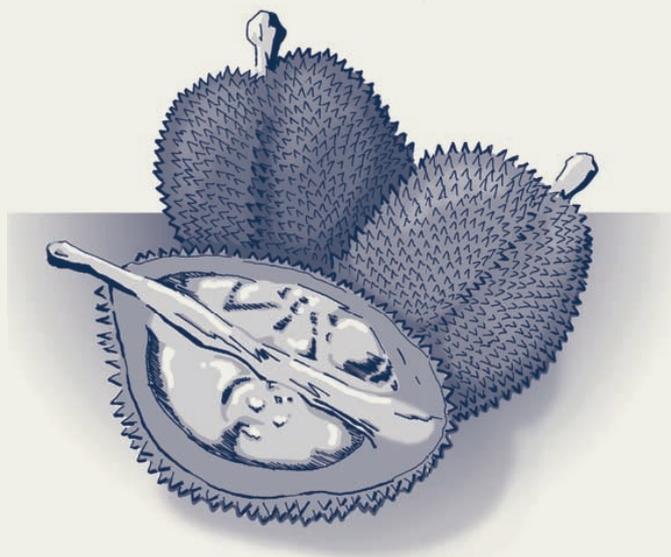


QUE HUONG SUPERMARKET

Rewinding 2600 Travis



IF A TIME-LAPSE CAMERA HAD BEEN PLACED ON THE CORNER OF 2600

Travis from 1986 to today, it would have captured a dilapidated building refurbished by contractors and painters, bricks coated in creamy white paint, neon blue and green words with accent marks scattered in Mylar across windows and walls. Then people carry out newly purchased baskets of purple mangosteens and boxes of yellow-green durians; men and women hoist whole roasted pigs in cardboard boxes wrapped in red cellophane for weddings; a mass of people, some in ao dai—silk colors floating before your eyes—celebrate with dancing Chinese lions and Fu dogs; and the residue of firecrackers pile up in the corners of walls and doors.

Suddenly, we would see the taking down of signs and the shuttering of doors. Just as quickly, the contractors and painters appear again: glass windows everywhere and bricks coated in dark gray. A limo pulls up to the front entrance facing McGowen Street. The back parking lot is filling up with cars, and the valet boys are running so fast you can hardly see them.

I knew 2600 Travis before Bryan Caswell's restaurant Reef, back when it was Que Huong Supermarket, a small, Vietnamese-owned "mall" with several businesses within its tacky, green linoleum hallways: the market itself, Hong Kong Restaurant, Thien An Sandwich Shop, Pho Cong Ly, and Le Nam Hair Salon. In the late 1970s, Midtown Houston was home to Little Saigon, a neighborhood (a village) of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans,

who pioneered the redevelopment of Midtown. Travis and Milam Streets were viewed as a mirror image of 1970s-era Saigon. The Vietnamese areas were established around Milam Street, Webster Street, Fannin Street, and San Jacinto Street. My father, with his prescient knowledge of Houston, had decided on this city as our home after reading an article about the Space City when we landed in Miami in 1975. We moved to Houston in 1979. A general practitioner, he soon opened his medical clinic in the St. Joseph Medical Plaza on Webster and Crawford Street. He invested in the brand new construction and became co-owner of the building with a group of doctors. He wooed other friends to set up shop there. Others came to Houston at my father's behest and built freestanding clinics on Milam (some of which still run today).

His clinic was on the first floor with easy access to the street. Through high school and college, and even graduate school, the clinic was a summer home for my siblings and me—we would work there, assisting my parents and the nursing staff by weighing patients and retrieving files. I learned a lot of medical terms and learned to recognize some individual symptoms just by watching my father in action.

It was a family business. And because it was my family, my mother was really in charge. She had encouraged my father to invest in the building and had determined that the first floor clinic was the best: since the front

BY LONG CHU

WHAT MY FATHER DIDN'T KNOW WAS THAT MY MOTHER WAS INDEED PRACTICING HEALING, BUT OF A DIFFERENT KIND: SHE WAS REDEFINING SOOTHSAYING AS SOOTHE-SAYING.

door was facing south, it would be the most prosperous location for his practice. She set the hours. She designed the waiting room and chose which magazines to place there. She made sure the clinic had a family room with a well-upholstered sofa where she could nap after lunch. This family room, much to my father's chagrin, was also my mother's "clinic," where she practiced a less reputable healing art: palmistry and card reading. On some days, my mother had more clients than he did.

My father railed unsuccessfully against the mysticism. He rebuked my mother for practicing the less scientific art. What my father didn't know was that my mother was indeed practicing healing, but of a different kind: she was redefining soothsaying as soothe-saying. She would hold a client's hand, reassuring her that a dallying husband would come back, or lament with another client that it was time to move on. She would reveal an "answer" that a woman already had in her heart but only needed the room to speak it out loud in the soothing presence of a friend. Most of her clients were women who struggled mightily against the chafing roles of women in a Vietnamese society, and my mother provided and encouraged the redefinition of those roles as revealed in cards and the lines of a palm.

