

The Lake Effect

Story by Susan Oh Photographs by Dan Fisher

*The Dong family: Monique and
Rose Duong with Hoa Dong*



A Road Well Traveled to KINGSBURY STREET CAFÉ

In many ways, Kingsbury Street Café is that perfect modern American café: a minimalist space of air and light, adorned with original abstracts by local artists and a menu of classic comforts with a signature, healthy twist. Look deeper—into the heart of the kitchen—and the gleaming 30 year old Hobart industrial mixers and antique chocolate molds hint at the Café's storied past. The recently opened Café is only the latest incarnation of one family's American dream that spans decades and across the Pacific Ocean, to the Fall of Saigon.

The Dong family, headed by matriarch and baker Hoa, and her two daughters, Rose and Monique, is the force behind the Kingsbury Street Café, a culmination of 30 years of a refugee family working together to survive, thrive and live their passion for good food. Their offerings, such as made from scratch lemon pancakes are ethereal yet custard-like, with fresh blueberries, lemon curd and zest and, to put it over the top, crème anglaise. The veggie burgers made of

bulgar wheat, beets and trio of peppers, are carefully crafted to the delight of patrons. Though the Café is only a few months old, long-time foodies may have experienced the family's elaborate creations before.

The Dong women were behind some of Chicago's most lauded treats over the past few decades, first with legendary cake designs for Woodridge-based Wilton (a high end baking supplies company and cake decorating school) in the late 1970s, then award-winning croissants and baked goods through the wholesale bakery, Work of Art, and Starbuck's best-selling Big Dipper donut in 2000. Rose Duong, 40, is the calm and shrewd business head of the family who, through a twist of fate, landed a catering stint with Harpo Studios supplying the legendary Green Rooms with food. She parlayed the demanding part-time job into running the employee café, feeding Oprah Winfrey's staff for five years before it closed last year.

"We were some of the best fed employees on the planet. Rose took the food service to another level," says Becky Liscum, a former Harpo senior field producer. "Whenever I had friends coming to the show, I would take them across the street for Rose's lunches because they were something special."

"One of the best things about working for Oprah was the Harpo café," says long-time employee Jim Kelley, a co-producer of the Oprah Show who ate at the café nearly daily. "Every two weeks was Mexican day and the line up would be around the corner," he says.

He raved about the puff pastry, fluffy yet substantial, and filled with savory veggies or meats. The legendary sandwich bar, lined with freshly roasted, free-range turkey and chicken, local cheeses and Chef Hoa's house-baked breads, was inspired from the staff canteen at the Hearst Corporation in New York City where Ms. Winfrey sent Rose to get ideas before she took over the staff food service. Kelley says, "I was so happy to hear



The Shift to Sustainability

The Harpo employee café, with Rose Duong at the helm, began its transition to free-range and sustainable food options in the spring of 2008, following *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episode *Do You Know Where Your Meat Comes From?* She says, “The show taught me so much about how poorly we treat animals and then eat food that’s been poorly handled. We have to change our eating habits and diet.” Following the show, Rose incorporated free-range eggs and naturally raised meats. “We started changing to local vendors and local farmers. We found a lot of our produce from City Farm and our local farmers markets,” she says.

Mindful menus with sustainable food choices were one thing, but going vegan was a whole other level. In January 2011, many staff members of Harpo Studios, along with millions of viewers took *The Oprah Winfrey Show’s Vegan Challenge* when participants were asked to take on a strictly vegan diet for one week. Hard core dairy and meat loving staff members gave up the cream in their coffee, the butter on their bagel, the meat on their plate and replaced them with substitutes...all vegan. For seven days.

“By the third day, people were getting agitated,” Rose recalls with a giggle.

The challenge in the kitchen became immense—making two hot vegan dishes a day, plus sides, soups, salad bar and dessert in the Harpo Café, especially substituting stock ingredients like butter, honey and cheese.

