



Mai Pham

Political Speechwriter Finds her Home in the Kitchen

NOW: Lemon Grass Restaurant (Sacramento, CA, since 1989), Lemon Grass Asian Grill & Noodle Bar, Star Ginger Asian Grill & Noodle Bar, Star Ginger Mobile Food Truck; creator and founder of Lemon Grass Kitchen Asian gourmet cooking sauces and marinades

THEN: On-air reporter; speechwriter for California Governor George Deukmejian

MENTORS: My mom and grandmother – that’s my story rather than going to culinary school or working at the French Laundry

AGE: 55

GREW UP: Born in Saigon, Vietnam; raised in Vietnam and Thailand; came to the U.S. in 1975 at age 19

EDUCATION: University of Maryland (journalism degree); Culinary Institute of America (honorary masters’ degree)

PUBS: *Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table* (James Beard Award-nominated); *The Best of Vietnamese and Thai Cooking*; *Flavors of Asia*

LIMELIGHT: Food Network special – *My Country, My Kitchen: Vietnam*

KUDOS: IACP Bert Greene Award for Distinguished Journalism

FAVE RESTOS: Street-food vendors and hawker centers

THOUGHT FOR FOOD: “Before eating, take time to thank the food.” — Lao Tzu

how I remember my mother and my grandmother. It’s how they expressed their love, through food. There was always this urging, this real desire to reconnect with my roots. And one way of doing that was through food. When a restaurant became available, I thought, “I’ve always loved cooking. Maybe I could do that.”



BBQ CHICKEN BANH MI WITH HOUSE-PICKLED CARROTS

[Yields 1 sandwich]

INGREDIENTS

- 1 8-inch baguette, split 2/3 through, lightly toasted
- 1 Tbsp mayonnaise
- 1/4 tsp Sriracha chili sauce
- 3-4 oz Thai BBQ Chicken, cut into 1/4 strips [recipe to follow]
- 5 slices of jalapeno
- 1 Tbsp pickled daikon & carrots [recipe to follow]
- 4 cucumber spears, sliced matchstick thin
- 4 each, 4-inch cilantro sprigs

[BBQ CHICKEN]

- 1 Tbsp garlic, minced
- 1/2 cup lemongrass, minced
- 1 Tbsp fish sauce
- 1/2 tsp sea salt
- 1 Tbsp curry powder
- 3/4 tsp turmeric powder
- 1 tsp chili flakes
- 5 lbs chicken thighs (boneless, skinless) rinsed and patted dry
- 2 Tbsp vegetable oil

METHOD

Combine all ingredients except for chicken. Stir well to blend. Add chicken thighs to marinade; toss to evenly coat the chicken pieces. Set aside to marinate for at least 2 hours. Just before cooking, add oil and toss the chicken several times.

To cook, first mark chicken (skin side only) on the grill over high heat. Bake in convection oven at 350°F for about 8-10 minutes depending on the thickness.

[PICKLED CARROTS & DAIKON]

- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1 1/2 tsp sea salt
- 1 cup warm water
- 1/2 cup distilled vinegar
- 2 lbs carrots, rinsed, drained and cut into 1/8-inch matchsticks
- 2 lbs daikon, rinsed, drained and cut into 1/8-inch matchsticks

METHOD

Combine first three ingredients and stir well to dissolve. Add vinegar and

stir again. Divide pickling solution in two separate containers. Add carrots to one container and daikon to the other. Make sure the vegetables are submerged in liquid.

Cover and set aside in the walk in. Carrots and daikon will be ready in one or two days.

ASSEMBLY

Spread mayonnaise and squeeze a thin line of Sriracha sauce on bottom side of baguette. Arrange chicken pieces on baguette, making sure they’re evenly spread lengthwise.

Next, arrange the jalapenos and pickled carrots and daikon, continuing with cucumbers and cilantro. Cut sandwich in half on the diagonal, serve immediately.

Executive Chef & Owner
Mai Pham

Lemon Grass
Sacramento, CA

Interview by Gayle Keck

You made a radical career move, from being a political speechwriter to opening a restaurant. What prompted that?

There was a little emptiness. I hadn’t really found my place.

Why not?

A lot of it had to do with the Vietnamese-American experience at the time, and the Vietnam War – seeing my family lose everything. We fled Vietnam in the middle of the night. We were forced to leave our grandmother, our uncles and aunts, all of our friends and life as we knew it. We came to this country with nothing but the clothes on our backs. Literally.

When you go through a traumatic experience, life takes on a very different meaning. Then you become terribly focused on things that might heal you.

And food was the key?

Food is a very grounding experience in Asian culture. It is the essence of who you are; the essence of family. It’s

Pretty bold...

It was all personal, all unplanned. I'm the accidental chef! Of course, it was very scary the first few months.

So you had to change the recipes to fit the American palate back in 1989?

We changed the presentation style a little bit, but nothing in terms of flavor or authenticity; for example, the catfish in clay pot, one of my grandmother's favorites. In Vietnam, it's done like a steak, cut across, so you get skin and bones. That was a no-no for customers back in those early days – so we used catfish filet. We also decided to use only chicken breasts. We now do chicken thighs, but back then, dark meat didn't fly very well.

How has the American palate changed?

It's much more sophisticated, more adventurous, very open to trying new things. I'm surprised how much people love the most authentic dish, the catfish in clay pot. It's a very savory, smoky flavor. A very dark, chocolate-brown sauce. It's not a grilled piece of fish with some vegetables. People are more open to trying things. You'd be surprised what they like!

How are you evolving your menus as tastes evolve?

I try to introduce new dishes from Vietnam and Thailand, and recently I've expanded the menu to include more Pan-Asian. My new passion is a collection of many cuisines, like in Singapore, where I travel quite a bit.

