



The author's grandparents, Yen Ho and Thuan Ton

ESSENTIAL CALIFORNIA RESTAURANTS

There's No Place Like Little Saigon

I went back to Little Saigon for the first time in a decade to see it through the eyes of my 91-year-old grandfather

by Cathy Chaplin | Jul 11, 2018, 12:01pm EDT
Photos by Andrea D'Agostino

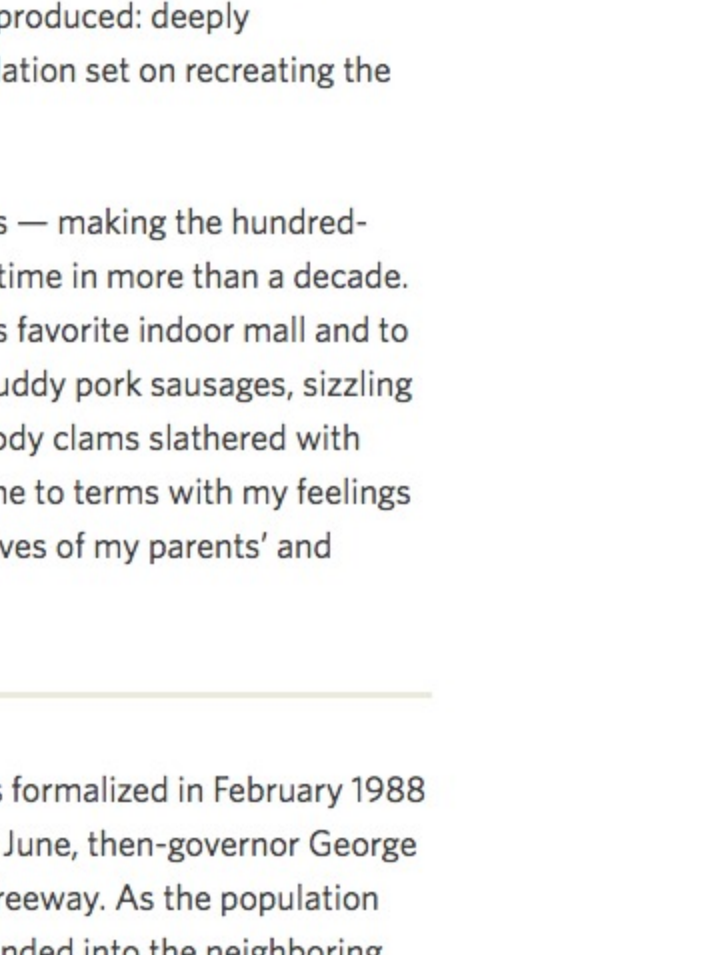
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Orange County's Little Saigon is not the Vietnamese equivalent of Chinatown, Koreatown, or Little Tokyo. These pockets within the Southern California landscape all share commonalities; each, of course, is a collection of like-people and like-things.

But what sets Little Saigon apart is its significance to the first generation of Vietnamese refugees: When Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, it picked itself up and made a new home in Orange County. The area is a kind of sacred ground, evidence that South Vietnam still exists, not only in the mind of its people, but as a place in the world.