“I was surprised to find vegan butter delicious,” says Rose, adding

“I was brought up that if you have chocolate, have good chocolate; butter over margarine.” For Mexican themed days, there were vegan chorizo sausage and vegan chicken, soy-based ingredients she found unexpectedly flavorful. Rose researched and talked to many purveyors about product. She’d been familiar with inventory at Whole Foods, but working on the *Vegan Challenge* opened her eyes to another culinary world.

Rose points out the difference in our attitude to food in North America compared to elsewhere in the world. In many other countries, people shop for food by the ingredient in small specialty shops, whereas in North America we have monolithic warehouses. The quality of food isn’t made a priority. “They shop for the food, whereas we shop for convenience,” she says.

After the *Vegan Challenge* aired, Rose continued to offer vegan options daily at the Harpo Café and sourced ingredients for Meatless Mondays. At the Kingsbury Street Café, the scale of a family restaurant doesn’t always make it possible to stock only locally-grown, sustainable produce, but they do what’s possible which is a significant portion of the pantry and offer vegan and vegetarian options on the menu, like the Vegetable Wrap—stir fried veggies & tofu wrapped in rice paper—along with Vegan Mahi Tuna and Quinoa Porridge. In the home, Rose and her family added more fresh vegetables to their diet, ate less meat and used more organics. But that part was, well, natural and easy, she says.

“If it’s naturally raised and organic, the quality and taste is so good that there’s no going back,” she says.

she’d opened this restaurant.”

Others seem to think so, too.

“So much flavor, so much mouth party... so much, so much!” raved one recent Kingsbury Street Café customer in an online review of the lean pork belly bahn mi sandwich with spicy mayo on a house-baked baguette.

Another review site reads, “Terrific brunch menu with excellent coffee; delightful pastries. Cheese scone sublime...”

You could say service through sustenance is a family tradition with the Dongs. In 1975, as Saigon fell, Hoa Dong said goodbye to her elderly mother who insisted on remaining behind and fled with her two young daughters and younger sister. Her mother, a skilled baker, pressed her prized Sunbeam hand-held mixers in Hoa’s hands, telling her that no matter what happened, she could always take care of her family by baking something good to eat.

“But we lost everything when we climbed the wall to get to a helicopter,” says Hoa, the white-haired matriarch with tiny, deft hands. For years, Rose and Monique recalled nothing of that day or Vietnam except flashes of scenes from their childhood. They bounced around refugee camps in Guam and then Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, from where they would make their way to Pound Ridge, New York, the home of Captain Robert Blair who knew Hoa’s family in Vietnam and sponsored them to come to the United States.

Life in the U.S. was safe but alien.

“We’d walk the aisles of the supermarket and there was nothing we recognized as food,” says Rose, adding, “No produce or spices. The only rice was Uncle Ben’s.”

Hoa, who didn’t feel she had any useful skills, fell back into baking after donations to a bake sale drew raves. But back in the 1970s, only men worked the bakeries and she couldn’t find meaningful work no matter where they went, from White Plains, New York, to Stamford, Connecticut. She’d go into each bakery looking for work with a gorgeously decorated cake in hand. “They’d look at the cake, they’d look at me and then back at the cake,” recalls Hoa, adding, “They just couldn’t believe I’d made such a



Left: *The Dong Family, 1974, in Binh Duong, Vietnam, before the fall of Saigon*

Below: *Rose with her Aunt Susie at a resettlement center in Fort Chaffee, AK*



thing.” She eventually found work at a German bakery in Greenwich, Connecticut.

A weeklong cake decorating course held by Wilton took Hoa and the girls to Chicago in 1976. By the end of the week, Norman Wilton himself hired Hoa as one of four cake designers published in its famed annuals that advanced elaborate designs. Hoa began teaching local immigrant Vietnamese women how to bake and decorate cakes out of a cake supplies store on Lincoln Avenue. After a fire destroyed the store, nine year-old Rose said to her mother, “Why don’t you open a bakery?”

