

An American story: An immigrant's daughter applies her Ivy League education to the family business

BY HELEN ECKINGER
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It began as a story about making a new start in a new country.

In 1975, pregnant and widowed, 27-year-old Tung Nguyen jumped aboard a fishing boat in Saigon Harbor. She didn't know where it was going or what would happen to her when she disembarked. All she cared about was escaping the North Vietnamese troops over taking the war-torn city.

Several lucky twists later -- not the least of which were a conveniently located American military ship and her preference for warm weather -- Tung arrived in Miami. She gave birth to a daughter, Lyn, and, along with her refugee sponsor, Kathy Manning, opened Hy Vong, a beloved, if incongruously located, Vietnamese restaurant on Little Havana's Calle Ocho in 1980.

Lyn grew up at Hy Vong, doing homework beneath the tables and learning math games from customers. She excelled at Coral Gables Senior High, won admission to Harvard, went on to earn an MBA from Cornell and moved to New York to work for a high-powered investment-banking firm.

Then the story took an unexpected turn. "When I left for college, I thought I was never going to come back," Lyn said.

But the fast-paced life of a young professional proved to have its downside. "Being single up north, I never cooked for myself -- I always ate out," she said. "I got sick of everything tasting the same, and I realized that if I was having that problem, other people were, too."

A business plan formed in her mind: Why not expand Hy Vong's scope by selling Tung's specialties at gourmet markets? After all, the restaurant had a devoted following -- customers willing to wait an hour for a table and another hour while Tung cooked their meals to order. Heat-and-serve products would make Hy Vong an option for the time-pressed and give it a piece of the growing market for high-end takeout.

"This is really an American story with Lyn and her mother," Kathy said. "In Vietnam, they had nothing. Here, Lyn has had an opportunity for an education and has pulled her mother up to this second level."

In November, Tung began making Hy Vong's most popular dish, dumpling-like rolling cakes, in a small plant in Dania, just as she does at the restaurant: She ladles rice-flour batter onto a piece of cloth stretched taut over a pan of boiling water, smooths it into a disc and, a minute later, removes the delicate, paper-thin pancake to a platter. She places several pinches of a pork-mushroom mixture in the center and quickly folds it into a roll. Then comes the catch -- rather than putting the roll on a plate and sending it to a hungry customer, Tung places it in a plastic to-go container that's popped into a refrigerator to await shipment to a grocery store.



Sitting in the plant's office, clad in a USDA-mandated plastic smock and hairnet, Kathy noted that Hy Vong is following the lead of its larger counterparts. "When I go around, I see a lot of this from big companies -- I just had mac and cheese from Cracker Barrel," she said. But she believes Hy Vong's new endeavor has an edge. "I think that ethnic foods are in," she said. "People are looking for different tastes."

Gardner's Markets were Hy Vong's first retail outlets. "It's one of our favorite restaurants, so it was very natural for them to come to us and ask us to help them launch their new line," said Susie Franco, director of Gardener's food and wine program. "The line is selling great in all of our stores," Franco said. "The restaurant has a great following -- people see the food, they recognize it and they buy it."

Rolling cakes, with pork or beef filling, will be joined this month by beef and rice noodle soup, pumpkin soup, vegetables with noodles and shrimp paté on sugar cane, with more retail items in the pipeline. They're priced at \$6 to \$7 a serving.

Hy Vong's success, from the restaurant to its nascent to-go line, begins and ends with Tung's talent. She learned cooking fundamentals from her grandmother in Vietnam, but most of her dishes are products of her innovative palate.

Take her rolling cakes, known as banh cuon in Vietnam. "She'd never had them until she came to the U.S.," said Lyn as she watched her mother prepare the dish. "In Vietnam, they're like caviar -- they're for the very rich. She tried them, and she said, 'I can do better than this.'"

For all the critical acclaim Tung's cooking has received over the years (including a brief interlude in the '90s when she left Hy Vong to open her own place), Lyn remains her mother's biggest fan. "The food is so special -- it's almost an ethereal experience," she said. "You get this unique mix of flavors in your mouth, and at the end you feel full, but you don't feel like you've gained 10 pounds."

In keeping with Lyn's vision of healthful meals-to-go, the meat used in Hy Vong Heat and Eat Delicacies is all-natural and the vegetables are organic. No preservative are added, which means items should be eaten within several days of production. Lyn sees that as an asset.

"People have become much more health-conscious," she said. "They don't want food with long shelf lives because it's probably been heavily processed."

Right now, all of Hy Vong retail products are prepared by Tung or a handful of closely supervised assistants. The plan is for her to train a staff for the Dania plant so she can focus on the restaurant -- a challenging proposition.

"Trying to get her to teach is difficult because it's so innate to her," Lyn said. "People really have to care about what they do. She'll say, 'I'm not going to serve this because it just doesn't look right or it just doesn't taste right.' That's hard to teach to people." Lyn and Kathy are focused on quality control, too, monitoring prospective takeout products to determine how long it's safe or desirable to leave them in stores. In a backroom at the Hy Vong plant, Kathy pulls a container of pumpkin soup from the refrigerator. "See how that bit of oil has risen to the top?" she asks Lyn. "We may have to strain it through a cheesecloth."

It's difficult to imagine an exchange like that at the Cracker Barrel mac-and- cheese factory.



Hy Vong Heat and Eat Delicacies are available at:

Gardner's Markets 3177 Bird Ave, Coconut Grove, 305.476.9900; 7301 Red Rd., South Miami, 305.667.9953; 8287 SW 124 St., Pinecrest, 305.255.2468

Hollywood Vine, 2035 Harrison St., Hollywood, 954.922.2910

Laurenzo's Italian Center, 16385 W Dixie Highway, North Miami Beach, 3053945.6381

Norman Brothers Produce, 7621 SW 87th Ave, Miami, 305.274.9363

On a roll: Tung Nguyen uses traditional equipment to craft her rolling cakes, right, at Hy Vong's Dania plant. From top, she lifts the lid on the 'song,' a double boiler with cotton fabric stretched across the top. Next, she ladles on rice-flour batter with a coconut-shell scoop. She lifts the finished wrapper with a slim bamboo spatula, and finally fills and rolls it. A platter of rolling cakes is above left.


