



Chestnut Hill Local

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CHC love story leads to culinary heaven

by Len Lear

Vietnam Restaurant at 221 N. 11th St. in Chinatown is one of only six restaurants in the United States that last month were awarded the prestigious 2024 James Beard Foundation's America's Classics Award, an honor given to "locally owned restaurants that serve quality food, have timeless appeal and reflect the character of their communities." It is a huge honor. (It also has been named "Best Ethnic Restaurant" in the city by Philadelphia magazine.)

When I read about the award, I could not help but recall meeting the now-owner, Benny Lai, and his wife-to-be, Tammy Dao, who was the first Vietnamese student ever admitted into Chestnut Hill College. I met them in the late 1980s when Tammy was a student at CHC (from 1986 to 1991), earning a business degree and then working at the Enterprise Rental Car Company for 10 years.

In 1987, when Tammy was attending CHC, there was a horrific fire in the school's cafeteria, where most students



Tammy and Benny Lai with their sons, Jonathan, 28 (right) and Justin, 24.

ate most or all of their meals. As a result of the fire, the cafeteria was closed down for months, and students had to find other places to eat. (Tammy babysat for many families in Chestnut Hill to earn spending money for the meals.)

At the time, Tammy's friends (CHC was all-female at the time) wanted to give her a special treat, so they took her to a Vietnamese restaurant, which had been getting rave reviews in the local media. While the students were

seated in the restaurant, the handsome young man who took their order was Benny Lai, son of the restaurant's owners. He took an instant liking to Tammy, who was notoriously shy.

Her friends from CHC, who could not help noticing how smitten Benny was with Tammy, decided to play matchmaker, so they gave Tammy's phone number to Benny when she was in the ladies room, and Benny quickly followed it up by calling Tammy and inviting her and her

friends back to the restaurant. “I always gave them free desserts,” Benny said. “The first time I saw Tammy, I knew she was the right one for me.”

“My friends actually did the flirting on my behalf,” Tammy recalled.

One thing led to another, as it often does, and the young couple soon became an item. They wound up getting married after two years of dating, and they now have two children, Jonathan, 28, and Justin, 24.

“I am grateful to CHC,” Benny said. “If it wasn’t for her school friends looking out for her, we never would have met.”

“I loved Chestnut Hill College,” said Tammy, whose father, an interpreter for the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, was killed in the Tet Offensive in 1968, six months before she was born. “We had very small classes at CHC and got a lot of individual attention. Also, I made lots of friends and got along with everybody.”

Benny’s parents, Nhu Lai and Thuyen Luu, had escaped from Vietnam by boat with their eight children in 1978. Benny was just a toddler at the time. The family had traveled in a small wooden boat, cramped together with dozens of other families, without sufficient food, water or fuel.



Vietnam Restaurant at 221 N. 11th St. in Chinatown; a star for 40 years.

After a long and arduous trip, the Lais spent nine months in a refugee camp in Malaysia before gaining access to the U.S.

None of them spoke English. They had suffered unimaginable losses, but when the parents arrived in Philadelphia in 1979, they worked around the clock, like so many immigrants, and by 1982 they had saved enough money to open a grocery store in West Philadelphia.

In 1984, they saw a new opportunity and started a tiny restaurant called Vietnam on the edge of the Chinatown community in Center City. Despite its diminutive size and simple decor, the restaurant soon earned a reputation for outstanding food. In fact, it could barely contain all the people who wanted a taste of the cuisine, which at the time was new to most Philadelphians.

By 1989, his parents had handed the business over to Benny, who now oversees the restaurant and helped it grow into the space people still enjoy 40 years after its debut. According to the James Beard Foundation, “From barbecue platters laden with grilled meats, stuffed grape leaves and Philly’s crispiest spring rolls to 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.”

In November of 2009, the Lais opened a second restaurant, Vietnam Cafe, at 814 S. 47th St. on the same block as the family’s original grocery store. It also is still thriving.

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