

Linh Garza
Dong Phuong Bakery — New Orleans, LA

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Date: February 18, 2015

Location: Dong Phuong Bakery, 14207 Chef Menteur Hwy., New Orleans, LA

Interviewer: Rien Fertel

Transcription: Lori Lawton

Length: Forty-eight minutes

Project: The Lives and Loaves of New Orleans

START OF INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at 00:00:02*]

Rien Fertel: Okay, this is Rien Fertel on the Bánh Mì Sandwich Trail. It is February 18, 2015. I am in New Orleans East at Dong Phuong Oriental Restaurant and Bakery. It's the day after Mardi Gras. Maybe we'll talk about that a bit, but I'm going to have I think the owner of Dong Phuong introduce herself.

[0:00:29]

Linh Garza: I'm Linh Garza, and my mom is actually the owner, but I also help. I'm the president of the organization, but —

[0:00:40]

RF: Give me your mom's name. What's your mom's name?

[0:00:41]

LG: It's Huong Tran.

RF: Let's start with her history. Where is she from?

[0:00:51]

LG: She's from South Vietnam, Lihominen [sp]. They opened the bakery back in the 1980s, when we first immigrated to the U.S. and — I lost my train of thought.

RF: So, do you know what year you immigrated?

[0:01:13]

LG: Yes, we left Vietnam when I was six months old when we jumped on the boat, so let's see, I was born in '78 [1978], so it was probably December of '78 was when we actually left Vietnam. We stayed in Malaysia — no, the Philippines for about a year before we were actually accepted into the U.S. and that's when we came over. And we stopped in California but this was the place where we ended up because I was sponsored. My dad's friend lives in New Orleans, so this is where we ended up. And we've been here ever since.

[0:01:58]

RF: So your father's friend, who was he? Was he Vietnamese or American?

[0:02:02]

LG: He is Vietnamese. He is my dad's, one of his — my dad was in the Air Force, the Vietnamese Air Force, so it was one of his Air Force buddies.

RF: This is your mom. Would you like to be a part of the interview too?

[0:02:23]

Huong HT: Sure. No.

RF: We could do translation.

HT: I would like —

RF: Oh, the baby.

HT: Yeah, baby.

[0:02:32]

RF: We have to do a baby switch. It was good to meet you.

[0:02:37]

LG: So, what else? The Vietnam Air Force. And he actually immigrated earlier than us. He left in '75 [1975], I believe.

RF: And he went to California?

[0:02:49]

LG: No, he came here.

RF: Oh, he came here first?

LG: He did.

[0:02:53]

RF: Did the family, when they relocated to this area, was it New Orleans East?

LG: Yes. Yes. A lot of Vietnamese were settled here in the “Far East” as we call it, Versailles. I think that’s the term of the village that we came over, because of the French influence.

[0:03:13]

RF: Right, but people called it the “Far East”?

LG: Oh, some people because it's as pretty much as far east as you can get before you get into outside of Orleans Parish itself.

[0:03:27]

RF: Right, so in the city limits. So you grew up here?

LG: I grew up in New Orleans, yes I did.

RF: And what high school did you go to?

LG: I went to Ben Franklin.

[0:03:36]

RF: That's a great school. What do you remember about growing up in the East, going to Ben Franklin? What are some of your earliest memories?

[0:03:45]

LG: My earliest? I think growing up in New Orleans East, it's not New Orleans. When I went to college, people would ask me, "What's —?" And I couldn't really describe because I didn't live the downtown, I didn't live the Uptown life. We lived out here and it was just a very close-knit community with all the Vietnamese market in here, the Vietnamese community in here. It was different. I guess I was sheltered from the rest of New Orleans. It feels like it.

[0:04:22]

RF: What sort of Vietnamese community activities went on in the East out here?

LG: Well, we always have the New Year's celebration. It's this weekend actually, at the church. They always have functions out there. It's great; the fair that they have: Vietnamese music, lots of activities. It's grown every year. Every year I've gone it just gets bigger and bigger.

[0:04:49]

RF: Was your family a member of the church?

LG: No, we're actually Buddhists.

RF: Okay. Was there a Buddhist community here, was there a Buddhist community center?

[0:05:01]

LG: It was very small, because the majority of the Vietnamese in New Orleans, I believe, are Catholic. But, I guess, the Buddhist community has started to grow. I don't know if you saw on the way here on Chef Menteur that big Buddhist temple. That happened after Katrina.

