

CELEBRATING ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER ENTREPRENEURS

May is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. We are so pleased to be collaborating with the Asian Business Association San Diego to share stories of Asian and Pacific Islander businesses in San Diego County. These businesses have a rich heritage and have significantly shaped the history of our region and nation. For the entire month of May, the San Diego Business Journal is dedicating a special section in each issue to share and tell their inspiring stories.

Business owners will also be recognized on Thursday May 20th, 2021. The San Diego Business Journal and the Asian Business Association San Diego will present the 2021 Asian Pacific Islander Businesses of the Year Awards, as well as a panel discussion on celebrating, uniting, and creating change in the San Diego region. We hope these stories and virtual event will not only inform but build an increasing awareness of Asian Pacific Islander Business community.



Barb Chodos
President and Publisher
San Diego Business Journal



Jason Paguio
President & CEO
Asian Business Association San Diego

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Korean Flavors Meet Southern Cooking

RESTAURANTS: Cross Street Chicken and Beer Meshes Cultures

■ By MARIEL CONCEPCION

It was during a trip to Seoul, Korea, in the early 2010s that **Tommy Nguyen** and his wife **Grace Chi** became inspired to introduce a Korean fried chicken food concept to San Diego.

But in order to set themselves apart from the local competition, especially once settling on a 2,000 square foot space in the Asian food enclave of Kearny Mesa, the two knew they had to get innovative with their offerings.

Along with business partner **Wilson To**, Nguyen and Chi decided to fuse Korean fried chicken with the commonly embraced comfort of Southern food culture, an approach never before taken in San Diego's gastronomic scene, said Nguyen. Lastly, inspired by the craft beer industry of San Diego, the final concept iteration included adding a hefty selection of brew on tap to pair with the tasty food.

In 2017, **Cross Street Chicken and Beer**, a fusion between Korean flavors and classic Southern cooking, was birthed. It offers 20 beers on tap, according to Nguyen, and over 10 chicken flavors and options, including the uber-popular Hot Chick Sandwich and the top-selling Seoul Spicy wings.

Today, the company, with a second, 300 square foot location in Carlsbad's **Windmill Food Hall** that opened late 2019, garners over \$2 million in revenue and has roughly 45 employees and counting. Thanks to a planned expansion next year, the company, self funded by the husband-and-wife duo, is projected to double its revenue by 2022, according to Nguyen.



Tommy Nguyen
Owner
Cross Street Chicken
and Beer



Photo Courtesy of Cross Street Chicken and Beer
Cross Street Chicken and Beer, located in Kearny Mesa and founded in 2017, expects to double its revenue by 2022.

Fried Chicken Lover

"I'm a huge fried chicken lover so after our trip to Seoul we wanted to bring some concepts we loved from there back to SD," said Nguyen, 32, who received his degree in management information systems from **San Diego State University**. "My wife's family owns 10-11 restaurants on Convoy Street (in Kearny Mesa) and her mom was one of the first to own a food place on the strip, **Friend's House**, maybe 15 years ago. So, we knew we wanted to follow in her family's footsteps. My wife and Wilson perfected all the recipes and I handle the finances and the marketing part of the business. We did a grand opening in December of 2017 and the support from the community was just insane. Now we are looking at expanding nationwide."

Other than experiencing a 40% drop in

sales at the beginning of COVID-19, Cross Street Chicken and Beer has been on a nearly-constant upward climb, says Nguyen. By the end of last summer, the company had reached pre-pandemic sales numbers, thanks in large part to the addition of curbside pickup and third-party delivery services. These days, revenue is up almost 15% from 2019, said Nguyen, even with the addition of national Korean fried chicken food chain **Bonchon Chicken** to Kearny Mesa in 2018.

For To, the success of Cross Street Chicken and Beer is a result of the culture that Nguyen and the team have built.

"We're so proud of what we've built together as a team, creating a safe and warm environment for both our team to work and guests to enjoy a great glass of beer and, of course, some fried chicken," he said. "For us, it all begins with ingredients, starting



Wilson To
Partner
Cross Street Chicken
and Beer

by marinating overnight our fresh never frozen chicken... Our technique to double fry our chicken to create the perfect crispy batter pays homage to traditional Korean fried chicken. Our inspiration for flavors incorporates the east and west cultures to build our multiple flavor offerings."

New Locations

Moving forward, Nguyen hopes to expand the Cross Street Chicken and Beer footprint and, hopefully, down the line, enter new markets.

For now, a new location at the **Del Mar Highlands Town Center**, is scheduled to open early 2022, said Nguyen, followed by a fourth eatery in downtown's **Horton Plaza**. The latter is set to launch toward the end of next year, he said.