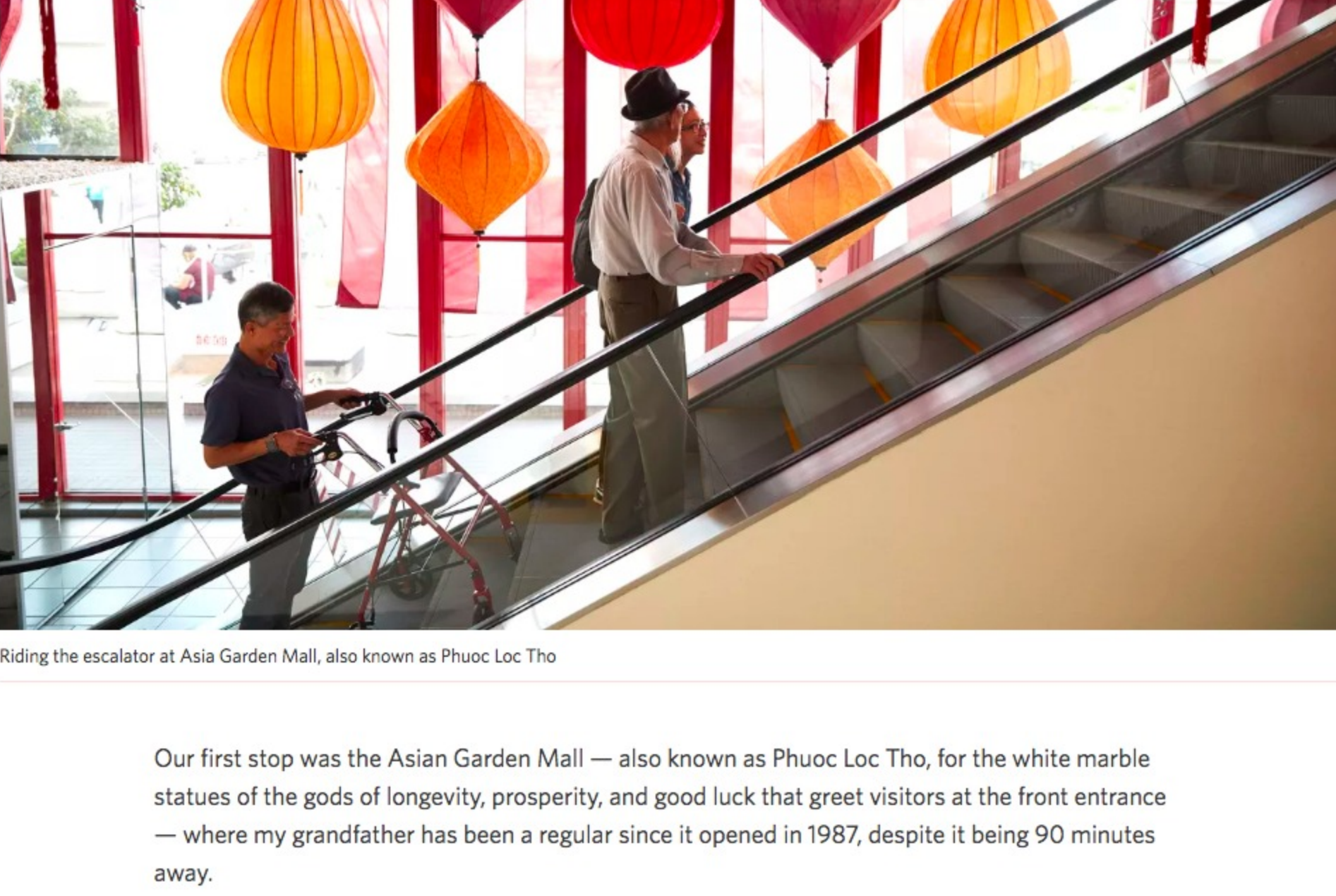
After my grandparents and their eight children settled in San Diego following the end of the Vietnam War, visits to Little Saigon were the distant they ever got to going to home again — seeing not only distant friends and relatives, but the cultural markers of a country that no longer existed, from the unofficial Vietnamese uniform of *do bo* (pajamas) and a *non la* (conical hat) to the former flag of South Vietnam, a goldenrod rectangle with three horizontal red stripes, flying alongside Old Glory. But in more recent years, what comes to mind whenever I think of Little Saigon are the tangled legacies of a war that ended long before I was born, and the rigid culture they produced: deeply conservative politics, frequent anti-communism protests, and a population set on recreating the Old Country and its traditions rather than building anew.

Earlier this summer, I took a trip to Little Saigon with my grandparents — making the hundred-mile, 90-minute drive from San Diego to Westminster — for the first time in more than a decade. For my 91-year-old grandfather, the trip was an opportunity to visit his favorite indoor mall and to share a good bite to eat: impeccably wrapped spring rolls filled with ruddy pork sausages, sizzling cast-iron platters of turmeric-laced fish with fresh dill, and grilled bloody clams slathered with scallion oil and crushed peanuts. For me, it was an opportunity to come to terms with my feelings about the place, to understand its charms and its significance in the lives of my parents' and grandparents' generations.



Officially speaking, the Little Saigon Tourist Commercial District was formalized in February 1988 by the city of Westminster as a 1.5-mile stretch of Bolsa Avenue; that June, then-governor George Deukmejian anointed it Little Saigon, complete with signs off the 22 freeway. As the population grew throughout the '80s, the original business and cultural hub expanded into the neighboring communities of Garden Grove, Fountain Valley, and Santa Ana. Today, Orange County's Little Saigon is the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam, with a population of 300,000, several Vietnamese-language newspapers, and hundreds of businesses spread over three square miles.

