

LOCAL Life

Chestnut Hill Local

February 25, 2010

Tammy's Vietnam-Chestnut Hill connection It's no Lai; new Vietnam Cafe is awesome

by Len Lear

The Lai family has truly lived the American dream, but is started out as a nightmare. Husband and wife Nhu Lai and Thuyen Luu, together with their eight children, sold all their worldly goods and fled Communist Vietnam in 1978 on a ramshackle boat. After being adrift for several days on the South China Sea and close to starvation, the Lai family was rescued by good Samaritan seamen and taken to Malaysia. They spent nine months in a U.N. refugee camp there and then boarded a plane to Philadelphia.

When they arrived in Philadelphia, the family of 10 moved into a small apartment at 2nd and Girard Avenue. "We had told the landlord there would be only four people living there," said Benny Lai, one of the family's eight children. "Otherwise, we would have never gotten the apartment. We had to do our homework in the library because there was no room in the apartment. I was 12 and could only say 'yes' and 'no' in English, but a principal at the Greenfield Elementary School was very kind to me."

The family later moved to West Philadelphia, which housed many Vietnam refugees, but they still felt like strangers in a strange land as no one in the family spoke English. Eventually, Benny, who is now 42, went to Lambertson High School and Temple University and became the family's interpreter.

Formerly the owners of a large sandal factory in Saigon that was forcibly taken from them by the government, the family was accustomed to the risks and rewards of entrepreneurship. It wasn't long before Benny's father saw an opportunity in Philadelphia's Southeast Asian community, which hungered for the culture and cuisine of their homeland. So he began trekking to New York's Chinatown to purchase ethnic Asian foods, which he sold to neighbors on the street.

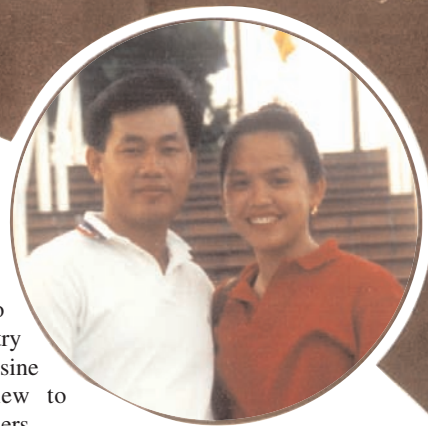
Benny and Tammy Lai are seen here with their sons, Jonathan, 14, and Justin, 10, during a vacation in the Bahamas in 2007.

During the blueberry season, the family would take a bus in the pre-dawn hours to farms in New Jersey, where they picked fruit alongside migrant workers. Everyone worked hard, and all of the money earned went toward building the business. By 1982, they had saved enough money to start a small grocery store at 47th and Baltimore in West Philadelphia called Fu Wah.

In 1984, the Lais opened the 28-seat Vietnam restaurant at 221 N.11th St. in Chinatown. Even though it was a typical sparsely decorated "hole in the wall" ethnic eatery, it featured great authentic cuisine with recipes from the family's home kitchen. Increasing sales at the restaurant gave Benny the perfect excuse to drop out of Temple and work there full-time. His warm personality added to the restaurant's appeal. Despite its diminutive size and no-frills décor (the room was so small that diners often had to share their tables with strangers), the restaurant soon earned a reputation for outstanding

food. In fact, it could barely contain all the people who wanted to try out this cuisine that was new to most customers.

The parents worked 24/7 to build their two businesses. Then, in 1989, Nhu Lai and Thuyen Luu turned Vietnam over to Benny, who has lifted the family's dream to a whole different level. The beloved "hole in the wall" at 11th Street near Race has tripled in size; it now seats more than 100 and includes an upstairs lounge, Bar Saigon. When Vietnam started, Benny and his parents made 500 spring rolls a week. Today the restaurant's chefs make 5000 spring rolls a week, and the restaurant is managed by Tina Lai, the youngest of the family's eight children. Vietnam restaurant has won numerous awards such as "Best Global Food" from Philadelphia Style magazine and "Best Ethnic Restaurant" from Philadelphia magazine.



(Top) Benny and Tammy Lai, the first person of Vietnamese origin ever to graduate from Chestnut Hill College, are seen here on a trip to San Antonio in 1992. A beautiful couple. (Above) Benny and Tammy Lai are seen here with their sons, Jonathan, 14, and Justin, 10, during a vacation in the Bahamas in 2007.

The Zagat Dining Guide calls their food "affordable...top-notch...don't miss...and divine..."