A fifth Cross Street Chicken and Beer, to be situated in **Petco Park**, is currently in discussions. ■

Cross Street Chicken and Beer



FOUNDED: 2017

OWNER: Tommy Nguyen, Grace Chi, Wilson To

HEADQUARTERS: Convoy

BUSINESS: chicken and beer food place with two locations.

REVENUE: over \$2M, projected to double revenue in 2022

LOCAL EMPLOYEES: roughly 45

WEBSITE: www.crosstreetcnb.com

NOTABLE: partner Wilson To was previously GM from Crab Hut Seafood Restaurant.

CONTACT: (858) 430-6001

Printing Co. Exceeds Customers Expectations

MARKETING: Firm Has Served Over 45,000 Customers Worldwide

■ By FRED GRIER

San Diego-based **Printivity**, an online printing company continues to find success after more than a decade in the business. Founded in 2010, Printivity was started by founder and CEO **Lawrence Chou** and was built from the ground up.

Today, Printivity has grown into a multimillion dollar company. A big part of the firm's success is due to its fast turnaround times and easy ordering, said Chou.

"Printivity started after I went to the local print shop and had the worst experience ever—I didn't understand the terminology, the technical stuff, or when the order was going to be complete," said Lawrence Chou, founder and CEO of Printivity. "Knowing we could provide a much better experience. We started printing in San Diego and before we knew it, we began serving customers across the country."

Helping Small Businesses

Helping small business owners, it sells a wide range of marketing products including booklet printing to magazine printing

to postcard printing, among other custom business solutions.

Orders can be delivered anywhere in the U.S. within 24 hours, and 95 percent of its orders are shipped all across the country. If a delivery is late or the customer doesn't like the finished product, there's no charge.

Printivity dedicated itself to providing the best experience for their customers. Not only were they known for price matching quotes offered up by other competitors, but they also stood behind their satisfaction guarantee of "We'll fix it, replace it, or refund it."

Printivity has an average 5-star rating on platforms like Yelp with more than 10,000 reviews.

"We have the nation's highest satisfaction rating of any printing company in the United States our size or larger. We also has 5-star average on Yelp, Facebook, and Google reviews have us at a 5-star average, which is unheard of," said Chou. "We have some

of the fastest turnaround times in the country. Since we've opened our doors we have served over 45,000 customers worldwide."

Building in San Diego

Since inception, the company has been awarded numerous accolades including being named 17th fastest growing company in San Diego and made the coveted Inc. 5000 list of the fastest growing U.S. private companies three times in a row.

Chou started Printivity with less than \$500 and setting up shop in his parent's garage. Today, the company has two San Diego facilities and a third location in New Jersey.

It offers free health insurance, paid time off, volunteer hours, and free college offered to all employees. In addition, all employees are encouraged to volunteer at least 20 hours for a cause that they are passionate about, said Chou, noting that over 90% of employees hit that goal each year. The



Lawrence Chou
Founder and CEO
Printivity

company has about 60 staffers in total.

Chou said he plans to continue growing and building its team in San Diego.

"San Diego is one of the best places in the United States to start a business because of our communities and culture. San Diegans are open-minded and willing to try new things, which really helps if you've got a new idea or a new way of doing things," said Chou. "We came into the printing industry knowing that we wanted to do things differently and do things better. And San Diego has welcomed us with open arms." ■

Printivity



FOUNDED: 2010

CEO: Lawrence Chou

HEADQUARTERS: Mira Mesa

BUSINESS: Sells marketing products

EMPLOYEES: 60

WEBSITE: www.printivity.com

NOTABLE: Chou started Printivity in his parent's garage and with less than \$500.

CONTACT: service@printivity.com

Building Bridges Through Culture

EVENTS: Social Artistry Creates Community and Connections Even During the Pandemic

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

While the pandemic may have shuttered large gatherings and celebrations, it didn't stop **Lauren Balcita Garces** from starting her own event production company in 2020.

In fact, as an experienced marketing professional and event planner, Garces thought what better time to launch her company **Social Artistry**, a business focused on empowering diverse communities through events.

"You know what better time to really show to the community like these are the types of events, these are the types of programming, this is the type of way I want to serve in our community," Garces said. "I really wanted to lean into...what I felt my purpose was with my company, which was to serve our diverse communities, give them more access to opportunities and get more resources."

Over the past year, Social Artistry adapted to serve San Diego's multicultural and hardest hit communities through project collaborations with the city, county, local ethnic chambers of commerce and more than 30 community-based organizations across the San Diego region.