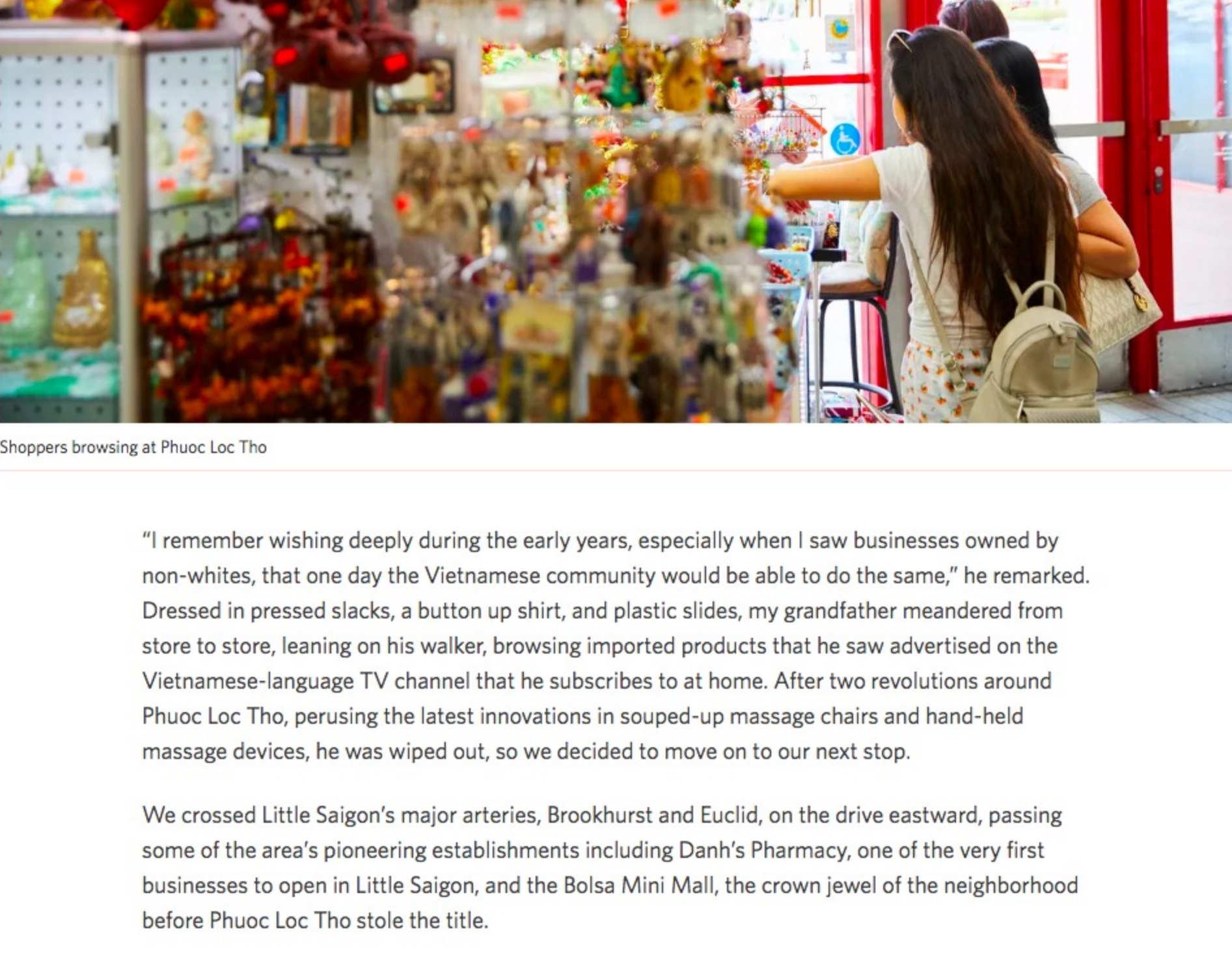
When we got off the freeway at Magnolia Street, it wasn't immediately clear that we were anywhere of note. Wide boulevards lined with the usual suburban mix of planned residential communities and their commercial strip mall counterparts breeze by. But as we approached Bolsa Avenue, the epicenter of Little Saigon, it became impossible to ignore the political signage. Election Day was around the corner, and lawns were littered with ads for every local political office imaginable — state assembly, county supervisor, and board of education seats.



Riding the escalator at Asia Garden Mall, also known as Phuoc Loc Tho

Our first stop was the Asian Garden Mall — also known as Phuoc Loc Tho, for the white marble statues of the gods of longevity, prosperity, and good luck that greet visitors at the front entrance — where my grandfather has been a regular since it opened in 1987, despite it being 90 minutes away.