[0:05:22]

RF: Okay, so it's more recent construction.

LG: Yes, but in the West Bank there are a lot more Buddhist communities over there.

[0:05:30]

RF: Right. What came first, the restaurant or the bakery, and when did it open?

LG: Sort of the restaurant. I guess the restaurant was always here. My grandmother purchased it from another family, another Vietnamese family, but my mom has always been baking, but from our home and selling it to the local stores. I'm not sure. As far as incorporation, I think the restaurant was incorporated first.

[0:06:11]

RF: Okay. Do you need to answer the phone?

LG: No.

RF: Tell me your grandmother's name.

LG: De Tran.

[0:06:19]

RF: Okay, and so she purchased a restaurant that was already here, a Vietnamese restaurant. Do you remember the name of —

LG: It was Dong Phuong.

[0:06:28]

RF: It was Dong Phuong. What does Dong Phuong mean?

LG: It just means "east."

[0:06:31]

RF: So it means east. And did your grandmother have a restaurant in Vietnam? Was she in the food industry ever?

LG: No, she was not. She worked for the owner, the previous owner, and I guess they wanted to sell and she gathered up a lot of borrowing, a lot of savings, and purchased it.

[0:06:54]

RF: Do you know what year that happened?

LG: 1980 — no it was '80 or '81.

[0:07:05]

RF: So very early '80s [1980s]. So the restaurant couldn't have been open very long, if the first Vietnamese came here in '75 [1975], right?

LG: Uh huh.

[0:07:14]

RF: Okay. Do you remember anything about the previous owners, who they were? Do you know anything?

LG: Oh, we still talk to them.

[0:07:23]

RF: They're still around?

LG: They're family friends. They live in Baton Rouge now though.

[0:07:28]

RF: Okay, they just wanted out of the restaurant business?

LG: Yeah, they wanted out of the business.

[0:07:32]

RF: And so your grandmother, is it your mother's mom we're talking about?

LG: My father's mother.

[0:07:38]

RF: Okay, and so how did she take to the restaurant business? Did she work in the kitchen? Did she work in the front?

LG: She did, she worked in the kitchen and my uncle also — my father's brother also worked with them and I think my aunt, my father's sister, also worked in the restaurant too as a waitress.

[0:08:00]

RF: Did your father ever work in the restaurant?

LG: Not really. He was actually — he worked the Schwegmann's [Grocery] as a stocker, I guess, while he went to school at UNO [University of New Orleans]. He wanted to be an engineer.

[0:08:18]

RF: And did he get a degree?

LG: No, no, he quit when he saw that my mom's bakery business was picking up and there was a lot more to support the family and things.

[0:08:30]

RF: So you said your mom was baking at home. Where was she selling her baked goods?

LG: To the local grocery stores, the local Vietnamese grocery stores, in the Vietnamese community, the small ones.

[0:08:44]

RF: What would she have been baking before she had the bakery?

LG: A lot of the —. Because my mom's father in Vietnam, he owns a bakery. He is a baker. So she got the recipes from him, so a lot of traditional Vietnamese pastries — actually Vietnamese/Chinese, but more Chinese pastries, because her father is Chinese. I don't know if you know the bean cakes, those types of pastries. That was their original product, if you would like, and it's a long tradition. It's very traditional. It's from the South Vietnamese.

[0:09:25]

RF: I've had those bean cakes. Can you describe them more for people who might be listening to this?

LG: Sure. They are encrusted in a flaky-type of pastry, and the bean paste — it's a mung bean paste that we cook in a large kettle with sugar. So it's a sweet dish and it's pretty good. I like it! [Laughs] Even though growing up in the U.S., it's still one of my favorite desserts.

[0:09:59]

RF: Traditionally — you said it was a traditional dish. Do you traditionally eat it at a certain time of day or on certain days or for holidays? When is it eaten or is it eaten all the time?

LG: It's pretty much eaten all the time. You have it with tea. I'm trying to think if there is a certain time that you eat more. No, it's pretty common. It's the moon cakes that you eat sort of once a year. We also make those.

[0:10:32]

RF: What are those?

LG: They are for the — they're called "moon cakes" because they're for the moon festival, the harvest moon festival around September, and it's a little bit different. They also filled with bean — well, different flavors, one is also a mung bean flavor, but it has an egg yolk, a salted duck yolk on the inside to sort of represent the moon.

[0:10:57]

RF: And when is that festival?

LG: Mid-autumn. It changes every year, but from about mid-autumn to September.

