

[Farmington resident opens restaurant in Apple Valley](#)

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PHOTO: Taste of Thaiyai in Apple Valley has a new owner, Nyi Htun, a Burmese refugee who came to the United States after the student uprising in the 1980s. Owning his own restaurant has been a long-time dream of Htun. Photo by Jessica Harper

Taste of Thaiyai at 7705 147th W. in Apple Valley is like a home away from home for its new owner, Nyi Htun.

Whether he's preparing Thai cuisines in the kitchen or greeting customers at the front desk, Htun is at the restaurant from open to close seven days a week.

"I spend most of my life in the restaurant," he said.

Life hasn't always been so routine for the 42-year-old Farmington resident, though.

Htun has seen and experienced more in his life than most would imagine.

During his last year in college, Htun said, he joined a revolutionary uprising in his homeland, Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, against its oppressive military government.

The night of the famous student protest on Aug. 8, 1988, in which an estimated 3,000 students were killed, the military stormed through Htun's camp and fired machine guns at the group of demonstrators.

“I was so scared,” he said. “That was the first time I heard gun shots in my life.”

Htun ran as fellow protesters were shot or captured, never to be heard from again.

“There were people dying all around me,” he said. “I saw my friends die next to me.”

Htun walked for four or five days after the invasion until he reached the Burmese-Thai border, where he remained for about nine years.

Htun said he knew he could never return home so he left for the United States in 1999 in hopes of creating a better life for himself.

“It was hard to leave my family behind but I have to live like this,” he said.

Upon arriving in America, Htun attempted to finish college. Although he completed six months of English courses, he struggled to keep up with the other students and quit.

“After two years, I didn’t know what I wanted to do,” he said.

Htun took a job at Taste of Thailand restaurant in St. Paul. He had never cooked Thai food before, but said he learned quickly through observation and trial-and-error.

“I love cooking and I learned a lot from the owner, but I didn’t expect to work there permanently,” he said.

Htun dreamed of opening his own business.

Last year Htun was given the opportunity to achieve this goal when the Taste of Thailand owner, who also owned Taste of Thaiyai in Apple Valley, was seeking a buyer for the Apple Valley location.

She agreed to sell it to Htun with the condition that the menu remain the same. He agreed.

Htun had never owned a restaurant before and was a little nervous.

So far business has been successful despite the harsh economy, he said.

Taste of Thaiyai made 30 percent more in revenue this year than last year, Htun said.

Taste of Thaiyai is open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and noon to 8 p.m. Sundays.

Taste of Thaiyai is located at 7705 147th St. W. in Apple Valley.

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