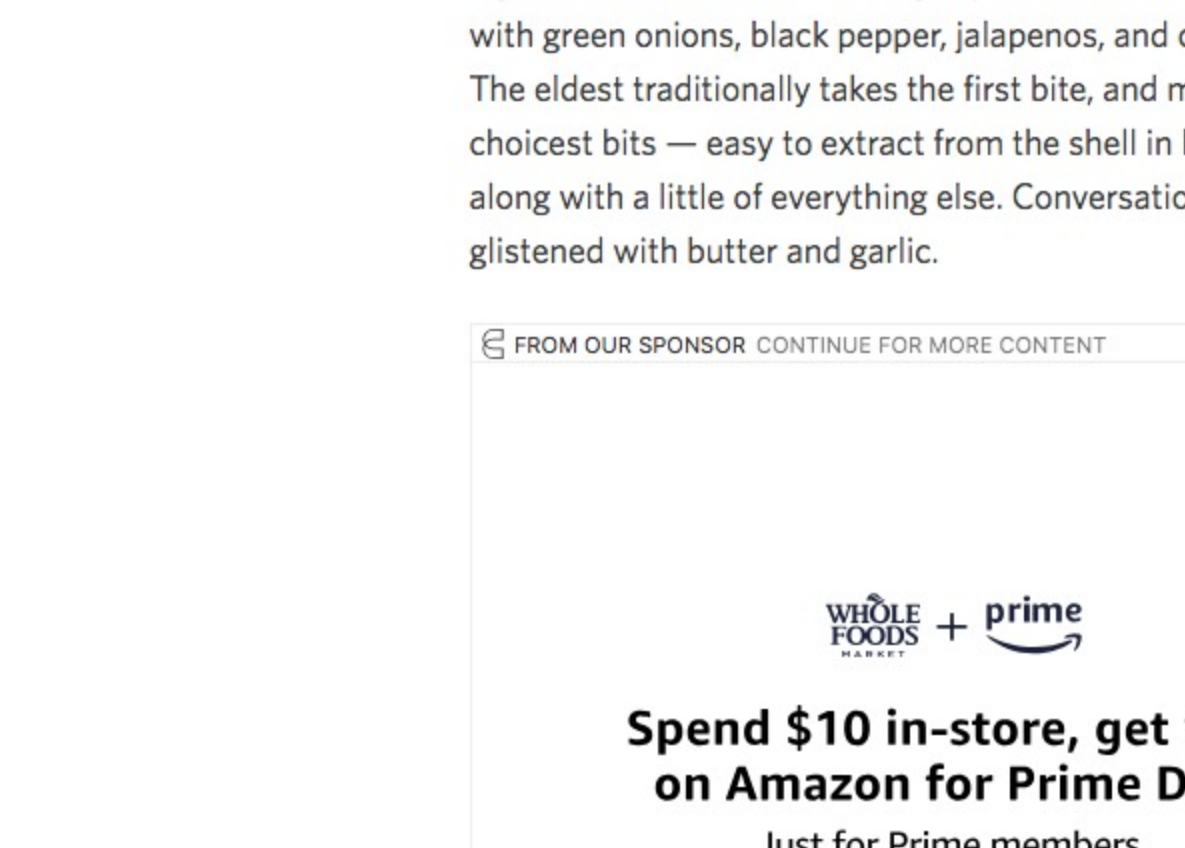
Phuoc Loc Tho is the neighborhood's nucleus, a popular meetup destination for the retired set and host to one of the largest Tet (Lunar New Year) celebrations stateside. While the building's ornate exterior is floor-to-ceiling glass windows and Chinese architectural flourishes bearing resemblance to pagodas, inside, it's an enormous 1980s shopping mall, with some 300 Vietnamese businesses across two stories hawkering everything from clothes and cosmetics to music and clocks, lacquered to an impressive sheen. The food court near the front is anchored by Lee's Sandwiches, a prolific purveyor of *banh mi* whose English-language menu, contemporary service model, and eye toward niceties has led to a massive expansion throughout the Southwest.



