

PHOENIX

M A G A Z I N E

Tottie Kaya

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Photo by Richard Maack

“I stole my dad’s gold (chain). I cut it and sewed it into the hem of my pants.”

Back of the house

Tottie Kaya, owner/chef of Tottie’s Asian Fusion in Scottsdale, always dreamed of having her own restaurant, but it took a major journey to accomplish her goal – literally.

She came to the U.S. from Laos in 1979 and got her first job at a McDonald’s. She earned an associate’s degree, worked as an engineering assistant at Motorola for 15 years and moonlighted as a bartender and server at Asian restaurants throughout the Valley.

Her first restaurant, which opened in 2003 at Thomas and Hayden roads in Scottsdale, was originally named Shanghai Palace. She renamed it Tottie’s Asian Fusion in 2007 to better reflect the Chinese/Thai/Vietnamese menu (it also features a sushi bar). Kaya herself is of Chinese, Thai and Laotian heritage.

In August 2009, she opened a second location, taking over the former Bistro Italia space in Lincoln Village, which was undergoing a \$6 million renovation. Her husband and two eldest sons help run the original Tottie's while Kaya gets her new location established.

I hear you escaped from Laos when you were young.

I escaped in '78. It was Communist then. We had to pay a boat person to escape to Thailand (down the Mekong River). I was only about 15 years old. My mom, the whole family, didn't know. I got a fake ID, fake papers. My older sister was already in Thailand. I had to pay to get a plane ticket.

Where did you get the money?

That's another story. I stole my dad's gold (chain). I cut it and sewed it into the hem of my pants.

Did your family in Laos have restaurant experience?

In Laos, we had a king and queen. My mom was cooking for them. I was always helping her out – parties and setup. The cooking I learned from my mom. Everything on the menu I grew up eating.

Owning one restaurant is tough enough, but two? How many hours do you put in at work?

From 8:30, 9 a.m., to midnight. I have to take my kid to school, get up at 6, 6:30. At 2:30, I have to leave to pick him up from school and come back. Customers, they understand. They wait for me to come back and make food for them.

You do most of the cooking, but you always look like you just stepped out of a magazine. How do you look like a million bucks working in a kitchen all day?

I always cook very cleanly, neatly. I don't have sauce all over me like other chefs. I like to look good when I come out to talk to the customers.

What are your most popular dishes?

Pad Thai and curry; Pad Kra Pow (Thai basil stir fry).

Which is harder, escaping from an oppressive regime or running a restaurant?

Running a restaurant. It's a lot of sacrifice. You have to love it to do it each day. Loving what you do is freedom.

DETAILS

Tottie's Asian Fusion

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