

Chinese market becomes American success story for Crescent City family

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Kelly and Peter Chen's business careers have been fraught with high risk. They're hoping their latest investment, Oriental Food Market, has greater potential for success.

The natives of China saw their first endeavor, a skincare company, seized by the Chinese government in 2009.

A year later, they immigrated to the U.S., landing in Los Angeles with their daughter, Coco.

Then, another business opportunity surfaced. A friend of a friend wanted the couple to join him in setting up a Chinese learning institute in Crescent City.

Armed only with a promise that he'd have the ball rolling by the time they got here in 2016, the Chens arrived here with their growing family. Unfortunately, the friend was inexperienced in the ways of American bureaucracy and administrative requirements for launching a business of the magnitude he had envisioned.

So, the friend left for Canada, leaving the Chens with no immediate employment prospects.

Undaunted, they opened the rear portion of their Crescent City home as an Airbnb rental, with the additional draw of Peter's hobby collection of exotic birds, from peacocks to pheasants and egg-laying hens.

As their Airbnb blossomed, another business opportunity arose. On Dec. 15, 2018, they purchased a Chinese food store from a Hmong who had been losing interest in operating the three-year-old market.

Although the shelves of the Oriental Food Market, 1981 Northcrest Dr., technically weren't bare when they took over, the Chens worked hard to restock with a variety of wares at affordable prices.

They knew this area didn't boast a large Asian population. According to the 2016 "Del Norte County Economic and Demographic Profile," as of 2014 there were only 594 Asians living in all of Del Norte County. So, they needed to attract a broader customer base with the lure of worldly foodstuffs.

The response was immediate. Kelly Chen said that within a short time, the couple needed to add additional varieties of goods to meet their customers' needs.

Now the Chens have close to 10 suppliers delivering fresh produce every Wednesday. They also personally take monthly trips to San Francisco to handpick goods to sell in the store. If they miss anything, customers can text the Chens to preorder specific items.

"The curiosity and excitement customers express in our produce motivate us to expand it even more," said Chen, "by not only getting them from our suppliers, but also offering produce in exchange with our local farmers, meanwhile hoping to help reduce their financial stress."

Shelley Sovola and her son, Joshua Francis, shopped the store for the first time last week and were pleasantly surprised by what they found. "I love to cook Asian food," Sovola said. "Where else can you get these vegetables and sugars, for example?"

"Their stock is a lot more expansive than a regular store," Francis added.

One of the Chens' more-popular innovations has been offering Saturday cooking demonstrations from 1-3 p.m., featuring exotic ingredients in their market. "This is not a professional restaurant, but I can show them how to make Japanese or Thai or Filipino dishes, how to know more about the cuisines, by taking our ingredients home and making it for themselves," Chen said.

Helen Everetts has been demonstrating Korean cuisine in the store since the Chens purchased it. And Sue Joseph, originally from Cambodia, has been demonstrating Asian cuisines, including Thai, Vietnamese and Filipino, for about three months.

"I love it," said Joseph, "for me to be helping others learn different cultures through cuisine. They are getting to know each other through food as a gateway to the heart of culture. I'm helping them learn my culture one plate at a time."

The Chens were surprised to learn that word of their small market is spreading regionwide. Larry Peng, a longtime friend who helps translate conversations into English for the Chens, said he's heard tales of their success firsthand.

"I play poker at the casino with mostly other retired people from Hiouchi, Grants Pass and Medford," said Peng. "Suddenly, all these people are talking about an Asian food market (here)."

Others in the community have wanted to associate with the Chens. Sunny Baker of the Family Resource Center of the Redwoods has partnered with them on the center's Food Smarts Workshops for Adults.

"The old store didn't usually have healthy food," said Baker, "but Kelly likes to partner with the community for more-healthy choices. Once the Chens came on board as the new owners, they became the community's champions."

Kelly Chen, who is still perfecting her English and speaks for her husband, who chooses to communicate almost solely in Chinese, said, "We want to thank everyone who came to our events for their warming support. Their love encourages and empowers us to make the best of everything we do.

"As immigrants with our four young children, we strive to live our dreams, make our life meaningful and spread the love of Jesus Christ in this beautiful country."

Success seems to be coming their way at last.

The Oriental Food Market is open 8 a.m.-8 p.m., Mondays through Saturdays. The Chens will open on Sundays for special requests in advance.