[0:11:05]

RF: Okay so kind of the harvest. I need to ask about your mother's father. Is he still around?

LG: No, he passed away.

[0:11:15]

RF: What was his name and where was his bakery?

LG: His name — I just called him “grandpa.” [Laughs] I don’t know.

[0:11:26]

RF: We can get his name later. Do you remember; did you ever get to visit his bakery?

LG: I have. I’ve been to Vietnam. Because his sons have taken over. They each opened their own bakery.

[0:11:37]

RF: Where is it? Where was the original?

LG: It’s in Vietnam. It’s in Sóc Trăng.

[0:11:46]

RF: Okay and his sons each have one in the same town?

LG: Yes. One of them kept — his youngest son kept the original bakery about twenty minutes away from Sóc Trăng. Sóc Trăng is a bigger city. I guess Vũng Tàu is the small village outside of that and he kept that, the original one, and then his other sons opened the bigger one in Sóc Trăng.

[0:12:17]

RF: Can you describe where this city is in relation to Saigon, where I think more people would know where that is.

LG: It's south of Saigon, southwest of Saigon, so it's — driving-wise, I don't know about distance, but I remember driving-wise about six hours south.

[0:12:36]

RF: So pretty far. Is it on the water or not on the water?

LG: It is not on the water.

[0:12:41]

RF: So it's closer to the Chinese border I guess?

LG: Yes.

[0:12:45]

RF: Okay, what did that bakery specialize in?

LG: The bean cakes. *[laughter]* That was the main product.

[0:12:55]

RF: And so your mom was selling these bean cakes to local groceries, and when does she open her bakery?

LG: When my grandmother bought the restaurant, they were able to have a little section in the back part where they could start baking and —

[0:13:17]

Huong Tran: Sorry. *[In Vietnamese]*

LG: His name is Wong Tran, my grandfather.

[0:13:42]

RF: Can you ask the name of his bakery?

LG: [*In Vietnamese*]

HT: [*In Vietnamese*]

LG: The name of his bakery is Mi Hip Ton [*sp*]. Let's see —.

[0:13:55]

RF: You were telling about selling pastries in the back.

LG: So yeah, they were baking in the back of the restaurant, and the owner of this property, he also wanted to sell the property, so my grandfather was able to take out a loan and purchase the property, so then we were able to open towards the front of the building where the retail is now. Before that, there was a small kitchen in back where they baked baked goods in the back there too, before we expanded back here.

[0:14:32]

RF: Was this the first restaurant in the East, the first Vietnamese restaurant, or were there others that predated it?

LG: [*in Vietnamese*].

HT: [*in Vietnamese*].

[0:14:52]

LG: My mom said it was the first one. Yes, it was the first.

RF: And it was the first Vietnamese bakery?

LG: Yes.

[0:15:00]

RF: Okay, so in those early years, in the '80s, what was the customer base? Was it only Vietnamese? Were non-Vietnamese eating?

LG: It was all Vietnamese, all Vietnamese.

[0:15:11]

RF: Do you know when it started to change; when non-Vietnamese started to eat lunch here, buy the baked goods?

HT: [*in Vietnamese*].

[0:15:28]

LG: Well, for the bakery, when we started making French bread, it was easy to cross over, I think, so that was when we started seeing a lot more non-Vietnamese come to the bakery. As far as the restaurant, I'm not sure.

[0:15:47]

RF: The French bread for bánh mì?

LG: Yes, the French bread for bánh mì.

[0:15:53]

RF: So, how did that original French bread recipe come about?

LG: That was my father's tinkering. I told you he likes — he wanted to be an engineer. He likes tinkering with things, so the recipe he just trial and error. He read all the books and knowing what — I guess he has a scientific mind, so he just tested it and that's how it sort of came about.

[0:16:26]

RF: Was he baking loaves at home or here?

LG: It was here. It was here, uh huh.

[0:16:32]

RF: Do you remember when he was going through this process?

LG: Yes, he brought a lot home for us to try [*laughs*]! We were like “No!” It was not quite as good. We were always the test — the guinea pigs. [*laughs*]

[0:16:49]

RF: Was he testing other French breads from traditional New Orleans bakeries and seeing how they tasted?

LG: [*in Vietnamese*]

HT: [*in Vietnamese*]

[0:17:10]

LG: Yes, he did try other bakeries' French bread. But he knew what he wanted: the texture, the flavors.

