The San Diego Business Journal continues to celebrate Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in collaboration with the Asian Business Association San Diego (ABASD). We are sharing stories of Asian and Pacific Islander businesses in San Diego County.

Business owners will be celebrated on Thursday, May 20, when the San Diego Business Journal and the ABASD host the 2021 Asian/Pacific Islander Businesses of the Year Awards. The ceremony will include a virtual panel discussion on Access to Capital for Asian and Pacific Islander Small Businesses. Panelists will include: Javier Iglesias, Sr. Vice President & Business Banking Market Leader of US Bank; Deep Lam, Sr. Vice President, Treasury Management Consultant of Wells Fargo; and Rob Disotell, Chief Lending Officer of California Coast Credit Union.

Award categories featured at the virtual event are: Community Leadership, Philanthropic Leadership, Nonprofit Partner of the Year, Small Business of the Year, Business of the Year, Corporate Partner of the Year, Bridge Builder of the Year, and ABASD Volunteer of the Year.

We also want to also thank our sponsors: Wells Fargo, U.S. Bank, California Coast Credit Union, AT&T, Proven Recruiting, Cox Communications, Sharp Health Plan, and Union Bank.

As we celebrate this month, we hope you enjoy this second week of inspirational stories and look forward to the awards program on May 20. To register, go to sdbj.com/bizevents.
Free Virtual Event

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

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 Access to Capital for Asian and Pacific Islander Small Businesses in the San Diego region.

Register@sdbj.com/bizevents
Panel discussion on Access to Capital for Asian and Pacific Islander Small Businesses in San Diego

MODERATOR

Jason Paguio
President & CEO
Asian Business Association San Diego

Javier Iglesias
Senior Vice President
Business Banking Market Leader
U.S. Bank

Deep Lam
Senior Vice President
Treasury Management Consultant
Wells Fargo Bank

Rob Disotell
Chief Lending Officer
California Coast Credit Union

PANELISTS

Javier Iglesias is a Senior Vice President, and the Business Banking Market Leader for the San Diego market. He has been with U.S. Bank since 2012, and his banking career began during college in 1993. Javier is responsible for leading the Business Banking teams and executing an effective strategy to acquire, service and deepen business banking relationships in the market. Prior to his arrival at U.S. Bank, Javier worked for two other large commercial banks in the San Diego Market in a variety of production and leadership roles in the Business Banking segment.

Deep Lam is currently a Senior Treasury Management Consultant with Wells Fargo Bank in San Diego. She has been with the bank for 12 years and in her current position since 2017. She consults with clients on leveraging technology for business operations. Prior to her current role, Deep was a Business Development Consultant for over 9 years serving the San Diego North County Market.

Rob Disotell is Chief Lending Officer at California Coast Credit Union, which was founded in 1929 and is the longest serving financial institution in San Diego with $3 billion in assets and over 200,000 members. Rob brings over four decades of experience in financial services, including over 30 years with a state chartered community commercial bank in the Seattle/Puget Sound region, the last 12 years as Chief Credit Officer. His primary focus has been on Commercial Real Estate (CRE) and Commercial and Industrial (C&I) asset based lending to small businesses. He has been responsible for all areas of lending, portfolio risk management practices, and lending policies and procedures.
Local Architect Says He is Living the American Dream

**ARCHITECTURE:** International Firm Known for Striking and Prominent Buildings

While in high school, Joseph Wong helped out in his parents’ restaurant with little idea of what he wanted to do with his life.

“I had a very good drafting teacher at San Diego High School,” Wong said — William Clifford.

“He asked me, ‘Joseph, are you planning to attend college?’ I said, ‘yeah, I will.’ He suggested, ‘What about being an architect?’ It was a little light bulb. I went to the library and looked it up, what is architecture and what is an architect? That was the turning point,” Wong said. “I am very grateful for his teaching and encouragement.”

Wong went on to earn a bachelor’s and master’s degree in architecture from the University of California Berkeley and a master’s degree in landscape architecture from Harvard University.

His firm, Joseph Wong Design Associates, is internationally known for its work and has designed some of the most striking and prominent buildings in San Diego County. They include Alexan Little Italy, St. Teresa of Calcutta – the affordable apartment tower under construction in East Village by Father Joe’s Villages – Palisade at UTC, Broadway Block in East Village, Hilton San Diego Bayfront Hotel, and Alila Marea Beach Resort Encinitas.

“The week we arrived, I remember we all started working at a Chinese restaurant,” Wong said.

His family came from Tunjin, the fourth largest city in China where Wong was born. His parents fled to Hong Kong with a goal of moving to the U.S. His grandfather, who lived in Chicago, sponsored the family’s move to this country.

Ten years later, Wong opened his architectural practice and worked on small downtown projects at a time when downtown San Diego was a place to avoid at night.

“Starting pretty early. We were doing residential housing. That’s always my interest,” Wong said. “As a team, we really like to see how we contribute our efforts finding projects that will improve the urban environment and make a better place for people.”

**Creating Beauty**

Wong said he broke into the international market in the 1990s when he won a competition to design an Intercontinental Hotel in Shanghai, China—a competition he didn’t expect to win.

Working in China had long been an ambition of his.

“Even when I attended my graduate school and had my practice, I never would have thought that I would design a project in the place where I was born,” Wong said.

Among the projects that Wong listed as his most notable were St. Teresa of Calcutta that will provide housing for the homeless and the Encinitas Beach Resort that caters to people at the opposite end of the economic spectrum.

Wong said the Encinitas Beach Resort is among his favorite projects partly because it was so long in reaching fruition.

“We had worked on this project 20 years ago. Twenty years later, we got it built. It’s just a beautiful site. We’re excited to see the project completed,” Wong said.

Wong said St. Teresa’s and other projects he’s done for Father Joe’s Villages “really humbled me.”

“Those kind of social projects, they really create a better and healthier community for the present and also for future generations,” Wong said. “We have a responsibility to create beauty that inspires social conscience and engages the community and strengthens our environment.”

**R3fresh Finds its Niche on Convoy Street**

**RESTAURANTS:** Owner-operator Joe Kao Chooses Juice Over Boba

Joe Kao was getting things done starting his business, a cafe on Convoy Street in Kearny Mesa, when he ran into a snap.

The entrepreneur, now 26, needed someone to guarantee the lease on his new space — a former cell phone store with a brilliant purple wall. So he called his mother, who at the time was in Taiwan.

He remembers his mother’s voice over the phone: “You’re doing what?”

It all ended well. Kao laid out his business plan for his mother, and she ended up putting her name on the lease. She also put in some money to get the business up and running, and became Kao’s business partner.

Today R3fresh Superfood Cafe & Juice Bar is embarking on its fifth year in business. Kao said the business has roughly one half million dollars in yearly revenue.

When COVID hit, Kao made the decision to stay open, and offer take-out only. It was the right move, he said. Revenue declined but it was better than outright closure. Now, he said, he is considering outdoor seating for the store.

The business get its share of regulars from the surrounding auto dealers and corporate offices in Kearny Mesa.

Looking beyond COVID, Kao is thinking about expanding R3fresh some more. He said he wants to avoid trendy areas such as downtown and North Park, and is looking north, considering small commercial spaces in communities such as Mira Mesa, Del Mar, Carlsbad and San Clemente.
Nominate your IT Leader for San Diego’s most prestigious technology award.

The Top Tech Awards honor the best of the best among technology leaders in the San Diego Region. If you think I.T. leader deserves recognition, nominate them today.

www.TopTechAwards.com

TOP TECH AWARDS 2021
Sept. 16
4-5pm
Proven Recruiting Helps Cos. Find Needed Talent

**SERVICES:** Firm Aims to Grow Business to $50 Million

**Leadership**
Prior to Proven Recruiting, Song started his career at Kforce, one of the largest professional staffing companies in the world. He spent more than 10 years leading an office that generated more than $40 million in revenue and managed over 70 staffers.

Song’s roles prior to recruiting included being a waiter, cashier, hotel maid, party planner, admin assistant, HR systems analyst for the White House Communications Agency. Losner’s staffing industry experience spans 32 years. He ran his own recruiting business in London between 1988 and 1996. Ingram was a group president for Kforce. He is active in the community and is involved with several local charities and non-profit groups.

**Over the last decade, Proven Recruiting has grown from a seven person team to a 150-person organization.**

Best Places to Work
The company has been named one of San Diego’s best places to work five consecutive years in a row. Although many of its events are held virtually due to the pandemic, Song said his team continues to invest in the human aspect of the business, adding that it holds weekly of virtual team get-togethers as well as a book club.

“We host a book club, three days a week, every single week,” said Song. “During the pandemic, we started our Un-plugged series. Where we highlight one person every other week and the entire company sit down and has the opportunity ask them about their lives, their upbringing, their religion, and all the stuff that is sort of taboo.”