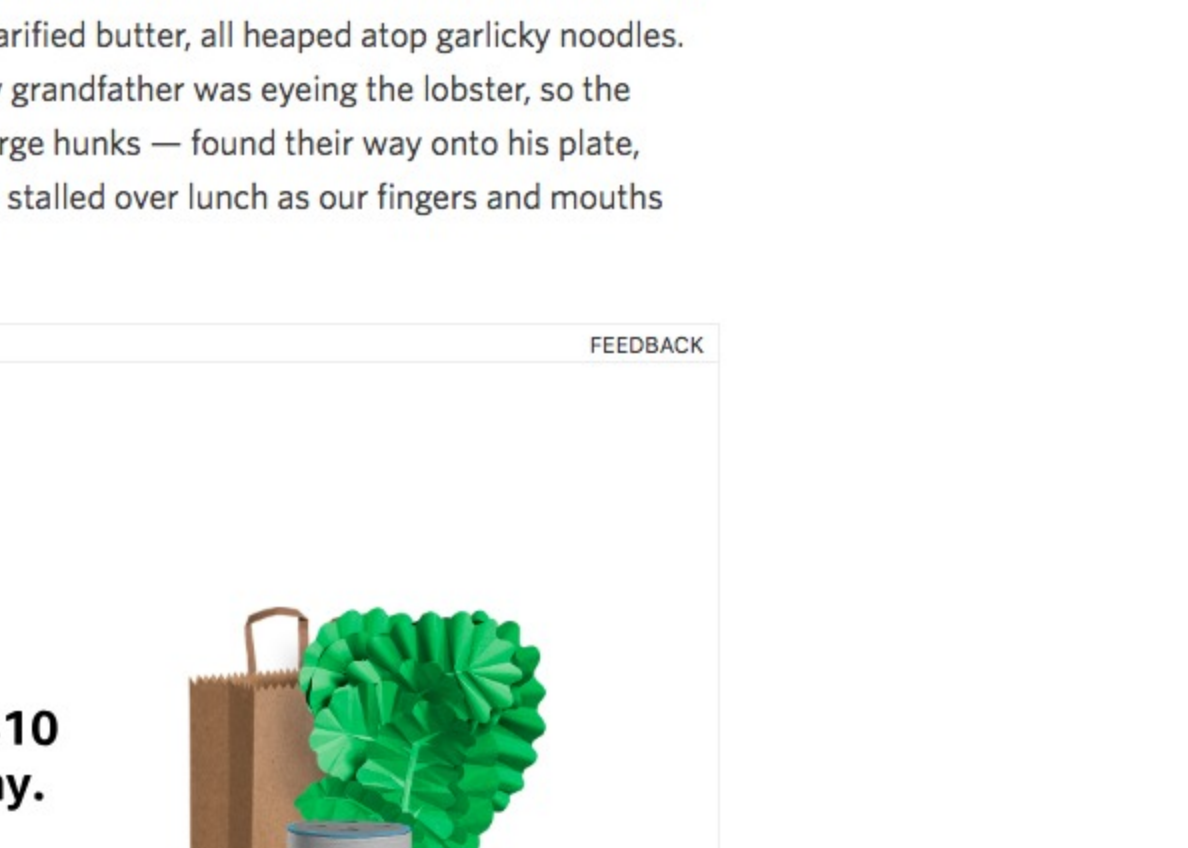
Shoppers browsing at Phuoc Loc Tho

"I remember wishing deeply during the early years, especially when I saw businesses owned by non-whites, that one day the Vietnamese community would be able to do the same," he remarked. Dressed in pressed slacks, a button up shirt, and plastic slides, my grandfather meandered from store to store, leaning on his walker, browsing imported products that he saw advertised on the Vietnamese-language TV channel that he subscribes to at home. After two revolutions around Phuoc Loc Tho, perusing the latest innovations in souped-up massage chairs and hand-held massage devices, he was wiped out, so we decided to move on to our next stop.

We crossed Little Saigon's major arteries, Brookhurst and Euclid, on the drive eastward, passing some of the area's pioneering establishments including Danh's Pharmacy, one of the very first businesses to open in Little Saigon, and the Bolsa Mini Mall, the crown jewel of the neighborhood before Phuoc Loc Tho stole the title.



