Beard America's Classics award

Vietnam, which opened on 11th Street in Chinatown in 1984, was founded by the Lai family, who had arrived in Philadelphia five years earlier with \$30 in their pockets.



Owner Benny Lai at Vietnam Restaurant in Philadelphia's Chinatown in 2018.  
TIM TAI / Staff Photographer

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Vietnam Restaurant in Chinatown, founded in 1984 by immigrants who arrived in Philadelphia five years before with only \$30, was named to the list of America's Classics by the James Beard Foundation.

The award has been given annually since 1998 to locally owned restaurants that “serve quality food, have timeless appeal, and reflect the character of their communities.” The honor will be given at the Beard Awards ceremony in June.

“This is an exciting day for us,” said Benny Lai, a son of founders Thuyen Luu and Nhu Lai.

The honor is just as much a celebration of the impact of Vietnam — one of Philadelphia’s first Vietnamese restaurants from its opening at 221 N. 11th St. — as it is about the remarkable journey of the Lai family, whose sandal factory in South Vietnam was confiscated by the communists after the fall of Saigon.

The family of 10, who had fled communist rule in China after the 1949 revolution, were sent to a “re-education camp” in the forest but fled to a refugee camp in Malaysia before escaping Southeast Asia by sea.

Arriving in West Philadelphia in 1979, they settled in a two-bedroom apartment and lived in bunk beds, eating “nothing but chicken legs, rice, and broccoli for 2½ years,” son Benny told *The Inquirer*. His father, Nhu Lai, got a job as a janitor.

Through savings and gifts, they came up with \$10,000 by 1982 to open a grocery, Fu-Wah, on 47th Street near Baltimore Avenue. In 1984, they came up with another \$10,000 to take over a turnkey restaurant and opened Vietnam, down the block from the Sixth Police District. It was similarly modest — just a storefront. Matriarch Thuyen Luu, already cooking for her husband and eight children, was the chef.

Benny Lai, then 22, took over the businesses in 1989 as his parents retired. He oversaw an expansion and renovation, adding a lounge on the building’s third floor. The Lais opened a second restaurant, Vietnam Cafe, near Fu-Wah.

Benny Lai’s mother, Thuyen Luu; his wife, Tammy; and their boys, Jonathan, 27, and

Justin, 24 — who both work in finance — help out when needed. Nhu Lai, Benny’s father, died 11 years ago. Benny said his sister Tina helped manage the restaurants but stopped after her 2013 marriage to Philadelphia Eagles chairman and CEO Jeffrey Lurie.



The house special vermicelli at Vietnam Restaurant. TIM TAI / Staff Photographer

Vietnam joins such local America’s Classics destinations as Corinne’s Place in Camden, White House Sub Shop and Chef Vola in Atlantic City, and John’s Roast Pork in South Philadelphia.

The Beard committee praised Vietnam as “one of Philly’s favorite date-night destinations for classic Vietnamese cuisine. ...” cited the Lai family as “among the first wave of Vietnamese refugees who came to Philadelphia to build a life on hard work and entrepreneurship fueled by lemongrass-scented feasts. ... From barbecue platters laden with grilled meats, stuffed grape leaves, and Philly’s crispiest spring rolls, to nước chấm-splashed vermicelli bowls, fragrant noodle soups, lemongrass stir-fries, and clay pots sizzling with caramelized pork, Vietnam’s kitchen has remained a model of consistency for decades.”