Work of Art bakery was born on Diversey and Clark, supplying to such customers as Neiman Marcus and Jewel for the next ten years. Its feather-light yet tender croissants would be named “Chicago’s Best” in a blind taste test by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1983. When high rents forced them to relocate to a cheaper venue on Halsted near the Ogden bridge, they became pioneers of the area notorious for the Cabrini Green housing projects. Starbucks came calling in 2000 but Hoa didn’t want to make just any old donut and came up with a giant buttermilk donut they called the Big Dipper. Soon, Starbucks stores throughout the Midwest, from St. Louis to Indiana and Missouri, all wanted the best-selling donut.

“We worked 20 hours a day,” says Monique, thin and stylish in head-to-toe black, who designed the interior of the Café and whose artwork graces some of the Café’s walls, adding, “I’d wake up in a panic, thinking, I’ve got to go make donuts.”

When they had just about had enough of the wholesaling business, Rose found out from a local grocer that Harpo Studios was looking for a caterer. She went and introduced herself and soon her family would supply the studio with baked goods twice daily and within five years, run the whole canteen.

“So many people were on a diet, they didn’t eat a lot of dessert,” says

Hello there pear. Got a question for you. How do I tell when you’re ripe?

It’s pretty simple really. Just check my neck. It’s right next to my stem. Press gently with your thumb. If it feels soft, I’m ripe and ready for the devouring.

Me, pureed in salad dressing, with Bibb lettuce and Gorgonzola.



You are so wise. And tasty.

If you like that, I’ve got more.



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“Short range, of course, is profit. Long range, their objective is a monopoly of the seed business, forcing all those who grow plants to buy their increasingly harmful products.”

University of Wisconsin plant breeder Dr. William F. Tracy concurs: “Placing the responsibility for the world’s crop germplasm and plant improvement in the hands of a few companies is bad public policy. The primary goal of private corporations is to make profit, and...this goal will be at odds with certain public needs.”

Among those many “public needs” are the need for democratic access to seeds, the need to know the nature of the vegetables we buy and eat, and the need for more biodiversity. But concentrated corporate ownership of seeds has led to far less biodiversity in U.S. seed catalogs: in 1981 there were about 5,000 varieties commonly available, while today there are less than 500 varieties.

Tom Stearns, founder of High Mowing Organic Seeds, laments, “What you have predominantly is somebody in a greenhouse or laboratory somewhere making judgment calls about where they think the greatest profit is for developing new varieties. Generally, they’re paying no attention to the nutritional, ecological and economic health of the people eating the varieties, the health of the farmers growing it or the health of the communities.”

Swenson is blunt alleging that corporations owning and manipulating seeds are “holding the food consuming public at gunpoint.” Once a seed is patented, the farmer is not allowed to save seed to plant the next year, and both farmer and consumer become utterly dependent on seed companies, losing

their independence and self-sufficiency. They also lose access to information about that seed and the vegetable that comes from it.

There is a bright spot on the horizon. Many individuals, nonprofits, farmers, and independent seed companies are busy ensuring seed access, diversity, community building, and a seed heritage for future generations. Groups like Fedco Seeds, High Mowing Seeds, and Seed Savers Exchange are increasing their membership and seed offerings year after year.

The first step many of them took after Monsanto acquired Seminis, was to stop carrying Seminis varieties. One such company is the worker/consumer cooperative Fedco Seeds. The president of Fedco, C. R. Lawn, explained “the current industrial seed system rests upon the unholy trinity of biotechnology, corporate concentration and intellectual property rights.” His seed company rejects that mindset and along with hundreds of other small seed companies, has signed the “Safe Seed Pledge” originally put forth by High Mowing Seeds, a Vermont company.

Here is the main text of the Safe Seed Pledge: *Agriculture and seeds provide the basis upon which our lives depend. We must protect this foundation as a safe and genetically stable source for future generations. For the benefit of all farmers, gardeners and consumers who want an alternative, we pledge that we do not knowingly buy or sell genetically engineered seeds or plants.*

As the plant breeder Dr. William Tracy reminds us “The future of our food supply requires genetic diversity but also demands a diversity of decision makers.”