The signature lobster dish at Tan Cang Newport Seafood



Canh chua (sour fish soup) at Tan Cang Newport Seafood

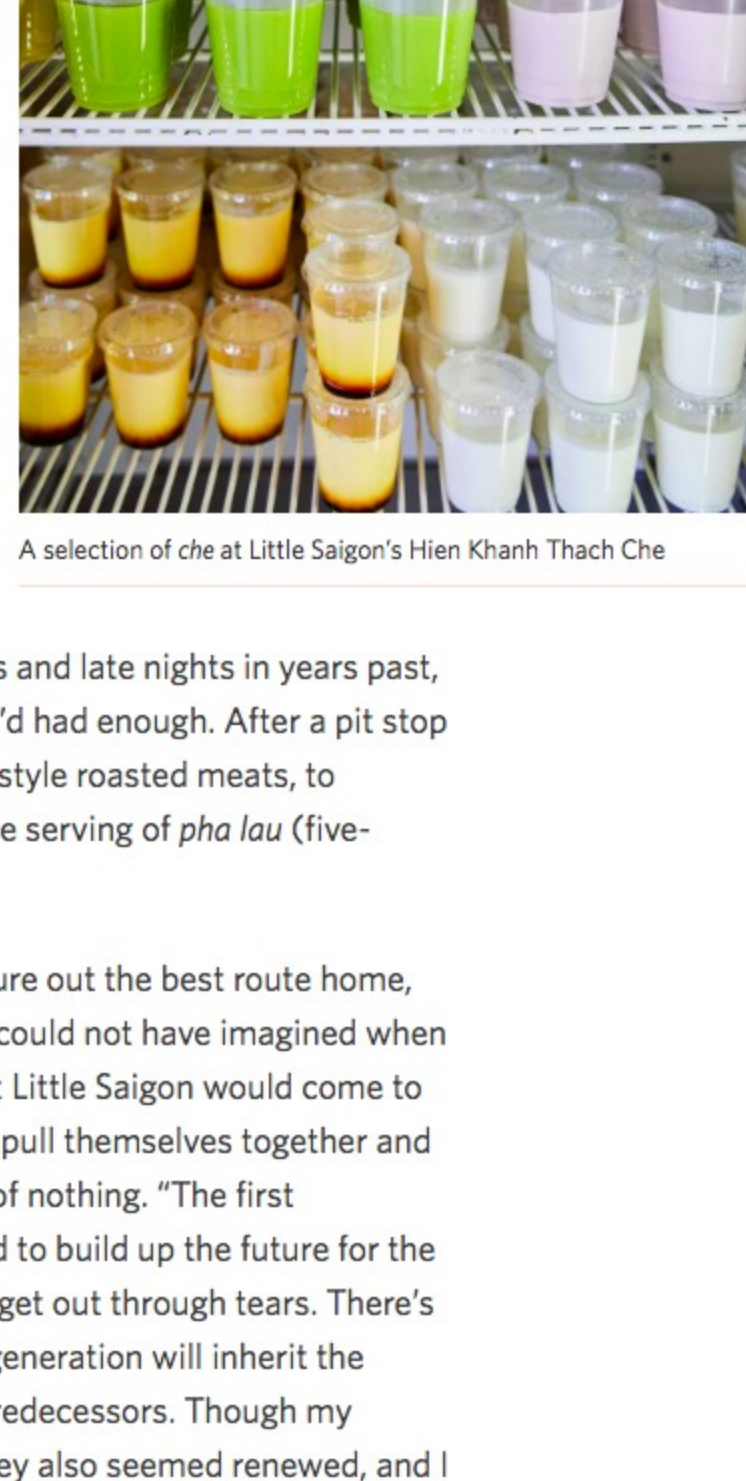
A recent facelift had refreshed the signage outside of Tan Cang Newport Seafood, but the boxy interior stuffed with round, banquet-sized tables and bubbling tanks of live seafood was mostly unchanged from when owners Wendy Lam and Ly Hua opened it in 1988. We settled in and, like always, ordered sour fish soup, shaking beef, sauteed morning glory, and the restaurant's signature lobster dish — an eight-pounder from Maine hacked into sizeable chunks, then stir-fried with green onions, black pepper, jalapenos, and clarified butter, all heaped atop garlicky noodles. The eldest traditionally takes the first bite, and my grandfather was eyeing the lobster, so the choicest bits — easy to extract from the shell in large hunks — found their way onto his plate, along with a little of everything else. Conversation stalled over lunch as our fingers and mouths glistened with butter and garlic.

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Our bellies brimming with lobster, we drove west down Bolsa to visit Thach Che Hien Khanh, Little Saigon's premier purveyor of Vietnamese desserts, because my grandfather's sweet tooth is legendary. Hien Khanh's tiny storefront is a brisk take-out operation, so efficiencies are prioritized over amenities — the half-dozen staffers in branded polos, standing tall and at the ready, skip over warm welcomes to take hurried orders.