In 2014 after several years working for a local geotechnical engineering firm, Liang, along with business partner Joon Lee, opened Common Theory Public House, located on Convoy Street. In 2018, he simultaneously launched Realm of the 52 Remedies, a speakeasy located right next door to Common, and Woomiok, an authentic Korean bone broth place also in Kearny Mesa, the Asian food hub of San Diego.

In 2019, pre-COVID-19, Liang had grown the revenue of his collective businesses, under parent companies JCL Investment (Common Theory and Realm) and LNA Restaurant Group (Woomiok), to roughly $35 million, he says. These days, the eateries are conducting about 75% of pre-pandemic sales numbers, conservatively.
Recognizing extraordinary efforts

Achieving great things in any community takes courage, vision, and tremendous effort. What each of us does can make life better for everyone.

We proudly celebrate the great achievements of all the Asian Pacific Islander Business Award nominees.
Celebrating Asian and Pacific Islander Entrepreneurs

Turning Tough Challenges into Success

**RESTAURANTS:** Tofu House Grows During Pandemic and Plans to Franchise

**By NATALLIE ROCHA**

Joonsok Kim, said he couldn’t sleep at all the day it was announced that restaurants had to stop serving food indoors due to the coronavirus pandemic. The owner of Tofu House, a casual restaurant serving tofu soup and hot-stone Korean barbecue, said “it was a nightmare for me.”

These days, many of the hot-pots are served outdoors under white canopy tents and lit up by strings of light bulbs in the parking spots in front of Tofu House — a move that turned the nightmare into a spotlight on his business.

“So, I was thinking overnight and I woke up at 6:30 in the morning to go to Costco Business Center and pick up the chairs and tents,” Kim said. “When I set it up, the tent first in Convoy Street, I was thinking for myself, ‘Oh my god, am I crazy in this hot day in July? or what am I doing right now? Am I stupid? No one starts to tent, why only me?”

Kim was one of the first restaurants to implement a pandemic, outdoor dining model and the fast setup worked in his favor. Former Mayor Kevin Faulconer applauded Tofu House as a model for other restaurants.

Like many other restaurants making it through the pandemic, Tofu House had a reduction in staff, however, last April Kim experienced a 10 percent increase in business from 2019, which he attributes to customers liking Tofu House and wanting to “come back as soon as they can.”

Not Giving Up

Originally from Seoul, Korea Kim came to San Diego at the age of 17 and stayed with his aunt and uncle in El Cajon. He attended Grossmont College and transferred to San Diego State University where he studied business management.

As a kid, Kim knew he wanted to own his own business and after earning his degree, he worked three jobs to save money and make that a reality. He recalled working from 5 a.m. to 3 a.m. delivering for a dry-cleaning business, vacuuming at a car wash and cleaning at a hotel kitchen.

In three years, he had enough money to start his business and with the help of three friends from South Korea who knew how to cook and needed work they started experimenting with recipes from his one bedroom, one bathroom apartment in La Mesa.

“We were using the bathroom for washing all the vegetables and, you know, make our kimchi and a lot of a recipe, we need a bigger kitchen to exercise but we didn’t have enough space so we were using one of the bedrooms in my apartment,” Kim said.

He said they cleaned the bathtub very well where they made large jars of kimchi, and chucked at the memory. Before Kim opened his restaurant, he tested the flavors of their food by serving about 600 to 1,000 people at their local Korean church.

Growing the Business

When he opened his first restaurant in 1998 at the age of 23, Kim said it was well-received because people liked the healthy tofu dishes. One of their most popular dishes is the bold tofu chef’s special, a soup with a variety of seafood, mushrooms and kimchi served to customers in a pot that reaches over 500 degrees Fahrenheit.

One of Kim’s goals is to be the In-N-Out Burger of Korean cuisine. Inspired by In-N-Out’s business model, every year Kim is narrowing down the Tofu House menu until it reaches nine, stand-out dishes.

He added that this July, Tofu House will open its third location and first franchise a minute away from the SDSU campus with the hopes of introducing his Korean food worldwide.

**Tofu House**

**FOUNDED:** 1998
**OWNER:** Joonsok Kim
**LOCATIONS:** Kearny Mesa, Mira Mesa
**BUSINESS:** Restaurant serving healthy tofu soup and authentic Korean cuisine
**EMPLOYEES:** 26 pre-COVID, 12 today
**WEBSITE:** www.ustofuhouse.com
**NOTABLE:** Tofu House was recognized by former Mayor Kevin Faulconer for their model of outdoor dining during the pandemic.
**CONTACT:** ustofuhouse@gmail.com

---

Boba Bar and Desserts Serves Internationally Influenced Treats

**FOOD:** Tiffany Tran Turned Her Love of Bubble Tea into a Business

**By NATALLIE ROCHA**

Behind each sweet treat served at Boba Bar and Desserts is inspiration from shop owner, Tiffany Tran’s travels throughout Asia. Before opening her first Boba Bar inside Zion Market, Tran said she didn’t have any boba experience, but she always loved boba.