My mother was keenly excited when Que Huong Supermarket opened in 1985. The owners, Tran Van Thanh and his wife, Tong Thi Phuong, were patients of my father's. They were also clients of my mother's. The Thanh's had owned a small Vietnamese market on Leeland Street. They wanted to expand and open a dream market, they told my mom. "Imagine, we can import fresh durians, fresh mangosteens, unimaginable jackfruits," Mrs. Phuong said when she came in one day for a reading. "We have a site in mind." My mom was in agreement. She was delighted by the prospect of fresh fruits from home. The intricate lines on Mrs. Phuong's weary hands promised prosperity.

Indeed Que Huong Supermarket had everything. My mother no longer had to make her own tofu, which she did for years, boiling and pressing soybeans into curds in a process that would take several days, plus several days more for the tofu cake to firm up. What greedy delight in my mother's eyes when she saw baskets and baskets of mangosteens! The surprisingly hard purple rind gives way when the fruit is pressed between one's palms, revealing nestled inside a white flesh reminiscent of peach, grape, and strawberry. At that time, this market was the only place in all of Houston where you could place an order for a whole roasted suckling pig for weddings and Tet celebrations.

Mrs. Phuong's lines did not lie, but they did not foretell when the prosperity would end. And if my mom knew, she did not reveal to Mrs. Phuong that her prosperity was tied to my mother's "prediction" that the wind was shifting from Midtown to the rapidly expanding Asian Town on Bellaire Boulevard between Highway 59 and the newly built Beltway 8, which made travel to that area from other parts of the city incredibly fast. My mother predicted the shift because she knew a lot of people, and they would talk, and the talk was of change. She also knew by her own altered habits: by 2002 and 2003, we were spending more time in shops off of

Bellaire Boulevard and often drove all the way out there for lunch and dinner in the newly built restaurants. My mother encouraged my father to close his clinic and sell his shares of the building at St. Joseph Medical Plaza. She also encouraged my brother, who was already practicing dentistry, to open a medical/dental office and let my father work there part-time to anchor the medical portion of the practice. And so in 2005 my father closed his office in Midtown, where he had been practicing for 26 years.

Que Huong Supermarket shuttered its doors in 2006. Mr. Thanh and Mrs. Phuong now run a smaller grocery store, with nowhere near the influence of Que Huong Supermarket, on Bellaire Boulevard across the street from the behemoth Hong Kong Supermarket (whose family ironically had their start in a small eatery within the Que Huong Supermarket mall). My father's leaving encouraged other colleagues to leave, and as certain as if the future were written in the lines of their hands, the Vietnamese community left Midtown and moved southwest. A few restaurants remain along Milam and Travis Streets now, but it is nothing like it was in the heyday of the 1980s and 90s.

Reef Restaurant opened its gleaming glass door at 2600 Travis in July 2007 to rave reviews. If you check out their website, you will learn that Bryan Caswell is a handsome, young chef and a powerful force on the national culinary scene. Caswell and Reef are collecting awards left and right: James Beard Award Nominee; Best Chef/Southwest 2010; Top 10 Best New Chefs (*Food & Wine* magazine); Number One Seafood Restaurant in the U.S. (*Bon Appétit* magazine); one of the 50 Best New U.S. Restaurants (*Travel & Leisure* magazine). There is a link on the website to magazine articles and photos of beautiful people celebrating the worthy success of Reef.

But what I remember is Que Huong Supermarket with the scent of dried shrimp and fish sauce, and stocks of bamboo shoots and roasted ducks, and I wonder if the people at Reef know they are partying where I used to shop for tofu, look out for fresh durians for my mother, and pick out red envelopes for li xi for my nephews and nieces. I wonder if they know they are probably standing where carcasses of suckling pigs were sprayed down and roasted so the skin puffed and crunched, then coated in obligatory red for worship ceremonies. I imagine the spicy note of star anise, so heavily present in a bowl of pho, still floating in the refined air of the new space.

Perhaps Bryan Caswell knows the history of the building. I imagine that he does. In doing my research for this essay, I ordered from his dessert menu the Vietnamese coffee tart. It was delightful and deep. I could taste the chicory note and the condensed milk—all ingredients of a good strong Vietnamese coffee like the ones I ordered often from a food stand at Que Huong Supermarket so many years ago. The walls in Reef are decked out in a bleached-green glass that was carried to shore from the ocean, which we crossed in 1975 to make our home in America: both in Houston, and in many ways, in the market that was once at 2600 Travis. c