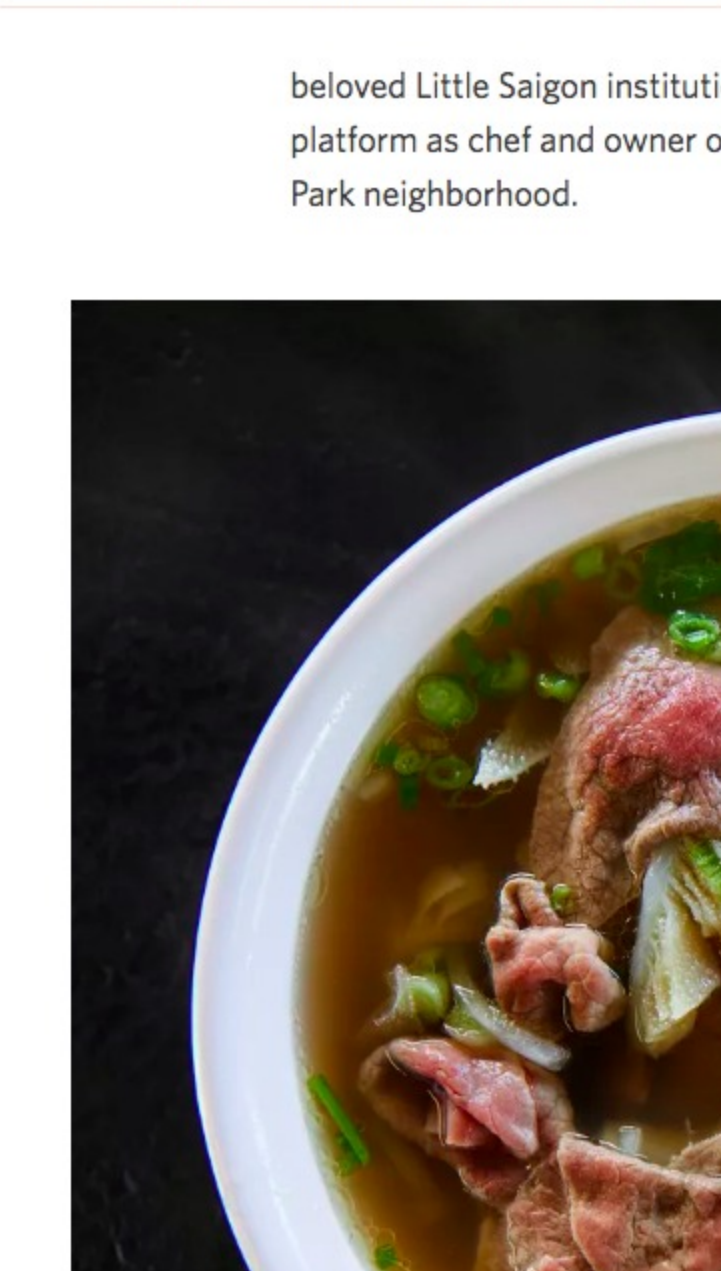
Sweet-seekers have their pick of grab-and-go items like flan and *thach* (jewel-hued jelly solidified with agar-agar), while a sizeable glass case offers all manner of *che*, Vietnam's oft-misunderstood genre of tapioca-laden and coconut milk-drenched sweets. Nearly impossible to classify due to its sheer variety, *che* is a refreshing pick-me-up that can be as rich as it is sweet. It's served warm or icy-cold; at times, it's lumpy enough to necessitate a spoon, but it can also be finely formed and slurped through a wide straw. Some kinds are layered — a study in contrast, viscosity, and artificial food coloring — with things like mashed and whole mung beans, pomegranate seeds, and even legumes like black-eyed peas and kidney beans.



A selection of che at Little Saigon's Hien Khanh Thach Che

My grandfather favors *che troi nuoc*, pleasingly chewy rice balls filled with yellow mung bean paste and gelling in ginger syrup, while I can never resist *banh do lon*, jiggly bob wonders that my mother introduced me to when I was a kid. We took our sweets to go, digging in with the air conditioning cranked high in the car. With each bite, I felt the generation gap closing; my grandfather always knew the restorative powers of *che*.

While I would have relished several more hours together and perhaps even dinner at Thanh My, the nearly 40-year-old institution where my family frequently shared hot pots on rainy days and late nights in years past, my grandparents' aching bones and general fatigue signaled that they'd had enough. After a pit stop at Lien Hoa BBQ Deli, a takeout shop that specializes in Cantonese-style roasted meats, to purchase several pounds of *thit heo quay* (roasted pork) and a sizable serving of *pha lau* (five-spiced offal stew), we decided to head home.