In true American entrepreneurial style, the Lai family has not rested on their success. Three months ago — November 17, to be exact — they opened Vietnam Cafe at 814 S. 47th St. (just below Baltimore Avenue) on the same block as the family's original grocery store, which is still in business after almost 30 years. Benny still lives right across the street with his wife, Tammy (whose father, an interpreter for the Americans during the Vietnam War, was killed in the Tet Offensive in 1968, six months before Tammy was even born), and their two sons, Jonathan, 14, and Justin, 10

Born Tammy Dao, Benny's wife, now 41, has a compelling biography of her own — and one with a Chestnut Hill connection. When Tammy came to the U.S. With her mother and brother in 1983, they moved to Houston because they already had relatives there. As Tammy was finishing up high school, her mother's sister, Theresa, a Catholic nun, decided to attend Holy Family College in Northeast Philadelphia.

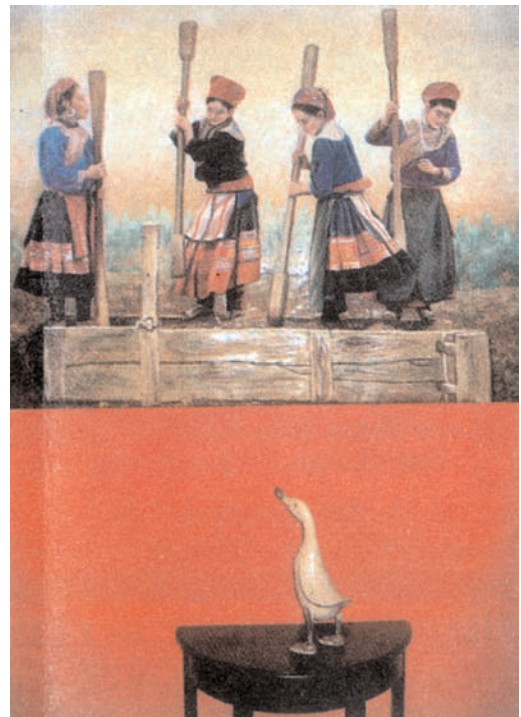
Tammy then decided to move to Philly also and attend Chestnut Hill College so that her aunt would always have a friend and relative nearby. When Tammy entered Chestnut Hill College, she was the school's only Vietnamese student. "I loved Chestnut Hill College," recalls Tammy, who spoke no English when she came to the U.S. "We had very small classes and got a lot of individual attention. Also, I made lots of friends and got along with everybody."

Tammy earned a business degree from CHC and then went to work for Enterprise Rental Cars for 10 years. While still at CHC, she and some friends were forced to eat all of their meals off-campus for several months after a disastrous fire in the school's cafeteria. They would "get tired of hoagies and pizza" every so often, however, and would occasionally travel to Chinatown, where they would try out restaurants "because of the light food and prices that college students could afford." (Tammy baby-sat for many Chestnut Hill families in order to earn spending money for the meals.)

On one occasion they decided to eat dinner at Vietnam restaurant. It just so happened that Benny Lai, who waited on the CHC students, was obviously attracted to Tammy, but the CHC charmer was too shy to respond. "My friends actually did the flirting on my behalf," said Tammy. "They even gave him my phone number without my knowledge when I was in the ladies room."

The Chestnut Hill students returned frequently to Vietnam restaurant, both because of the excellent food and also because of the budding romance. "I always gave them free desserts," said Benny. "The first time I saw Tammy, I kind of knew she was the right one for me. And I was right."

After two years of dating, Benny and Tammy got married. "My mom met him for the first time when I graduated from CHC," said Tammy. "She liked him a lot, which is a good thing. I was brought up to do whatever my



mom says, period. If she had not liked Benny, that would have been the end of that."

The Lais' new Vietnam Cafe in University City, which replaced an Italian restaurant called Abbraccio, can seat almost 170 in three gorgeous dining rooms and at a classy bar. Both the sophisticated look and the awesome food could pass the restaurant off as a Stephen Starr creation, but the relatively low prices tell you it's not. You can't go wrong with anything on the menu, but for first-timers I would recommend the huge bowl of heavenly chicken lemon grass soup (\$5.75) and the barbecue platter, which has six different items and is easily enough for two people (\$24.95). There is a beef sauce that accompanies it, and it is definitely nectar from the gods. I actually began to drink it by itself

There is a big, free municipal parking lot right in back of the restaurant. For more information, call 215-729-0260 or visit www.eatatvietnam.com. For more on the original Vietnam restaurant, call 215-592-1163.



(Above) The new Vietnam Café at 816 S. 47th St. in University City is filled with authentic, beautiful works of art from Vietnam. (Left) The awesome dim sum appetizer at Vietnam Café is a great way to sample many Vietnamese dishes if you are not familiar with them (photos by Len Lear)