RF: Was bánh mì a sandwich culture from where he came from, in South Vietnam?

LG: It is. It is. It's a street food in Vietnam definitely.

[0:17:31]

RF: So he wanted to have bánh mì served here.

LG: Yes.

[0:17:37]

RF: So when did that really come about? When were sandwiches starting to be served in the bakery?

LG: [*in Vietnamese*]

HT: [*in Vietnamese*]

[0:17:49]

LG: 1991.

RF: 1991, okay. And was there a sandwich counter immediately?

LG: [*in Vietnamese*]

HT: [*in Vietnamese*]

[0:18:03]

LG: We served bread first and then slowly — it wasn't a counter that we have now, but yes, we started making sandwiches.

[0:18:14]

RF: One of my favorite sandwiches in New Orleans is the bánh mì here, and it's really fun to come and see — I think there's two or three ladies just working the line and they're so fast. Have some of them been here a long time? I recognized some from when I came here before Katrina, and then I see them now. Who are they? How long have they been here?

[0:18:37]

LG: Oh, there are three ladies up there who have been with us, one of us has been with us since [*in Vietnamese*] —.

HT: [*in Vietnamese*].

[0:18:47]

LG: Twenty-five years and another one, she was with us about the same. [*in Vietnamese*]?

HT: [*in Vietnamese*].

[0:18:59]

LG: Twenty. And then the other's probably about fifteen. Yeah, so there's three stalwarts there that have been around for a while and yes, they are very fast. I think they can take anybody as far as speed of making sandwiches. *[laughs]*.

[0:19:14]

RF: So was the menu the same, the traditional —? How did it expand over time or was it the same?

LG: It has expanded quite a bit over time. We started with the #1 cold cut, the French style. It's one of the meats that recognized by a lot of Vietnamese. I guess it's like a head cheese-type, and so that's — we make that also.

[0:19:45]

RF: You make the cold cuts yourself?

LG: We make ninety-nine percent, ninety percent of our meats also, yes. That started and my mom is developing new meat products and we just expanded, and now we have seventeen I guess. *[laughs]*

[0:20:10]

RF: I didn't realize; there's seventeen different sandwich varieties? What is the most popular? Is it #1?

LG: For the Vietnamese it's #1.

[0:20:16]

RF: Okay. What is it for non-Vietnamese?

LG: Probably the Chinese pork, the char siu.

[0:20:26]

RF: Can you describe #1 in full? What are the cold cuts on it?

LG: The #1 has the — like I said, it's kind of similar to the French headcheese, I think. It's pork with a bit of pork skin. And as far as the vegetables, all of them are the same with the daikon and carrot slaw. Oh, the pâté, that's right. The pâté is what makes it. [laughs]

[0:20:57]

RF: On the #1 there's pâté?

LG: Yes.

[0:20:58]

RF: Do y'all make the pâté?

LG: We do make our own pâté, and our own aioli, the mayonnaise.

[0:21:06]

RF: Do you think — a lot of people call bánh mì “Vietnamese po-boys.” Do you think that there was something to the success that we have po-boys here, po-boy culture?

LG: I think so. I think it makes it more familiar when you say “po-boy.” They know. If you say sandwiches, they say, “Oh, we don’t know.” So saying “po-boy,” you know, it’s on a French bread. I think it does. I think it does.

[0:21:42]

RF: How similar or non-similar do you think the French bread is that y’all make compared to the French bread in Vietnam, to the bánh mì bread?

LG: The French bread of Vietnam, I think they use rice flour, so it’s a little bit harder, I think, than ours.

[0:21:59]

RF: So you replace it with what type of flour?

LG: We just use bread flour.

[0:22:04]

RF: When did — this is a question I’ve always wondered — but I noticed after Katrina — I could be wrong here — but that there was a Dong Phuong truck delivering French bread all over the city. Did that happen right after Katrina? Did it happen before? When did everyone start selling your bread or using your bread?

LG: Well, some places would come pick up. We started delivering — let’s see, Katrina was 2005 — probably ’07 or ’08, 2007 or 2008 was when we started delivering.

[0:22:41]

RF: Yeah. So how many places — do you know how many places use the French bread in the area?

LG: We have about, I think, around, about forty stops a day, so about that much.

[laughs].

[0:23:04]

RF: Can you tell me; this area was — speaking about Katrina — this area was heavily affected. Can you say the effect on the restaurant and the business and the bakery from the flooding?

LG: Well, we didn't reopen until —.

