

Downtown welcomes new swanky bistro

BY GRETA MART
Staff Reporter

Sisters Linda and Becky Pheng are fully cognizant that launching a new restaurant during the current economic climate is risky business.

Lemongrass Bistro, their new venture at 501 Main Street, officially opened yesterday and adds an "Asian Fusion" flair to the Martinez dining scene. The duo, who live in Hercules, fell in love with Martinez when looking for possible locations, they said yesterday.

Despite the national plunge in disposable income spending, the two young entrepreneurs have enough hope, energy and confidence to carry them through the inevitable rough spots.

After all, they watched their role models, a.k.a. their parents, escape utter poverty in Laos by attaining refugee status and moving to Fresno 25 years ago. There Thong and Boun Pheng worked as fruit pickers and farmers during the day and attended night school to learn English,

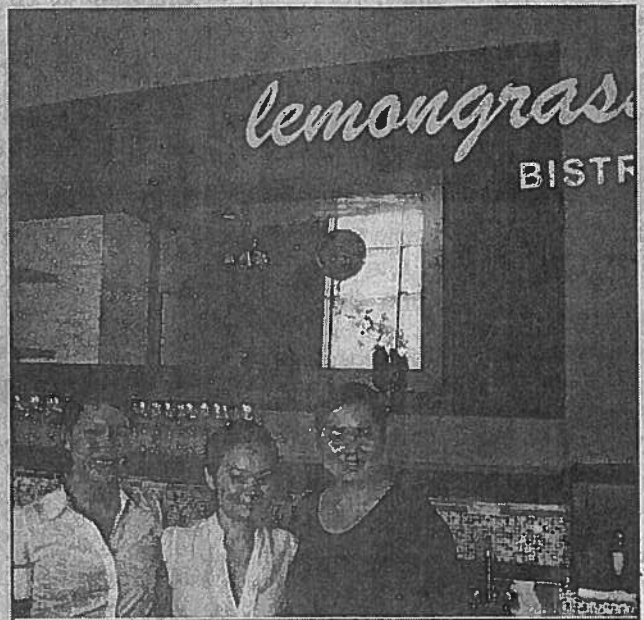


PHOTO BY GRETA MART
Nancy Phetdavanh, cousin of Lemongrass Bistro owners Becky and Linda Pheng, smile on opening day. The Asian Fusion restaurant is located at the end of the 500 block of Main Street.

LEMONGRASS

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according to Becky Pheng, in hopes that their daughters would have a better future.

"In 1985, [we] moved to the Bay Area. Continuing with night school and community college, [my parents] worked hard during the day in a restaurant and decided that opening their own restaurant and realizing their American Dream [was what they wanted]," said Becky Pheng. "There were times when they both held second jobs while looking towards the future and learning restaurant management and cooking skills that would be necessary for our family's success. [My mom] now has 20 years of experience as a chef at various Thai restaurants in the Bay Area. She has always been passionate about cooking and especially southeast Asian Cuisine. She continues to make annual visits to Laos where she hones her culinary skills and brings back new and exciting dishes."

Linda and Becky's father, Thong, worked so hard to raise his family up by their bootstraps that eventually he earned enough to

help build an elementary school back in their native country, as is the tradition of a Laotian-elderest son.

The two daughters inherited their parents' work ethic. Once they decided to go for it in May, the two have hustled to create Lemongrass while still working their day jobs; Becky also serves as a paralegal in the legal counsel department of East Bay Regional Parks District.

Lemongrass reflects the sisters' environmental sensibilities. They used recycled glass tiles and countertops for decoration and forsook Styrofoam to-go containers for biodegradable ones.

Much of the stylish décor was contributed by two San Francisco Academy of Art students, Laura Wilson and I-Ching, who earned credit for the project.

"We believe so much in our product and the City of Martinez that we basically went against all odds," said Linda Pheng. "We tried to create a chic, fresh place that would attract young and old."

The Lemongrass Bistro is open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily.