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Interview with The Tran and Yen Tran (Saigon Noodles)

Alyssa Powell

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Interview with The Tran from Saigon Noodles, Salinas.

Video Link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HCRVOiMI2Mvye3RjZzc9x_yPd4gc1NyG/view?usp=sharing

Interviewees: The Tran, Yen Tran

Interviewer: Alyssa Powell

Date: May 10, 2022

Location: Starbucks, 3148 Del Monte Blvd

Collection: Food for Thought: Oral Histories of California's Asian-Pacific Foodways, JAPN 317: Pacific Food Empires, Spring 2022

Length: 00:14:00

Biography

The Tran is the owner of a Vietnamese restaurant in Salinas, California, called Saigon Noodles, located just a short distance away from the Northridge Mall.

The Tran was born in Vietnam near the capital of Saigon, now called Ho Chi Min City, and later immigrated to the United States as a young adult.

Growing up, The always ate Vietnamese food, and his favorite food was Vietnamese noodle soup, also called pho.

About five years ago, in 2018, The opened Saigon Noodles with his brother and his wife, Yen Tran, who continues to help him at the restaurant. They named their restaurant Saigon Noodles due to his love of pho and the fact that Saigon is a well-known name connected to Vietnam and his upbringing.

It took a couple of years for the business to build up customers, but over time their restaurant has become successful and is a favorite eatery among the local Salinas population.

Summary Of Transcript:

(0:00) The interview begins. 0:12 The Tran introduces himself and states that he opened the business 5 years ago. (1:12) The explains why he named the restaurant Saigon Noodle and the origins of the word Saigon. (1:49) The explains where he was born in Vietnam. (3:38) The explains how he gets the ingredients and how much they cost. (5:20) The talks about the various kinds of people who come to eat at his restaurant. (7:30) Yen explains some discrepancies between customers not knowing how to eat Vietnamese food, like rare beef pho (8:40) The discusses his favorite meals growing up in Vietnam. (9:31) The describes how they make their soup. (11:13) The describes how they had to close the restaurant due to covid. (12:20) Yen explains the different toppings they use and how important the flavor is. (13:20) The and Yen talk about how Vietnamese food is healthy. (14:00) The interview is over.

Alyssa: Alright, so I'm just gonna introduce myself real quick. So my name is Alyssa Powell, and if I could just have you introduce yourself real quick. Just your name.

The Tran: My name is The Tran

Alyssa: Alright. And then, did you want to be a part of the interview?

Yen Tran: Uhh..I'm ok.

Alyssa: Ok. Alright, so I just have a question to start off with, when did you open the restaurant?

The Tran: Actually we opened, this was 5 years ago.

Alyssa: Oh only 5 years ago?!

The Tran: Yes

Alyssa: Wow, it's very successful, I thought it would be a long time, but 5 years is very good

The Tran: Yes, uh-hu, you know when we first start you take a long long time to be there. To get the permission and the license, everything.

Alyssa: That is very true yeah.

The Tran: Yeah, yeah and we took a couple years to build customer and then it took a long time too

Alyssa: To, like, advertise it, get your regulars and everything. I know, it does take a while.

The Tran: Yeah

Alyssa: So, why did you name the restaurant Saigon Noodles?

The Tran: Oh the Saigon Noodle, you know Saigon is very popular in Vietnam because that's the name of the big city in Vietnam before, but now they still keep the name. They change to Ho Chi Min City, but still some, there are a lot of people that still call Saigon noodle, so that's a popular name, so if we call Saigon noodle, everybody know we Vietnamese.

Alyssa: Exactly

The Tran: Yeah

Alyssa: Everyone knows Saigon.

The Tran: Yeah

Alyssa: There's even Little Saigon in San Jose

The Tran: Yes, uh,uh.

Alyssa: Yeah, That's a really smart decision. And were you born in Vietnam?

The Tran: Yeah.

Alyssa: And where?

The Tran: I was born in Vietnam-----1:50-1:55 around Saigon

Alyssa: Oh ok.

The Tran: It take about 40 minute driving

Alyssa: Oh ok, that's not bad. That's pretty close. So why did you decide to open up the restaurant?

The Tran: Actually...um..you know my wife before we live in (city in Vietnam, maybe Xuyen) 2:10-2:12 we live in---- for a year, and my wife, she works for nails and hair cut in Salinas. Yeah she work on the next door of the Saigon Noodle

Alyssa: Oh that one...really?

The Tran: (laughs) Yeah, you know, and where you have nails and it's the next door

Alyssa: Yeah I've seen it.

The Tran: She worked there and then she bought it. She bought that place and she worked there for a couple years and then the Saigon Noodle before that was a Mexican restaurant.

Alyssa: Oh Really?!

The Tran: Yeah, and the name, Cozumel, I guess? Cozumel restaurant.

Yen Tran: Cozumel [Mexican Restaurant] Have you tried that? 3:00-3:30

Alyssa: No I don't think I've ever been there before.