[0:23:23]

[Baby cries]

LG: We — okay, so when did we — Katrina happened in '05 [2005], August of '05. We reopened January of '06, so we didn't get very much water. We had a lot of damage to our storage area in the back, which we had to rebuild, but other than that, I guess we just had to clean and wait for the power and water to come back, and then we were able to reopen. It was interesting, the first day. We didn't have much except for bread, but a lot of our customers came in and they started clapping, and they were so happy that, I guess, somebody came back.

[0:24:17]

RF: Were you living in New Orleans at the time?

LG: I was. I was. I was living in New Orleans at the time.

[0:24:24]

RF: You live in Dallas now, you said?

LG: I do. I live in Dallas right now.

[0:24:29]

RF: And are you in the restaurant industry there? Why do you live in Dallas?

LG: No, I'm actually an accountant! *[laughs]*

[0:24:34]

RF: When did you leave?

LG: I left in '06 [2006], '07. I left in '07, for a man. *[laughs]*

[0:24:42]

RF: Is there a Vietnamese culture in Dallas?

LG: There is, but it's more spread out. Dallas is pretty big, so they have pockets of Vietnamese communities around the metroplex.

[0:24:56]

RF: Are there any — I know that a lot of Vietnamese restaurants here in the area kind of have cousin restaurants in Houston or in Orange County, in Los Angeles. Is the family large enough where there's other restaurants in the family?

[0:25:14]

LG: Well, my dad's brother, he also passed away not too long ago, he had a bakery in Canada, in Toronto. So, I guess that's the only one. Everyone else — his sister did not get into the business, and my mom is only one of her family here, so.

[0:25:36]

RF: So you mentioned there's seventeen different bánh mì's now. Is that what you said?

LG: Yes.

[0:25:42]

RF: Those seventeen — is it adding different Vietnamese varieties to the menu or is to capture American pallets once you expand to that larger number?

LG: Both. Our #14 is the second, I guess, popular one for Vietnamese, which is the Vietnamese sausage. And then we did expand to capture more American with the chicken. You don't see very much chicken.

[0:26:14]

RF: Right, so in Vietnam you would never put grilled or barbecued or whatever chicken on a French bread?

LG: It's not quite traditional. Pork is more popular.

[0:26:24]

RF: Right. Can you describe that sausage, the #14?

LG: It's a little bit of a sweet and savory sausage. It doesn't have a casing. It's called nem nướng, and you see it on a lot of the menus. People use it not just in sandwiches, but also in spring rolls.

[0:26:41]

RF: So, what is your mom's role in the business today? You said she's the owner. Is she here every day? Does she manage the place?

[0:26:51]

LG: She does. She wish she doesn't, but yes, she does. She does, she manages the day-to-day operations. She comes up with new products. She sort of quality control. She doesn't do much of the actual baking and making it any more because, you know, her age is — she doesn't have to. But, yep, she does a lot of the testings.

[0:27:20]

RF: Does she oversee the restaurant side of things?

LG: No, the restaurant is actually owned by my uncle, my dad's brother. So, his family.

[0:27:28]

RF: Okay, so how does that relationship work between the bakery and the restaurant?

LG: I don't know.

[0:27:36]

RF: It's two businesses, but sort of under one roof or with a door connecting the two.

LG: Yes. Yes, it's definitely two businesses. As far as — it works great. We're a family so — if they need they use the ovens sometimes to grill or bake some of their products, their meats. It's a collaboration, that's what it is.

[0:28:10]

RF: So I've got to ask: yesterday was Mardi Gras, we just thankfully ended the long Mardi Gras season and when we were walking in you said that it was really busy and that you sold a lot of king cakes. Tell me about the king cake. When did they start making king cakes here? Personally, it's one of my favorites. Maybe you could tell me why I like it so much and New Orleanians love it so much, especially in the past couple of years you've gotten a lot of attention for your king cakes.

[0:28:35]

LG: Well we started, I want to say only five years ago. We didn't start — I think that year it was maybe like 100. It was not very many because not a lot of people knew about it. Last year, *The Times Picayune* had an article and that I think really put us on the map and that article came out towards the end of the season and we had a lot of orders then. We only make king cakes during the Mardi Gras season and then we stop. We don't make it year round. I guess this year we just did not expect it to carry over, so we were not quite prepared for the demand, so it was very tough. It was very tough trying to meet the demand.

[0:29:26]

RF: Do you know how many king cakes you sold?