That’s where YOU come in—whether you

are a gardener or shopper or both. Ask your farmer where he or she gets their seeds, and whether those companies have signed the Safe Seed Pledge. You decide who you want the decision makers to be simply by putting your money in their pockets whenever you buy seeds or vegetables.

This spring, inform yourself, dig in, and plant a seed. Just make sure it’s a seed of delicious self-sufficiency and independence, a seed of hope. ec

Terra Brockman is an author, speaker and founder of The Land Connection, a non-profit with a mission to preserve farmland. Ever passionate about the local foodshed, she also sheds light on issues that affect the diversity and sustainability of the planet.



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Kingsbury Street Café Cheddar Cheese Scone

Recipe by Chef Hoa Dong. Makes 20

5 cups King Arthur pastry flour
3 tablespoons baking powder
¼ cup sugar
¼ teaspoon sea salt
6 ounces organic butter (cut into cubes)
2 egg yolks
1½ cups organic milk
¾ pound shredded cheddar cheese
1 egg, beaten

1. Combine all dry ingredients into the mixing bowl and mix on low speed for 1 minute. Add butter and mix for 3-4 minutes. Add yolks and pour milk into mixture to develop into gluten form.
2. Place dough on a working table and pat down into ¼ inch thick rectangle.
3. Sprinkle cheddar cheese evenly on top of dough and cut into triangle wedges with a sharp knife. Transfer to baking sheet lined with silpat, leaving space between each wedge.
4. Brush with egg wash and bake at 350°F for 12-15 minutes or until golden brown. Remove from oven and serve warm.

Warm Breakfast Quinoa Porridge

Recipe from Kingsbury Street Café. Serves 2

2 cups water
1 small cinnamon stick
1 cup organic red quinoa (rinse thoroughly)
2 tablespoons agave nectar (plus more for serving)
2 tablespoons walnuts
1 tablespoon cranberries
1 tablespoon dried apricots
3 tablespoons flax seeds

1. Bring water and cinnamon stick to a boil in a small saucepan.
2. Add quinoa and return to boil. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer until ¾ of the water has been absorbed.
3. Stir in agave nectar. Cook covered until almost all the water has been absorbed. Discard cinnamon stick and transfer into small bowls.
4. Top with walnuts, cranberries, apricots, agave nectar and flax seeds.

*Option: substitute milk or almond milk in place of water for taste preference.

Rose, “so the people at Harpo didn’t know we had an award-winning bakery.”

Both Rose and Monique, honor students, grew up in Chicago. Rose graduated from the University of Illinois Chicago and Monique, the School of the Art Institute. The sisters met, dated and married their respective college sweethearts and started their own families. All throughout, they worked together, both in the kitchen and at home.

“We went through so much hardship, with our mother raising us on her own,” says Rose, “We wanted to help out because that’s just what we do.”

Hoa, now in her 60s, still wakes daily at 3:30am to bake the day’s goods while Rose joins her at the Café later in the morning around 8:30. Monique is in charge of décor and elaborate and artistic decorations of the baked goods, such as the handmade, life-like sugar lilies laid out in rows and rows one afternoon. They bicker good-naturedly, contradicting each other, telling stories and finishing sentences, as families do, especially one that has worked together for 30 years to create a common dream. “We have our heart and soul in

this place,” says Rose, a smile spreading across her face. It’s a smile that knows it’s home.

Full disclosure: Edible Chicago co-editor Becky Liscum was a Harpo employee for 15 years.

Editor’s note: According to family tradition in Viet Nam, after marrying, the women keep their maiden names and the children take their father’s last name. Rose and Monique have their father’s name, Duong, while their mother Hoa has her father’s last name, Dong. But, according to Rose, they consider themselves the Dong family. [ec](#)

Susan Oh is a Chicago-based writer who is learning to bake when she isn’t sharpening her writing pencils. She is a recent Scholar to the Wesleyan University Writers Conference, an Asian American Journalists Association’s Knight-Poynter Fellow and Ford Foundation Fellow.



Exclusive **VIDEO** with chef Rose Duong on ediblechicago.com