For example?

I think there are some common threads between Vietnamese cuisine and South Indian cuisine. It has such a great collection of vegetarian recipes, and we have a lot of vegetarian customers. So we do all kinds of curries and chutneys with eggplant and legumes and lentils. That's allowed us to move beyond tofu.

We do Singapore noodles, which is really not a Singapore dish, but has become one. And black pepper crab, and Malaysian food, and Indonesian – some of the most iconic dishes that I think we should share with our customers.

You also opened Star Ginger, a more casual restaurant, last year. Why that direction when you're known for fine-dining?

It's how I think people want to eat Asian food today. Very vibrant flavors, nice comfortable atmosphere, but very affordable. To do that, we have to be in locations that have the volume to support very competitive pricing. I think that's the future of Asian food.

Why's that?

There seems to be a big national trend in casualizing restaurants now. Mission Chinese Food in San Francisco is an example. People are interested in different food, good food, big flavors. They don't care so much about nice, plush-looking places.

Is the economy a factor?

Of course. And it's ironic because our food costs have gone up. In my own case, we have not had a price increase in three years at my main restaurant. I'm getting the clue from customers that I shouldn't be raising prices, so I don't.

Are food costs generally lower with Asian restaurants because you tend to have less protein?

It's a bit of a generalization. They can be, but you can also say that about Italian, too, where you do a lot of pasta. Our Hawaiian Ahi tuna costs us \$14 to \$16 per pound. For protein, that's quite a lot of money. One thing about our cuisine is, maybe we don't put ten pounds of meat on the plate, but we also put a lot of beautiful herbs, and herbs are like, \$6 per pound.

Do you have someone who custom-grows your fresh herbs?

A family actually did in the beginning. I had to promise them I'd buy all the herbs if they would grow them. If I didn't, I wouldn't have had the herbs! When we first met them, they were growing herbs in a community garden. They've become a nice-sized business now, with 20 acres. And they still grow all of our herbs.

What fresh herbs do you use?

We always try to have four on the plate: Thai basil; mint; Vietnamese rau ram; red perilla, with a flavor similar to Japanese shiso; or green perilla, which has a flavor almost like lemon balm. They're particularly delicious when you wrap them up with spring rolls. Our salads are tossed with them. So it's very herbaceous in a good way and really perfumes what you're eating.

You've formed a partnership with Sodexo to spread your casual Star Ginger concept to college campuses. Is there a chain of restaurants in your future?

That's always intrigued me. But it's not only about business for me because I grew up with street foods in Vietnam. And in Vietnam and Thailand, street food is kind of like fast food – but it's really good, not processed, not just a burger.

There, fast food is about hawkers who take their carts out to a market and sell only one thing. What you have is very specialized dishes that are done really well. You spend 30 or 40 years doing one dish right. You can't afford to be mediocre because the entry point is easy. The successful ones are doing quite well for a reason – because there's always the threat of another street food vendor who's going to be better.

What have the challenges been for you in taking that concept to campus dining halls?

What enables me to unlock the secret there is to work with the staff. At the end of the day, any chef will tell you, it's all about execution. You have to love what you do and care. If you don't have that, the dish will always fail, no matter how wonderful the recipe is.

SPICY THAI PAD SI EW

INGREDIENTS

- 1 Tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 Tbsp yellow onions, thinly sliced
- 1 tsp shallots, thinly sliced
- 1/2 tsp garlic, coarsely chopped
- 1 Tbsp egg, beaten
- 1 Tbsp fish sauce
- 7 oz fresh rice noodles (chow fun)
- 1 Tbsp sweet soy sauce
- 1 Tbsp oyster sauce
- 3 oz pork or chicken, cut into thin slices, cooked
- 5 red bell peppers, 1/4-inch julienne
- 1/4 cup Yu Choy or Chinese broccoli, blanched
- 1/3 cup Snow peas, blanched

METHOD

Heat oil in a no-stick frying pan over high heat. Add onions, shallots and garlic and stir until fragrant, about 1 minute. Next, add eggs and stir to scramble lightly.

Splash fish sauce around the edge of pan to caramelize and add chow fun, spreading across surface of pan. Immediately drizzle sweet soy sauce over the noodles, cooking undisturbed for 20 seconds.

Turn noodles over once in order to stain other side of noodles with soy sauce. Add oyster sauce and remaining ingredients. Toss and stir gently and cook until all vegetables are thoroughly hot. If pan gets too dry, splash 2 to 3 tablespoons of water.

Executive Chef & Owner Mai Pham

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So how do you inspire staff who have to crank out so many meals?

I humanize the recipes. They're my family recipes, and everybody has a grandmother, everybody has a mother. In very large dining operations, the staff don't necessarily think of those things because it tends to be a bit mechanical sometimes, and I always try to bring that cultural touch to it, that human touch to it, that personal story.

Where do you get inspiration?

Through my travels. I love to travel – it's the one indulgence I have in life. Wherever I go, I'm almost always interested in the food. I love seeing how it's done by people who are extremely passionate, how it's done the right way. That's my inspiration, in terms of recipes and flavors.

Any recent trips that really made an impression?

I've been spending a lot of time in Singapore. It's such a cultural and culinary crossroads. Right now there's a very interesting culinary movement happening, where younger chefs are digging really deep into their heritage and trying to figure out what it is that they want to do in terms of cooking and where they want to be in that culinary universe. It's fun to see people who are not particularly bogged down by tradition, but yet they want to respect it very much. I found that very inspiring and energizing.

You got into the restaurant business for extremely personal reasons. Did you find the resolution you were looking for?

Yes, it's been 20 years, so I have resolved it. In life you're guided by these inner feelings – and they were correct.