LG: I just looked it up. We sold about 7,000 this year, way more than we anticipated.

[0:29:35]

RF: And that's a short Mardi Gras season too. Sometimes we go all the way to March.

LG: Last year we sold 3,000.

[0:29:42]

RF: Wow!

LG: That puts it in perspective. That's why we were very [*laughs*], we were unprepared.

[0:29:51]

RF: That's amazing and that was three weeks longer, I think, last year. What does the baking crew do? Do they bake all night long? Do they show up in the morning? What are the baking hours?

[0:30:02]

LG: We have two shifts, so they — for the French bread, you mean?

RF: Yeah, for the French bread.

[0:30:10]

LG: For the French bread, yes, they show up about 11:00 pm, and then we have another crew coming in at about six in the morning, to continue with the other products. Usually French bread, we're pretty much done for the first crew.

[0:30:29]

RF: Can you describe the French bread making process without — if you don't want to give away any secrets or anything, but I've only been to one French bread manufacturer in the city and they're the biggest, and it was a very mechanized process. It was Leidenheimer and they have belts everywhere. Is it like that here or is it more oven system?

[0:30:56]

LG: No, we don't have that type of conveyor system. It's a lot of it — we do have machines, equipment, but a lot of it is manual. Pretty much water, flour, sugar, salt goes into a big mixer, mix it. But we have someone that has to take it out of the mixer manually, divide it, and then roll it. The rolling part is done by a machine, but they have to stack them onto the baking pans, and then it's proofed and then it goes in the oven.

[0:31:30]

RF: So it's a real hands-on process.

LG: It is. It is.

[0:31:34]

RF: How many loaves do you do in a week or in a month.

LG: Oh, let's see, [long pause] about 6,000 loaves a day.

[0:31:52]

RF: And that's every day of the week?

LG: That's except for Tuesdays. We're closed on Tuesdays, but yes. On the weekends we do a little bit more.

[0:32:00]

RF: So on average, 6,000 a week. A lot of people are used to the longer, I think, three foot po-boy loaves. Can you describe your loaf?

[0:32:11]

LG: It's about seven, seven to eight inch. It's a typical bánh mì size, I guess. It's not — so some people are like, "Well —." Some of our customers wanted something bigger, they wanted something smaller, because they're used to more of a six-inch or twelve-inch. We do make a twelve-inch sub. We deliver it to restaurants only. We don't sell them at the store.

[0:32:37]

RF: Have you been to Vietnam?

LG: Yes, I've been there three times.

[0:32:43]

RF: And have you had bánh mì there?

LG: Yes. Yes I have. *[laughs]*

[0:32:46]

RF: You grew up with this bánh mì. What do you think about the original bánh mì?

LG: Like I told you, it has some rice flour in it so it's a little bit harder, and it kind of cuts the top of your teeth and your mouth a little bit. I prefer ours. [laughs]

[0:33:07]

RF: What do you think Vietnamese in Vietnam would say about — if you could bring some loaves and have them be fresh over there and the comparison? What would they say? Would they like it? Would they consider it French? What would they say?

[0:33:18]

LG: I'm not sure, but my grandmother, she has actually immigrated back to Vietnam now [laughs], since she retired, and she has us bring over a box when we go over so that she can freeze it and eat it, because she doesn't like the ones made in Vietnam.

[0:33:36]

RF: So she has you all bring it over when you come.

LG: Yes [laughs].

[0:33:39]

RF: Where does she live now?

LG: She lives in the same village that we used to.

RF: Why did she make that choice to move back when retiring from here?

[0:33:48]

LG: Well, it's hard for her here. She doesn't drive. She's never learned how to drive. Her English is very limited, I would pretty much say none. And it's just easier to be in a place where you're familiar, where you know the language and her friends and family are there. I guess not her family, but her friends. She does have brothers and sisters and cousins.

[0:34:17]

RF: Just a few more questions. How have you seen the Vietnamese community change since the early '80s [1980s] or maybe just '80s or '90s? How have you seen it change? Both the Vietnamese community and then I'll ask about the Vietnamese food and restaurant community.

[0:34:34]

LG: Well, my generation Vietnamese, I guess, first generation Vietnamese, we grew up here and we're sort of spreading out. A lot of us don't stay in the community and we don't have a lot of older-generation Vietnamese coming over anymore. That sort of slowed down quite a bit. So I see changes as far as food-wise, I guess, the younger generation, we try to bring our parents to try other foods and things, so I think that sort of expansion, that change in thoughts. A lot of the traditional foods might be slipping away. I see the decline in our moon cakes because it's a traditional food that mostly older generation know, but not very popular with the younger generation. So I've seen that happen.