Connecting Communities

Growing up in Kapolei, Hawaii on the big island of Oahu, Garces said she didn't dream of being an event producer. However, she did dream of owning her own company.



Lauren Balcita Garces
CEO
Social Artistry

She came to San Diego State University to pursue a degree in marketing because she said it seemed like the most creative path in business and it allowed her to use both her creative and strategic mindset. To stave off homesickness and find community, she got involved in clubs such as the Asian Pacific Student Alliance and the American Marketing Association.

Garces found event production through her first internship at Silk Road Productions, and eventually rose to become a vice president at the company. Then in May of last year, she felt that it was finally time to live

her childhood dream of owning a business.

The name "social artistry" reflects her company's vision of "creating sustainable economic and cultural impact with community leaders and organizations through creative events."

Working Together

For Garces, making that vision a reality means using her business to bring attention to the Asian and Pacific Islander communities and key decision makers so they can work together toward equity.

"A really big thing for me is like, I see a lot of the groups that I work with a lot of the people that I work with are different like puzzle pieces," Garces said. "Everyone has



Photo Courtesy of Social Artistry

Social Artistry supported Cross Street Chicken and Beer in the Convoy District for the first-ever live mural reveal in the neighborhood.

their own talents and skills and things that they're amazing at, but the way that we actually make like...a beautiful picture together is by connecting more and more of those pieces."

Garces is also well connected in the San Diego community as president of the National Association of Asian American Professionals - San Diego and with the San Diego Asian Pacific Islander (API) Coalition she's helped reach out in solidarity and to support Asian and Pacific Islander-owned small businesses experiencing not only financial challenges but discrimination due to the pandemic.

"It's important that we support them because, you know ... discriminating against our hard-working Asian and Pacific Islander business owners, is a misguided way to put your emotions," Garces said. ■

Social Artistry



FOUNDED: 2020

CEO: Lauren Balcita Garces

HEADQUARTERS: Based in San Diego | Event experience in San Francisco and New York

BUSINESS: Social Artistry focuses on creating sustainable economic and cultural impact with community leaders and organizations through events.

EMPLOYEES: 1

WEBSITE: socialartistry.co

NOTABLE: Founder Lauren Balcita Garces was named one of the 2021 Women of Distinction for Civic Engagement by Mayor Todd Gloria during Women's History Month.

CONTACT: Lauren@SocialArtistry.co

He Went from Parking Cars to Owning a Law Firm

LEGAL: Attorney Specializes in Immigration Cases

■ By RAY HUARD

Harsh treatment was behind **Peter D. Chu's** decision to become a lawyer specializing in immigration cases.

Chu emigrated from Hong Kong to Hawaii in 1960 when he was 11-years-old with his parents, two brothers and a sister.

As part of the naturalization process, Chu said he had to be fingerprinted.

"When I got my citizenship, I remember the officer treated me very rudely. He slammed my hand down to get the fingerprints," Chu said. "I decided to become an immigration lawyer so I could help other people going through the system so they wouldn't get treated the same way. I can understand them better than other attorneys."

Coming to America

Like many other immigrant families, Chu said his "came to United States for better life opportunities."

His father worked in hotels, eventually becoming manager of a **Hilton** hotel. His mother ran a restaurant.

"My dad came to America with \$300 and very little English. When he retired, he ran one of the best hotels in Hawaii and he had lunch with the governor and he knew the senator from Hawaii," Chu said. "Despite when other people say bad things about America, I tell people I've seen it with my own eyes. People have come here with nothing and built a million-dollar business."

As a child, Chu said school was a challenge because school officials didn't know what to do with an English learner.

To teach him English, "they stuck me in third grade even though I was in the sixth



Photo courtesy of Law Offices of Peter D. Chu

Peter D. Chu, Founder and Owner, Lillian Chu and Hai G. Huynh specialize in immigration law with the Law Offices of Peter D. Chu.

grade," Chu said. "I had to sit in little chairs with the third graders."

Opening a Practice

Chu's earlier decision to become a lawyer was cemented when he worked as a valet at a Honolulu hotel while in college, parking the cars of lawyers and other professionals.

"I wanted to be one of them rather than the guy that was parking cars," Chu said. "I could have parked cars for the rest of my life. It was a great job really. It paid really well."

After earning a bachelor's degree from the **University of Hawaii**, Chu went to **California Western School of Law** in San Diego, earning his law degree in 1981.

"I wanted a place that was warm, like Hawaii. I didn't want to go to a big city like L.A. or San Francisco. California Western had a lot of students from Hawaii at the time," Chu said.

Chu opened his practice in 1982 in a Kearny Mesa office building on Convoy Street and never left.

