



Feeding authentic food to the area's growing Vietnamese population has created a demand for Vietnamese restaurants, as well as markets where home chefs can purchase specialized ingredients for traditional dishes. Just down the street from Pho Saigon is Saigon Market, the oldest and largest Asian market in the area. The owner, Tony Tai, arrived in Springfield in 1984 with his family after being sponsored by an uncle who lived in Ware. "No one spoke Vietnamese in Springfield in 1984; it was very difficult," says Tai. The family opened Saigon Market in 1993, the same year Tai started an economics major at UMass. The first year was difficult, says Tai, because they weren't yet known in the community, but since then they've been "growing and growing." After two years, his mother quit her job and began working full-time at the store, and eventually Tai sold a small business he was developing and came back to help as well.

Khanh Nguyen, Branch Manager for Boat People SOS in Springfield, an organization with 14 branches nationwide serving Vietnamese immigrants and refugees, says that estimates vary drastically about the number of Vietnamese in Springfield. While the last census reported a population of 2000 in Springfield, Nguyen believes that up to 7000 may live in the area. Based on the number of clients her agency serves, Hang Tang, Director of the Springfield Vietnamese American Cultural Association (SVACA), estimates that perhaps 8000-10,000 Vietnamese reside in Springfield and nearby towns.

Nguyen identifies three separate waves of Vietnamese immigrants to Springfield. About ten to fifteen families, many of whom worked for American companies, were airlifted from Saigon and came to the city in 1975. Designated "boat people," because they escaped Vietnam by boat or walking through the Cambodian border, the second group arrived from the late '70s to the mid-80s. The third wave came in the early '90s, after the establishment of the Humanitarian Operation Program and the Orderly Departure Program facilitated former political prisoners and Amerasian (offspring of American infantrymen and Vietnamese women) children's immigration to the US as "free cases," families or individuals who had no relatives in the country. Nguyen says that Springfield was offered as the first option, and those, like his family, who chose the city for resettlement could get off the wait list faster. He estimates that 10 percent of the current Vietnamese population originated in the first wave, 30 percent are boat people, and 60 percent are Amerasian or former political detainees.

"If a Vietnamese comes to the store looking for something, it's likely that we'll have it," Tai says. His shop carries

many of the same goods you would find at other Asian markets at the store, but they specialize in Southeast Asian foods. In addition to Vietnamese community members and restaurant owners, the market has a following outside the community. "A lot of Americans are finding recipes on the Internet and shopping more for Asian stuff," says Tai, adding that Americans believe Asian food is healthier than other ethnic cuisines. He said that Hispanic shoppers are common as well, as they use the fresh cilantro and culantro (a similar herb with a long, spiky leaf) in many of their dishes.

At Saigon Market, overflowing containers of fresh mangoes, bananas, Chinese broccoli, yu choy, mustard greens, cilantro and scallions crowd the front entrance.

The back is filled with boxed and frozen specialty items like cuttlefish balls (a squid-like mollusk that's ground up and marinated for soups or hot pot) golden pompano (a Vietnamese favorite in the Jack fish family), galanga (also known as Thai ginger) and frog legs. Gesturing to unopened boxes stacked behind him, Tai says that the produce had been purchased just that morning in Chelsea Market. "We pick it out ourselves to make sure it's fresh," he says of the exotic vegetables that come from Florida, South America, California and Texas. To get to the city markets at opening time, Tai and another employee drive to Boston on Mondays and New York City's Chinatown on Wednesdays and Fridays, leaving at 2:30 A.M.

As Forest Park continues to grow and change, industrious businesses bring new ingredients and menu items to their patrons, scaling back the spice and bulking up the portions for American appetites, but authentic Vietnamese cuisine remains the cornerstone of the neighborhood. As indicated by its name, Pho Saigon takes its pho seriously. Duong says that the restaurant "tries to do as close to what is in Vietnam as possible," and still serves pho from its opening hour at 11:00 until closing time at 9:00. Unlike Americans, who have set menus for different times of the day, Duong says Vietnamese don't distinguish their meals in this way. "It's the pho—breakfast, lunch and dinner," she says. ♣

*A graduate of the Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program, Katherine Jamieson is a freelancer specializing in health and food writing. Her work is forthcoming in Ode, Ms., Bust and Terrain.org. She abides in Whately with her fiancé, their sweet old dog and two destructive kittens.*