[0:35:46]

RF: Yeah. Just in the past ten years really since Katrina, there's been a new wave of Vietnamese restaurants in the central part of New Orleans. What do you think about that? What

are your thoughts? When you came back after a couple of years of being in Texas, what did you think about that?

[0:36:06]

LG: It's like the new Chinese restaurant, it seems like. And it's interesting. I haven't tried any of them. I tried, I think, one or two, but not a lot of them. I have tried the ones in Dallas, I guess, the new Vietnamese that caters more to non-Vietnamese. And it's not traditional, but some of them are interesting. They try different things, so, I guess, I do not like them, but I think they're not the traditional favorites. Well, example: fish sauce. Fish sauce is very important to Vietnamese food and some places either water it down quite a bit or not use it at all.

[0:37:12]

RF: Really? To make it less fishy?

LG: Yes, to make it less fishy. Then I can't say that it's Vietnamese food. [laughs]

[0:37:22]

RF: No fish sauce, no Vietnamese food. Did you ever expect New Orleans proper — I mean New Orleans East is of course New Orleans — but central New Orleans to become this little Vietnamese food court really? I mean there are Vietnamese restaurants everywhere.

[0:37:36]

LG: No, I did not expect it to take off that much, but like I said, my generation growing up here in New Orleans, they're able to speak the language.

[0:37:51]

RF: Did you work here when you were in high school or college?

LG: I worked at the front. *[laughs]* I worked in retail.

[0:38:01]

RF: In the bakery?

LG: In the bakery, yes, in the store.

[0:38:04]

RF: And for how many years and did you enjoy it? What were your thoughts? What do you remember that?

[0:38:09]

LG: I remember Sundays being so busy, it was crazy. I did enjoy it. I liked it when it was crazy busy, actually. And I worked usually on the weekends, after school sometimes, but I did that pretty much all through my high school years.

[0:38:26]

RF: Did your parents —?

LG: I spoke a lot more Vietnamese too. Since moving to Dallas, my Vietnamese has been slipping because I don't interact with a lot of Vietnamese anymore.

[0:38:42]

RF: Okay. Is your husband Vietnamese?

LG: No, he's actually Hispanic, and I don't know Spanish either. [*Laughs*]

[0:38:49]

RF: Does he know any Vietnamese?

LG: Only a few phrases.

RF: You have one child?

LG: Yes.

[0:38:56]

RF: What is the language in the house?

LG: We try to do all three. I think she's very confused at the moment. [*laughs*]

[0:39:04]

RF: That's great though. You mentioned Sunday is very popular. Is Sunday a big day for Vietnamese to buy pastries?

LG: Yes it is, it's after church, the after church crowd.

[0:39:15]

RF: Can you run down some of the more popular pastries? The bakery is big, it's a good size and there's racks six feet high full of stuff. Can you mention some of the more popular items?

[0:39:27]

LG: Well, I guess, our popular pastries is all the meat-filled pastries because Vietnamese tend to not eat a lot of sweets. We like savory products more. So those pastries are definitely our biggest sellers, so the meat pies, the pâté chaud and this other creation my mom made. [*Laughs*]

[0:39:52]

RF: What is that?

LG: Well, you know the steamed buns, right? The steamed buns are also very popular. Well, she put the meat that's in the steamed bun into a flakey crust. [*laughs*]

[0:40:02]

RF: Are those the ones to the right of the cash register?

LG: Yes, to the right. It's big around and has the —

[0:40:09]

RF: And has the different stamps on them? Those?

LG: Yes.

[0:40:16]

RF: Okay. Did your mom and dad want you to pursue this after college, or they said, “No restaurant for you?” How did that go?

[0:40:24]

LG: No, neither one of them wanted any of us — I have a brother and a sister — to take this over, to run it. They said it’s too much work. They did it so that we could go to school and have a better life [laughs] and not do this.

[0:40:43]

RF: I’m the same way. I grew up in a restaurant that my grandmother had and it was the same way: she said, “No, none of you are allowed to do it.” And then I did it, after she passed away for a little while. And she was right. So tell me, did you ever resist and say, “No, I want to do this” or either of your siblings?