The Tran: That's a really really old place and the owner they too old. They could not run the restaurant anymore.

Alyssa: I see..

The Tran: So they stop it. And they stayed empty. And then I went to my wife and I said

*Some lost footage due to the camera shutting off unexpectedly.

In the minute or two before it was noticed, Alyssa and The discussed:

- How The opened Saigon Noodles with his brother and wife. The business was mostly family run until recently, as the two now have a better grasp on how to handle a business and understood the priorities of their family members.

- where Saigon Noodles gets its fresh ingredients, which Alyssa hinted to by mentioning the nearby Asian Markets throughout Salinas and Marina. The explained that it's hard to get the ingredients they need in the local area, so he started off his business by receiving shipments from a distributor in Oakland. Now he receives weekly shipments from Oakland and San Jose, and will opt for local grocers if they run out of fruit and vegetable ingredients before the next shipment.

-Alyssa also began asking about expanding the business but then noticed the video issue.

Footage and audio transferred from iPhone recording to Laptop, due to technical issues on iPhone. Some discrepancies in laptop audio due to untreated microphone issues.

Alyssa: Okay, it's recording on this one now. So let me just go ahead and re-ask my question. So, about the ingredients. So if you can just explain again where you get the ingredients from.

The Tran: Mm, actually we not, for now, we don't think about expanding the business. Um, it's very hard.

Alyssa: Yeah it is.

The Tran: You know, now, everything's more hard. We _____ costs about 400k.

Alyssa: Oh my gosh, that's expensive. So you're just thinking of keeping the one for now

The Tran: Yeah, the one for now. It is very hard to get the chef cook. It's very hard to find the cook and the _____

Alyssa: Yeah, I bet

The Tran: But we ___, maybe a couple years later we think about it

Alyssa: Oh yeah, okay! Well that's nice, you know, to consider that.

The Tran: Yeah

Alyssa: So what kind of people mostly come into your restaurant? Is it a lot of families? Are there a lot of Vietnamese people that come in? What kind of people come in _____

The Tran: Mostly, um, most are Mexican and Filipino.

Alyssa: Oh really?

The Tran: Yeah, Salinas is mostly Mexican and Filipino that come into my restaurant

Alyssa: Mm hm!

The Tran: And not many Vietnamese, just some Vietnamese come in. There's not too many people-Vietnamese people- in Salinas

Alyssa: That's true, yeah

The Tran: Some couple of Japanese besides you *laughs*, and Korean, and Lao, Hmong, Cambodian, but not too much Vietnamese people

Alyssa: Not too much Vietnamese people

Yen Tran: Sometimes we don't- we didn't notice it because some Vietnamese they were born here, they don't speak Vietnamese, so we don't know too. Like, we just moved from San Jose so we don't know a lot of Vietnamese here. We don't have any friends *laughs*

Alyssa: Ah... well I mean, there's not a lot of Vietnamese people over in Salinas, so-

Yen Tran: In Marina, it's a lot. I think, I had heard about, in Marina, we have a lot of customers from Marina too. They come to our restaurant.

Alyssa: There's a lot of Vietnamese restaurants in Marina as well. And uh, have you guys tried them before?

The Tran: Yeah we did

Yen Tran: We also tried

Alyssa: Oh okay, well I still think your guys' is the best

Yen and The: *laugh* Thank you!

The Tran: Yeah before we opened the thing is, we had to visit all the restaurants in here, to know what is best. ___ how they make, and compare with the ___ we make, and then, you know, I can not make the real Vietnamese because there are not a lot of- not a lot of Vietnamese___ so we had to change it. You know, yeah.

Alyssa: Oh okay, I see. So, um, going off from that, I remember one time you got a phone call where the lady was complaining about the- I think the meat being separate from the noodles or something? Does that happen a lot where people don't know anything about Vietnamese food?

Yen Tran: Not a lot, sometimes, just one or two times. They ask me 'oh why you don't put the meat?', you know? But you know the steak- the rare steak- well it's okay we make it well done already we cook it already but the rare steak it soak it up, the rare steak is not-not look like the rare steak, you know. Because it's really hard to eat that. That's why when you bring it home you have to pour the soup, you know, and put it in. That is perfect, you know, because the meat is gonna be soft, you know. But some people, I know, you know, not a lot of people, they don't know. Just like the last time, you know, when you come [to] the restaurant, they calling, you know. But we tell them how to do it, they can do it. It's not too hard. It's really easy.

Alyssa: Yeah, well that's good to know.

Yen Tran: Yeah, it's just one or two people, you know.

Alyssa: Okay, well that's not too bad. And then, do a lot of people mispronounce, uh, like they say "Fo" or something like that?

Yen Tran: Yeah, a lot they call Pho "Fo" or something like that

Alyssa: Or "Po"? *laughs*

Yen Tran: ___ Sometime I'm surprised too.

The Tran: Um, bahn mi, yeah

Yen Tran: They call Vietnamese ___ too, they call banh mi, not the sandwich _____. They say okay can I order the banh mi, pork or chicken or beef, something like that. *laugh* They learn.