"I've been in the same shopping center for the last 40 years," Chu said. "People know where I am. It's easy to get to."

The supervising attorney in his law firm is **Hai Huynh**, whose family fled Viet Nam among the so-called boat people.

"We all have a similar background. We all came as immigrants, except my daughter,

who was born here. She's a fortunate one," Chu said.

Daughter Lillian is a lawyer in Chu's office. Chu said his two other daughters also worked as lawyers in his office for a time but left to raise families.

Understanding to Come

Chu is president of the **Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of San Diego**, which owns a downtown clubhouse and a 44-unit affordable apartment complex for seniors. He said that the recent attacks on Asian-Americans as some blame China for the COVID-19 pandemic are dismaying but temporary.

He also is a former director of the **San Diego Opera** and a former director of the **Asian American Repertory Theater**.

"Sooner or later, people understand, China had nothing to do with it," Chu said. "I tell everyone, just put your heads down and America is the land of opportunity. I come across so many people in my office that came to America with nothing and because they were smart enough to work hard, they made something of themselves." ■

Law Offices of Peter D. Chu



FOUNDED: 1982

FOUNDER/OWNER: Peter D. Chu

HEADQUARTERS: Kearny Mesa

BUSINESS: Law firm

NOTABLE: Hong Kong immigrant Peter Chu went from parking cars to establishing his own law firm.

WEBSITE: www.peterchu.com

CONTACT: 858-268-8823

Using Creativity and Code to Amplify Stories

TECH: Catherine Eng Designs Programs for People to Learn and Connect

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

As a kid, **Catherine Eng** dreamed of being an artist. Her creative curiosity drove her to teach herself coding and inspired her to share this skill with students through her educational STEM program, **Design Code Build**.

Her latest venture is an app called **OurWorlds, Inc.** which seeks to share stories of Native American tribal leaders through an augmented and virtual reality platform.

Looking back on her career thus far, Eng has managed to blend her creative and technical skills to empower others to design platforms and share stories that enable people to connect.

Design Code Build

Eng studied film and fine arts at **The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art** in Manhattan, and shortly thereafter she worked on some of the very first websites on the internet.

Throughout her career she has designed and developed popular apps and websites for entertainment brands such as **HBO, Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, Sony Music, Mattel, Tiger Beat Magazine** and **Next Model Management** to name a few.

Along the way, Eng realized that coding was just an extension of her craft as a designer — she read manuals and Googled everything to better understand her design limitations and tools.

“Really the way I learned inspired me to open Design Code Build because I realized it was possible that like really anyone can learn,” Eng said. “If you have something that you’re really passionate about making...you’ll find a way.”

Originally from New York, Eng came to San Diego to be closer to her husband’s family and in 2015 she co-founded Design Code Build. Part of her mission is to



Students can learn how to use Javascript, HTML/PHP and CSS in a project that teaches them how to code their own Instagram.

Photo Courtesy of Catherine Eng

expand opportunities for girls to get involved in computer science.

“It bothered me that like there was this whole game culture around like boys, you know like gaming culture and the girls felt excluded from programming,” Eng said.

Over the years, she has partnered



Catherine Eng
Founder
Design Code Build,
OurWorlds, Inc.

with local organizations such as **Girl Scouts of San Diego** to provide STEM programs, summer camps and hackathons for K-12 students.

OurWorlds

It was through her work with Design Code Build that Eng connected with OurWorlds co-founder, **Kilma S. Lattin**, whose son was participating in a coding summer camp. Together, Eng and Lattin, who is an active member of the **Pala Band of Mission Indians**, started working on the idea in 2017, as a way of amplifying the voices of Native American stories.

There are 18 Native American Tribes in San Diego County — more than in any other county in the United States, according to the **University of San Diego**. Eng said one of the key elements of the OurWorlds platform is to illustrate how the land informs the story of each unique tribe.

“One very important thing to me is to be able to empower Native American...stakeholders to be able to tell their own stories and tell their own histories,” Eng said of the integral nature of oral tradition in Native American narratives.

Interviews with tribal leaders were filmed using volumetric video that captures three-dimensional space and will translate to an immersive viewing experience. For example, people can learn the history of the Kumeyaay people who originally stewarded the coastal land we now call La Jolla.

For Eng, it was especially important that the design respectfully illustrates the aesthetic of these visual stories and connects with the audience. The app launched its beta testing in April and currently features stories from seven locations across the globe from California to France, with plans to expand. ■

Design Code Build



FOUNDED: 2015

FOUNDER: Catherine Eng

HEADQUARTERS: Downtown San Diego

BUSINESS: Coding academy for K-12 students that teaches digital media and STEM skills from a project-based perspective.