Boba, or bubble tea, are little pearls made of tapioca and cooked up and served outdoors under white canopy tents and lit up by strings of light bulbs in the parking spots in front nestled in the back corner of a strip-mall on Convoy Street.

“We cook it up for our shop and we cook the boba like every two hours to have it fresh,” Tran said. “We coat it in honey and brown sugar, to make it a little bit sweet. And I would describe it kind of like a gummy bear texture. So, it’s chewy and it goes on the bottom of your drink.”

Tran said they import their boba from Taiwan and as of recent, there has been a national boba shortage which has also impacted her shop’s suppliers. Despite this supply chain challenge and not being able to travel for the past year, Tran said the shop has stayed open during the pandemic to serve its customers.

Through it all, Tran said people have been grateful that their shop has been open and some of their customers have been coming consistently for the past five years. She runs the Convoy location, while her husband mainly runs the National City shop and her dad operates the original location at Zion Market.

**Family Business**

Tran spent part of her childhood in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and then from the age of 9 grew up in San Diego. She continued to spend her summers in Vietnam, where her dad owned restaurants and as a kid, she fantasized about opening her own cafe.

She earned her degree in Behavioral Neuroscience from the University of San Diego, and after graduation, Tran opened Boba Bar at the age of 21.

“We just happened to open the boba shop right after I graduated because I didn’t apply to any like pharmacy or optometry school yet, that is what I was planning to do, but I decided to not do it and then try out the boba business and then I really liked it,” Tran said.

It was her dad’s idea to start the first one inside of Zion Market and since then they have grown the business to approximately 30 employees across three locations.

**Fresh Ingredients**

One of the things that makes Boba Bar stand out among other bubble tea shops, is the commitment to fresh ingredients for authentic flavors, said Tran. For instance, every day, her dad cuts about 80 percent of the fruit by hand.

In addition to the boba they import from Taiwan, Tran said they cook their own brown sugar for the popular Brown Sugar Milk tea, which is something she said not a lot of shops can say they do.

One example of Tran making a spin on an Asian dessert is Boba Bar’s “puffles” — an Instagram-worthy treat with inspiration from Chinese waffles. The soft waffles almost look like giant bubble wrap around soft and fluffy custard and a sprinkling of colorful toppings.

“We try to make it look really pretty, except now that it’s COVID, everything is a to-go order, so it’s not as pretty, but it’s still good to-go in a cup — we still try to make it look pretty and then decorate it,” Tran said. “You know how some places, the food looks really good, but then it doesn’t taste that good. We try to make it look good and taste good.”

**Boba Bar and Desserts**

**FOUNDED:** 2016
**OWNER:** Tiffany Tran
**LOCATIONS:** Kearny Mesa, National City
**BUSINESS:** Boba Bar and Desserts serves up bubble tea, acai bowls and soft serve treats with a soft waffle cone called “puffles.”
**EMPLOYEES:** About 30 employees
**INSTAGRAM:** @bobabarsd
**NOTABLE:** Boba Bar imports their boba from Taiwan and cooks their own brown sugar in house for their Brown Sugar Milk Tea.
**CONTACT:** bobabarsd@gmail.com
Asian Business Association San Diego represents the interests of more than 30,000 Asian-owned businesses countywide.

50K+ PEOPLE
Employed by Asian-owned businesses in San Diego County

$4+ BILLION
Annual gross sales generated by Asian-owned businesses in San Diego County

$1+ BILLION
Annual payroll generated by Asian-owned businesses in San Diego County

Thank You to our Sponsors

ABASD Triple Diamond Sponsors

T Mobile • WELLS FARGO • AT&T

ABASD Double Diamond Sponsors

ABASD Diamond Sponsors

ABASD Corporate Platinum Sponsors

JOIN THE ASIAN BUSINESS ASSOCIATION SAN DIEGO TODAY!

Join us in helping San Diego businesses and our communities thrive!

Asian Business Association San Diego
7675 Dagget St, Suite 340
San Diego, CA 92111
abasd.org 858.277.2822