Alyssa: Yeah, I'm sure you learn(?)

Yen Tran: When they learn it's ___, yeah they learn.

Alyssa: Aah, that's great! And then, when you were growing up, what kind of foods were your favorite? And do you sell them at your restaurant?

The Tran: Uhh, since I'm born in Vietnam, uh definitely the city I lived ___ the Vietnamese restaurant. They don't have any, another.. They don't have like sushi, it doesn't have

McDonald's, it doesn't have like Korean restaurants. Mostly Vietnamese restaurants, so all my life, in Vietnam, I ate at Vietnamese restaurants. Vietnamese food only.

Alyssa: What was your favorite?

The Tran: Um, my favorite is the noodle. Of course, with the soup. Yeah. So that's why we opened the place, especially for the noodle soups. Yeah.

Yen Tran: To share it with everyone!

Alyssa: Yeah! And everyone loves it. It's so good when it's like a cold day, or you're not feeling too good, it really helps. It really helps, it's so good

The and Yen: Yeah!

Alyssa: And then let's see.. Oh! Speaking of the soups, how long does it take to make the broth?

The Tran: Um, you know, at least it takes up to 24 hours. Yeah big time, big time um, if we- usually I cook it exactly like 24 hours. To make the broth because we cook with a lot of (bon?) So when we cook a lot, like 24 hours, everything on the (bon).. Um, I don't know how to explain much in English, because my English is not very well

Alyssa: You can explain it in Vietnamese, I'll have um, I'll have my boyfriend's family translate it.

The Tran: Translate it? *laugh*

Alyssa: Yeah, yeah, you can explain it's okay

The Tran: *Laugh* Yeah, because um just um the soup when we cook it 24 hours the soup is more sweet, more ____

Yen Tran: Yeah the sweet, the sweet from the (bon) *unintelligible*

The Tran: The sweet from the (bon) it come around, and most of the time we cook it every night

Alyssa: Oh okay, so overnight?

The Tran: Yeah we cook overnight

Yen Tran: Almost we have to cook every single day

Alyssa: Really?

Yen Tran: Because it's popular

Alyssa: It is, yeah

Yen Tran: I feel so glad, you know, because now after the Covid, everyone just keep coming

Alyssa: Oh that's good!

Yen Tran: So, you know, that's why we sell more. Thank god

Alyssa: So during the whole pandemic, did you guys do to-go or did you guys have to close down?

The Tran: Um. for the pandemic we mostly close the restaurant. We mostly close due to the government. _____

Alyssa: Did a lot of people come during that time?

The Tran: Um, not too many people

Alyssa: So now a lot of people are coming huh

The Tran: Yeah, now a lot of people are coming

Alyssa: That's good! I'm really happy to hear that

The Tran: Yeah

Alyssa: And I also wanted to like, um, since you guys have kids, do they come to the restaurant a lot? What's their favorite food?

The Tran: Um, of course they love the noodle soup. And the chow mein noodles, ___time in Vietnam. *laugh* Yeah

Alyssa: And then, do they get the kids menu stuff, or do you make them their own special kind?

The Tran: It's just the same thing as the customers

Alyssa: Oh okay, I see. Well that's nice! And let's see if I have any more questions.. Oh! So what makes Vietnamese food, like, real? Like, what makes your food stand out? What makes it more traditional Vietnamese food?

The Tran: Traditional Vietnamese..

Yen Tran: it's almost, it's almost the same with the soup, but we have different toppings. The toppings when we put on the side, we have more toppings on __. Yeah, one the Vietnamese food they have more toppings.

Alyssa: Oh, that's good that's good

Yen Tran: Yeah, but in the soup, you know, we have a lot of like cinnamon or something, it is more stronger. It's much more stronger. But in here, you know, they can not do too strong.

Alyssa: Oh, I see. Yeah, because I notice when I go to other places the soup doesn't taste as flavorful, the broth isn't as flavorful. But it is at your guys'

Yen Tran: Yeah we have more, look like we compare between, you know, but also it's not like the other place, it's just the broth. Yeah, not look like the real pho. Yeah we make more, more than them

Alyssa: Oh, I see. That's good, that's good. I'm glad to hear that. And is there anything that you want people to know about Vietnamese food? That people probably wonder about?

Yen Tran: Healthy

The Tran: Um, probably, you know, yeah, the Vietnamese food, the first thing is that it is healthy for everybody. Yeah, especially when you are sick, when you flu, when you tired, or when you're drunk

Alyssa and The: *laugh*

Yen Tran: Yeah, it's for sure

The Tran: When you want the soup, right away it help you recover your body very quickly. Uh huh.

Alyssa: Yeah, we're always going when we're not feeling too good or too tired.

The and Yen: Yeah!

Yeah, it's always great. Better than drinking coffee. Just having that soup to help you feel better. So that was great. Thank you guys for your time! So that will be all for today!