EMPLOYEES: Seasonal, between 5-10

WEBSITE: designcodebuild.com

NOTABLE: Overall, DesignCodeBuild has impacted over 1,000 students, through work with San Diego Unified, UCSD, San Diego French American School and Girl Scouts San Diego.

CONTACT: catherine.eng@designcodebuild.com

The Vision Endures at Convoy Street’s Dumpling Inn

RESTAURANTS: Vietnam, China, Kentucky, O.C. All Make Their Mark on Eatery

■ By BRAD GRAVES

It’s been quite a run, the last six years at **Dumpling Inn & Shanghai Saloon**.

Founded in 1994, the business occupied a small storefront in a Convoy Street strip center, keeping six tables well occupied.

Six years ago the business owners had the chance to become the center’s anchor tenant. They decorated the new space — formerly occupied by a grocery store — with sidewalk café touches and put in an extensive bar. Five years ago, **Sandy Vuong Tobin** and her family bought the business. The stretch of Convoy grew more trendy, then COVID hit. Like its neighbors, Dumpling Inn set up tables under tents in its parking lot.

Today Vuong Tobin is talking recovery, and the variables that go into making a restaurant turn a profit. She is seated at a big table in the saloon part of the restaurant, unused as it is noontime. She has room for 360 customers but, for now, can only operate at 50% capacity. One of her greatest needs at the moment, she said, is staff.

“We’re fortunate to have the team we have,” she said, adding that it is “all hands on deck” as Convoy Street shakes off the

COVID economy. It’s not unusual to find her running food out to tables or serving as hostess.

She wasn’t always doing this.

Buying Into the Vision

Vuong Tobin studied psychology and human behavior at the **University of California, Irvine** with a minor in management. Restaurants had always been a family business, but Vuong Tobin said she had a “comfortable career” doing marketing for a dental corporation in Orange County.

It was a different road from the one her father took. **Phat Vuong** emigrated from Vietnam in 1980 and then worked his way up from dishwasher to head chef at a restaurant at the then-new Horton Plaza shopping center. Today he runs his own small restaurant on El Cajon Boulevard.

Vuong Tobin recalled the day her father



Sandy Vuong Tobin
Owner-Operator
Dumpling Inn &
Shanghai Saloon

asked if she wanted to go into business for herself. Her initial answer was no. Then she learned of the vision for Dumpling Inn.

She grins behind her mask and looks around. The place is clean and bright, but there are no white tablecloths. This is a place where you can dress up or come as you are. You can bring your grandmother here. “It’s very traditional and nontraditional,” she said. “It’s comfortable, organic, fun.”

Kentucky and Convoy

So Vuong Tobin traded her office job for 12-hour days, running a San Diego restaurant with her sister **Pricilla Vuong**. The common denominator with both jobs is work with people, which Vuong Tobin relishes. “I miss the 8 to 5, but there is the same human interaction.”

The restaurant business has also offered opportunities not available to a marketing person with an 8-to-5 job. Prior to COVID, the Vuongs were able to travel to Kentucky to produce special editions of **Maker’s Mark** bourbon, selecting the particular wood which would give the finished product its unique flavor.

In addition, there is the unique feel of

Convoy Street. The neighborhood is “a super fun area,” Vuong Tobin said, full of family businesses run by people in their mid-30s. Convoy Street attracts a young crowd, she added. The area has not undergone a gentrification but rather a revitalization.

Dumpling Inn is now open for indoor dining. Vuong Tobin said she is hopeful for the business when she sees former customers return, and when she sees the attitude of her staff.

“I have an amazing team,” she said. “When I look at them, it keeps me going.” ■

Dumpling Inn & Shanghai Saloon



FOUNDED: 1994

OWNER-OPERATOR: Sandy Vuong Tobin

ADDRESS: 4625 Convoy St.

BUSINESS: Restaurant and bar

EMPLOYEES: 47 pre-COVID, 40 today

WEBSITE: www.dumplinginn.com

NOTABLE: Sandy Vuong Tobin’s father, Phat Vuong, runs the 10-table Minh Ky restaurant on El Cajon Boulevard

CONTACT: (858) 268-9638

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ASIAN
PACIFIC ISLANDER
BUSINESSES
of the year **AWARDS 2021**

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In honor of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, The San Diego Business Journal and Asian Business Association San Diego is proud to present Asian Pacific Islander Businesses of the Year Awards and a panel discussion on celebrating, uniting and creating change in the Asian community.

Virtual event

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Thursday May 20, 2021
2pm - 3:30 pm

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