Diep Tran is the forty-three-year-old proprietor and chef of Good Girl Dinette—a Vietnamese diner in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Highland Park. GGD has been around since 2009, but Tran’s restaurant roots reach back to her childhood. After fleeing Vietnam in the seventies, her family found itself in Southern California, where they opened one of Orange County’s first Vietnamese restaurants, Pho 79. Over the decades, the business expanded to five locations throughout Southern California; today, the last remaining Pho 79 is in Garden Grove.

My grandparents came to the U.S. in 1975 with relatives; I came in 1978. They came by airplane to Colorado—they were able to get papers because there were a lot of Catholic sponsorships there—and the rest of us came as boat people. We came with an uncle who had eight kids. He was the one who organized the escape plan. I think we tried to go four times. What would happen is, we would get ferried from a fishing boat to a bigger boat, and you would just do that until the cops got suspicious. The moment they got suspicious, that bigger boat would leave. It was a lot of waiting around. I was six when we got to America, probably five when we first tried; it took a while.

Colorado was way too cold, so the family moved to Garden Grove, California. My nuclear family was my sister and my brother. My mother had died, and my father was in a concentration camp, so we bunked with my grandparents and another uncle who had four kids. It was a five-bedroom apartment.

Grandma was always cooking. Before the pho restaurant, we would supply charcuterie to the Catholic communities. Before church started or in between services, Grandma would cut up cha lu—a bologna/mortadella thing that you get in banh mi—into little cubes, put toothpicks in them, and go outside, and say, Hey, we’ve got this over there in the Volkswagen. It was always something the family did to make money.

My grandma was not a dabbler. She was always intense—a little too intense. She was very formidable, very exacting. My grandma and grandpa lost their fortune for the first time before 1954, when the country was partitioned between North and South. They had a bus company, a taxi company, and some factories, but they had to leave it all behind. They couldn’t sell anything, so they just left with nothing. They went to the South, and that’s when they started to make different foods to sell. By the time she owned a bunch of businesses again, my grandma didn’t need to make money; she just did it because she was obsessed. When she came here and had nothing left from her past life, she was like, I know what to do.

In 1982, when Diep was ten, the family opened Pho 79 on Hazard Avenue in Garden Grove. It was Diep’s grandmother’s brainchild—she was responsible for the name, menu, and business model—but every Tran family member had a role, too: her two aunts were the line cooks, Diep’s cousins were prep cooks and runners, and her uncle and cousin worked front of house.

The first day of the restaurant was a school day. It was breakfast and the adults were about to leave, and they were like, We’re not gonna see you until really late, you’re gonna be asleep by the time we get home. We were like,
Okay. It was really tense, and we were tense, too.

When we got home, all of my relatives were back already. And we thought, The hell? What happened? They said, "We had to close early." And we were thinking, Nobody came, right? And they were like, "No, we had to close at noon because we ran out of food," and the whole house erupted. That was the moment when we knew we were on to something. It was such an underserved market, but we weren't thinking of it as a market. It's never been just a business. My grandma whistled the ladles we used to stir the pho. The recipe was my grandma's. My grandma had always made pho, always had her hand in food. She understood how to run a business, but her passion was always food.

Every bowl of pho would come back empty, but one day a bowl of pho came back completely full, and my aunt was like, "There is nothing wrong with this pho! What the fuck! What the hell went wrong?" She couldn't deal; it bothered her all evening. Later, one of the runners said it was just because the lady was on a date and she didn't want to eat in front of him. And that just baffled my aunt. Two years prior she had been in a refugee camp eating canned food, and the idea just bothered her so much. That's what it meant to them. It was the family name, and there was a heightened importance. It was like her honor was at stake or something.

I think what made those days special was that we didn't know it was a special time—we were looking into an abyss, we were standing at a ledge, we didn't know how far down it was. We didn't know if there was water to break our fall. And we just did it. It was exhilarating and fucking scary as hell at the same time. As a refugee, you're prepared for disaster. Shit could just be not good. But it was great.

Were they happy to be in America? That was kind of beside the point.

When my mother—who was the youngest in her family—passed away at sea, they felt it keenly. I was six when that happened. We got news of people dying by telegram; you didn't witness it. Everything was filtered through some sort of communication—telegram, letter. We had an empty-casket funeral for my mom.

You couldn't mourn, in a way, because there was this distance. And also, you were just plugging away. I think mourning was considered indulgent. "What the fuck are you doing? What are you crying for?" That's a true quote from my grandma. It's not as though she didn't cry. She cried about my mom all the time—but angry crying. You can cry if you're still doing work, if you're still productive. You can't fall apart.

Though Diem is now a restaurateur herself, she isn't privy to her grandmother's pho recipe, which was given only to the aunts and uncles who opened their own Pho 79s.

I don't have the recipe to our family's pho. They don't trust me with the recipe. You've gotta own the restaurant, you've got to prove your worth. My grandma was a secretive person, and she passed that on to everyone else.

I remember when I first opened my restaurant, I was having trouble with my imperial rolls. They were getting too soggy. I called up my aunt and said, "Hey, Auntie, can you give me some advice?" I thought, Whatever, they're just imperial rolls, she's not gonna withhold. So she asked what I put in my imperial rolls, and I said this and that, and she was like, "Yeah, that's about right." And I said, "They're soggy," and she said, "I don't know." I know you know! It's an old, old world. I respect it.

I remember trying to make chicken pho when I was in college, living on my own for the first time without any roommates. It just didn't turn out right—it didn't have that depth that my grandma's had. So I called her up. She had Alzheimer's at the end of her life, but this was when she was still lucid. I was like, "I'm making this pho, and it's not as good as yours." And she was like, "Of course it's not as good as mine, because I'm sifu [the master]!" So I asked if she could show it to me. I brought everything, we were doing all the steps, and I tasted it—it was my same kind of pho. It wasn't bad, it just didn't have that Grandma thing. At this point it was, like, four hours in. I was tired, and I said, "I'm gonna take a shower." I was so disappointed. I came out, and I saw her stirring the pot. I asked, "Did you put something in there?" And she said, "No, I'm just stirring." And I tasted it, and it was fucking fantastic! And I went, "What the fuck!"

I think that she just wasn't able to articulate it. After a point, it's not about the recipe, it's about you tasting and adjusting. I think every pho recipe is the same. It's the person's ability to taste and figure it out from there, which I have a hard time teaching the cooks. The detail is everything—a little more of this, a little more of that, whatever. That was my grandma.

This was Grandpa: if he had a glass of water with a straw in it, he would take the straw and put it in his pocket for next time. He was a refugee! I think in old-school pho places, that frugality still abides. I think that's why it works. You have to pay attention, because you don't want to waste, and because you're paying attention, the food is the way it is.

When my grandma died, he had a whole closet of saved Styrofoam containers.

When he was ninety, I visited every week to clean. He had all these new shirts in plastic bags and I said, "Grandpa, what are all these new clothes?" And he goes, "Oh, I'm saving them." And I go, "Dude, you're ninety. What are you saving them for?" And he goes, "Ugh, I know, I can't help it." That's my family.