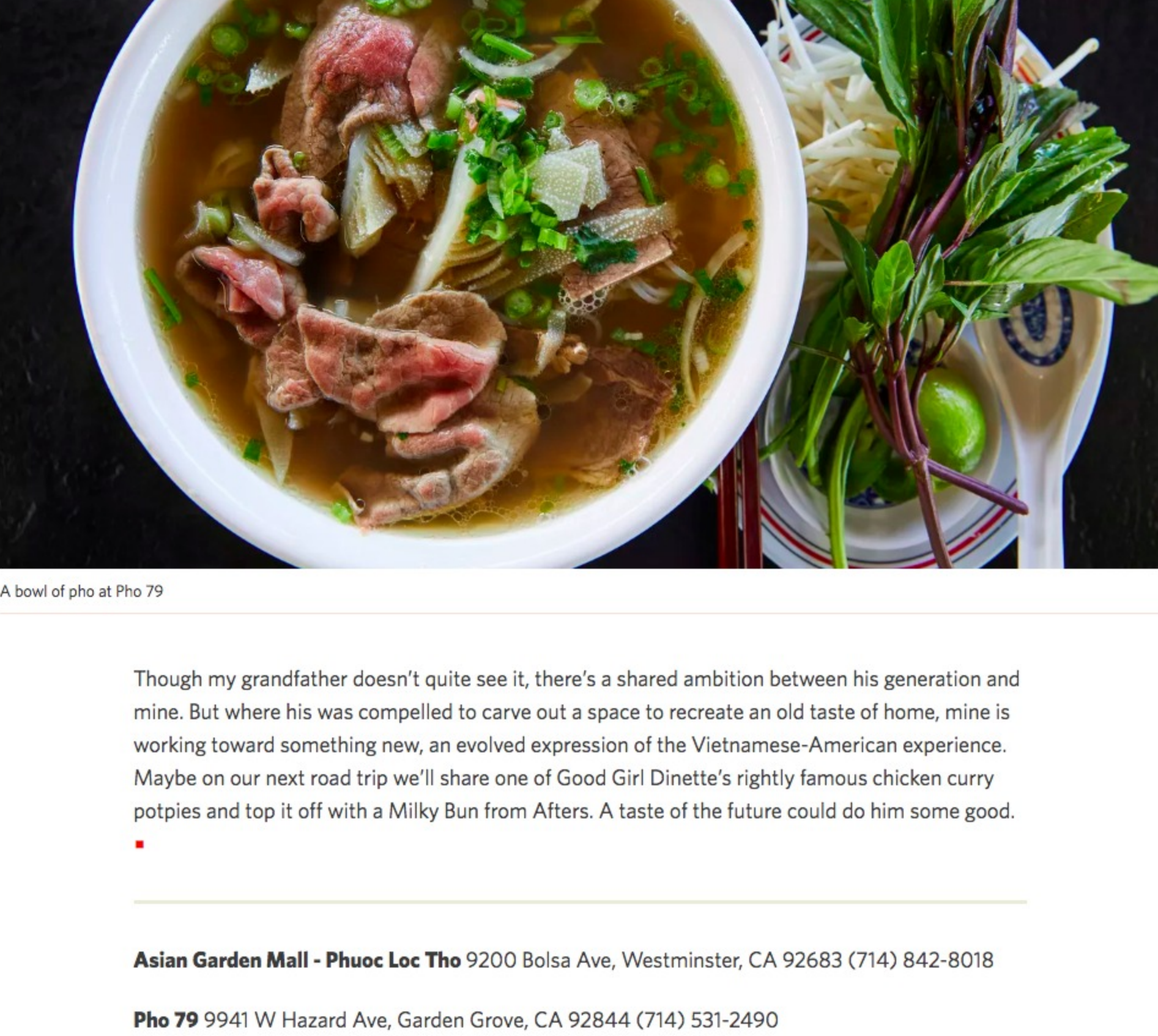


Roasted ducks displayed in the window at Lien Hoa BBQ Deli

As I fiddled with my phone to figure out the best route home, my grandfather began to cry. He could not have imagined when he left Vietnam 43 years ago that Little Saigon would come to be — that an exiled people could pull themselves together and build a booming community out of nothing. "The first generation, we worked really hard to build up the future for the next generation," he managed to get out through tears. There's a part of him that fears the next generation will inherit the privileges but not the grit of its predecessors. Though my grandparents were exhausted, they also seemed renewed, and I got exactly what I came for — a better appreciation for the place.

The drive home was a rush-hour grind. Inching toward San Diego, I kept replaying my grandfather's words in my head. I thought about Andy Nguyen and Scott Nghiem, two entrepreneurs born and raised in Little Saigon who founded Afters Ice Cream. Their impossibly photogenic doughnut-ice cream sandwich, Milky Bun, garnishes heart-eye emojis across Southern California's Instagram feeds.

I was also thought a lot about Diep Tran, the granddaughter of Pho 79's founder, who spent her youth working in the kitchen of the beloved Little Saigon institution. Today, she's advocating for restaurant workers' rights from her platform as chef and owner of Good Girl Dinette, a Vietnamese-American diner in LA's Highland Park neighborhood.



A bowl of pho at Pho 79

Though my grandfather doesn't quite see it, there's a shared ambition between his generation and mine. But where his was compelled to carve out a space to recreate an old taste of home, mine is working toward something new, an evolved expression of the Vietnamese-American experience. Maybe on our next road trip we'll share one of Good Girl Dinette's rightly famous chicken curry potpies and top it off with a Milky Bun from Afters. A taste of the future could do him some good.

- Asian Garden Mall - Phuoc Loc Tho** 9200 Bolsa Ave, Westminster, CA 92683 (714) 842-8018
- Pho 79** 9941 W Hazard Ave, Garden Grove, CA 92844 (714) 531-2490
- Thanh My** 9553 Bolsa Ave, Westminster, CA 92683 (714) 531-9540
- Lien Hoa BBQ Deli** 9311 Bolsa Ave, Westminster, CA 92683 (714) 894-1085
- Tan Cang Newport Seafood** 4411 W 1st St, Santa Ana, CA 92703 (714) 531-5146

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