[0:41:01]

LG: I did. When my dad passed away, I moved home to be with my mom and I worked in the bakery for those years, about four years. I didn’t do retail, but I actually worked in the back on the production, trying to help her manage and run the bakery. It was very hard work, long hours. And I did, liked it. I wanted to do it, but I had other pursuits [laughs], but my mom did not want me to do it. She was like, “No, this is not for you.”

[0:41:43]

RF: And so neither of your siblings are involved in the bakery?

LG: No. My sister is a computer nerd [laughs] and my brother is an attorney.

[0:41:53]

RF: Do they live here in the area?

LG: My brother passed away and my sister lives in Baltimore.

[0:41:58]

RF: So what's the future of the business of the bakery? What is your mom going to do? I'm sure this is talked about or worried about.

[0:42:07]

LG: Yes, it has been talked over. We just don't know. We just kind of — whenever it comes, it happens. We just don't know.

[0:42:17]

RF: How old is your mom? She looks great.

LG: She is going to be sixty this year.

[0:42:23]

RF: Okay, so she has a lot of time. Does she talk about how long she wants to work or how that's going to go?

[0:42:30]

LG: She wants to quit now after the king cakes, she was so exhausted afterwards. She was like, “I’m ready to retire now.” But I don’t know.

[0:42:41]

RF: What do you hope for the future? Do you think Dong Phuong, the bakery, will outlast her? Will she retire and let it go or will it retire with her, when she retires?

[0:42:56]

LG: I can’t say. I would like it to continue, but that is — I guess that would be asking for a lot. So it probably would retire when she retires.

[0:43:18]

RF: What does this bakery mean, do you think, to the larger area, the larger New Orleans community? What do you think this place is here?

[0:43:28]

LG: Well, it’s a place where everybody goes, not just the bakery, but the restaurant. They go every Sunday after church. It’s a gathering place. Everyone knows us over here. It’s tough.

[0:43:46]

RF: When you travel elsewhere, have people heard of Dong Phuong? I think it’s one of the most famous Vietnamese restaurants, certainly in New Orleans, and the bakery, have people heard of it in Texas or in other Vietnamese communities? If you go to Houston or other places?

[0:44:11]

LG: We do — I guess in other Vietnamese communities — because we do sell our traditional pastries, the bean cakes and the moon cakes, across the U.S. to other grocery stores. For that type of pastry, that's our market, outside of New Orleans. It's mostly along the East Coast, because there's too much competition from California.

[0:44:42]

RF: Is that Washington, D.C. or where?

LG: No, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta. Atlanta is a big one for us.

[0:44:54]

RF: Okay, so I've seen them in Rouses, here, locally, but I've never seen them elsewhere.

LG: Mostly only our traditional pastries is what we ship out. They last longer. We were on the Food Network not too long ago.

[0:45:07]

RF: The bakery?

LG: The bakery.

RF: And what were they focusing on?

LG: The bánh mì. The sausage.

[0:45:17]

RF: But that label that is on your packaging is known across the East Coast. You use that same label.

LG: Yes we do. Yes, the same label.

[0:45:29]

RF: Do you ever miss the restaurant business? You've been away for a few years. Do you miss working in the bakery?

LG: I do. I thought about opening one in Dallas [*Laughs*].

[0:45:40]

RF: What did your mom say?

LG: My mom and my husband thought it was a crazy idea. The thought has crossed my mind. I wanted to open up my own shop.

[0:45:55]

RF: What do you think makes your mom — your mom has been doing this for?

LG: Thirty-something years.

RF: So thirty-something years between her house and the bakery here and now the bigger bakery. What do you think makes her a great baker?

[0:46:12]

LG: Balance of flavors. She's very good at it. The salt and the savory. It goes by her mom teaching her. Her favorite quote or saying is: "Everything that's savory has to have a pinch of sweet and everything that's sweet has to have a pinch of savory."

[0:46:36]

RF: Where did her mom teach her to bake? Was it at home in Vietnam?

LG: In Vietnam.

[0:46:42]

RF: And her mom was just a home baker?

LG: Yes, a home cook.

[0:46:45]

RF: Does your mom cook other things? Does she cook savory dishes, soups and other things?

LG: Yes.

[0:46:51]

RF: Does it match up to her baking?

LG: Yes, my mom is a great cook. She loves to cook too.

[0:47:00]

RF: Well I think that's good. We can end it here. Do you want to add anything? I'm glad we got to talk to your mom and I got to meet her. I want to thank you very much.

[0:47:11]

LG: Thank you. Thank you.

RF: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW