



SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL

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

In Association With



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 are proud to present their 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.

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SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL

ASIAN
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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



Jason Paguio is President and CEO of Asian Business Association San Diego and the Strategic Partnerships Director for the CalAsian Chamber of Commerce. Jason's civic commitments include serving on the City of San Diego Small Business Advisory Board, Board of Directors of the NTC Foundation (Arts District Liberty Station), LEAD San Diego, the San Diego Community Housing Corporation, and an appointment to San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria's Asian-Pacific Islander Advisory Group.

PANELISTS



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



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
Senior Vice President
Treasury Management Consultant
Wells Fargo Bank



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
Chief Lending Officer
California Coast Credit Union



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.

Bennett Peji Puts Community Before Self

NONPROFIT: Leader Advocates for Diversity in San Diego

■ By FRED GRIER

Bennett Peji, has had a career-long focus on innovative design solutions, strategic brand marketing, and sustainable community engagement.

A native of the Philippines raised in Clairemont, Peji's early life is a common story of immigrants. He had little money growing up but plenty of love. Like many working-class families he bounced from apartment to apartment, neighborhood to neighborhood.

In 1987, Peji went on to found **Bennett Peji Design** and has been at the forefront of some important undertakings in the San Diego region.

"I am a passionate advocate for a sustainable organization and community development through innovative thinking and creative design," said Peji. "Across my career, I've had the honor of driving high-performance teams to succeed in mission-critical projects focused on social responsibility, impact investing, and public partnerships."

International Design Expert

Today, Peji is one of San Diego's top creative minds and an expert of civic and culturally minded design, civic engagement and brand consulting. His mantra is "Form follows culture," which he encompasses in the work he does at his firm, by creating branding and spaces that cross cultural divides.



Bennett Peji
Chief Innovation
Officer
Filipino School

In 2003, he was the master planner for a 1-mile stretch of National City that embraced far more than a singular Filipino cultural identity, representing the diversity of over 200 Filipino-American organizations in multi-generational designs along Plaza Boulevard.

In total, he has received over 200 awards for the design and execution of public campaigns. Notable clients include the **City of San Diego**, **Scripps Research**

Institute, **MAAC**, the **San Diego Workforce Partnership** and **Hewlett-Packard**. The firm operated for roughly 27 years before shutting down in 2014.

Peji's career has taken him around the world to lecture in 11 countries and led him to be civically engaged as a board member of **California Humanities**, **La Jolla Playhouse** and **Urban Discovery Academy Foundation**.

"I am an advocate for diversity and inclusion. I'm proud to say that my employees at my own design firm over the years have come from 22 different countries and



Photo Courtesy of The Filipino School.
In August 2020, Mayor of San Diego Todd Gloria visited The Filipino School to talk about voices historically unheard.

have brought their unique cultural perspectives to helping generate truly innovative solutions," said Peji.

Making Impact

In 2014, Peji joined as vice president at the **Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation** for six years. Peji led the winning proposal for \$2.5 million to create the first city-funded, diversity-focused business entrepreneurship center and accelerator in San Diego, called **Connect All @ the Jacobs Center**.

Peji's work is the manifestation of a push to make our economy much more inclusive. "I firmly believe that innovators can come from any neighborhood, even our most underserved and overlooked neighborhoods," he said.

Stepping down last year, he now spends a majority of his time serving as the chief innovation officer of the **Filipino School** and chairman of the board of **California Humanities**. ■

Filipino School The Filipino School

FOUNDED: 2015

CEO: Tony Olaes

BUSINESS: Nonprofit

HEADQUARTERS: Miramar

TEAM: 17

WEBSITE: www.thefilipinoschool.com

NOTABLE: Peji is an expert of civic and culturally minded design.

CONTACT: bennett.peji@gmail.com

Advising and Elevating Prestige Brands

MEDIA: Joon S. Han Strategizes How to Bring Businesses into New Media

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

Joon S. Han has made his career out of advising businesses and sharing his insight with others. His newest venture, **Trifecta New Media Group**, launched this year with a goal of advising established brands on how to enter into new platforms from social media to podcasting.

Han has focused this passion for audio into helping companies amplify their voice and he previously hosted a podcast called, "Your Biz Rocks" which breaks down the elements of a successful business.

"Podcasting, if you look at like psychologically or from a marketing perspective has got to be easily one of the most powerful forms of marketing out there because it's very intimate," Han said. "Very rarely does anyone listen to something in stereo, other than their own voice...And it's the only form of marketing that is the most subversive because you basically are submitting yourself to it, or holding yourself to it all day while you're doing other things."

Han said he was one of the earliest Asian-American voices to forge a path in podcasting, and he sees this platform as one



Joon S. Han
Strategist,
Co-Founder
Trifecta New Media
Group



Photo Courtesy of Joon S. Han
Joon S. Han is an experienced public speaker on how businesses can expand their brands into new media and has given a talk at TedxSanDiego.

of the many ways his work can positively impact others.

Learning from Family

For Han, he credits his two sets of parents for teaching him everything he knows about entrepreneurship. Growing up, his family moved around the Los Angeles area and at the time, he didn't realize it was because they were avoiding Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS).

"But we moved around all the time because we were running — running from INS

and we lived in the same city, Cerritos for like three years," Han said. "I remember thinking going into fifth grade like, 'wow this is the longest you've ever lived in one place,' and that was the year that we got caught and deported."

Han was living in rural Korea with his family before he and his brother came back to the United States to live with complete strangers, a couple in San Clemente who he called his "white parents."

"The hustle of my parents working five jobs between the two of them you know all this

kind of stuff and it was very entrepreneurial, but lower wage kind of stuff, and then when we moved back to the United States, my brother and I were dropped in the lap of luxury in San Clemente," Han said.

Han described the contrast of his upbringing in working class, immigrant communities to living in an upper class, mostly white area in Orange County and how that shaped his worldview as a person.

"I learned a lot about entrepreneurship from both sets of parents," Han said. "There's no way I'd be as successful as I am right now if I didn't have my white parents, because they just taught me some things about, you know I think sociologists call it a 'hidden curriculum.' It's not taught in school, you know, and you can get an MBA and still not learn most of this." ■

Trifecta New Media Group



FOUNDED: 2021

CO-FOUNDERS: Joon S. Han, Andre K. Kwan and Bernard Mauricia

HEADQUARTERS: San Diego

BUSINESS: New media development and advisory agency focused on serving the unique, holistic and exacting standards of prestige and legacy brands.

EMPLOYEES: 3

NOTABLE: Han is the author of a book called "Get Ahead by Giving Back: Hacking Business Success With Generosity" and he has been a TEDxSanDiego speaker.

CONTACT: media@trifectanewmedia.com

Founder Shares Family's Herbal Formulas

MANUFACTURING: JBK Wellness Labs Formulates Products for Other Brands

■ By MARIEL CONCEPCION

JBK Wellness Labs is rooted in family tradition.

Founded by Dr. **Jenelle Kim** and husband **Craig Nandoo**, **JBK Wellness Labs** is a formulator and manufacturer contracted by high-end luxury topical, beauty and dietary supplements companies to create products for them. Its formulas consist of traditional East Asian herbs and medicines that have been passed down from generation to generation within her Korean family, she said.

These days, **JBK**

Wellness Labs are carried in high-end retailers and mainstream locations like **Nordstrom**, **Urban Outfitters**, **Whole Foods**, **Walmart**, **Target**, **Bergdorf Goodman**, the **Ritz Carlton**, the **Four Seasons** and **Mardarin Oriental**, among

others. The company's revenue was between \$8 million and \$12 million in 2018, between \$10 million and \$15 million in 2019, and is projected to grow roughly 20% in 2021, according to the company.

"I come from a long lineage of herbalists and doctors and studied traditional oriental medicine," said Kim. "I'm the ninth generation and the first woman in my lineage to be guardian of my family's formulas."



Dr. Jenelle Kim
Founder
JBK Wellness Labs



Photo Courtesy of JBK Wellness Labs

JBK Wellness Labs works with about 75 brands, according to the company. It is projecting to grow its revenue by 20% in 2021.

Bi Bong Formulas

Kim is the holder of what is known as Bi Bong formulas, or secret formulas. A Bi Bong formula represents the "pinnacle in herbal formulation", she said, meaning, when formulas are properly balanced between its components, it is possible to create properties that are not evident in the individual herbs themselves.

"Great masters of herbology have spent lifetimes seeking the right methods of preparation, ratios and results, which is why Bi Bong formulas are truly rare," reads the **JBK Wellness** site. "When this perfect balance of synergy is brought to a formula,

it becomes transformative in its power."

Because she knew she wanted to share these formulas with the world, Kim consulted with her family who gave her their blessings.

75 High-End Brands

Today, **JBK Wellness Labs** works with about 75 high-end brands, formulating and manufacturing roughly five products for each, said Nandoo. In terms of formulas, the company has a couple hundred variations, he said, adding that customers can place orders for between 5,000 and 10,000 SKUs depending on the product.

"We are constantly developing new products," said Nandoo. "Pre-pandemic, our growth was 800% year-over-year. I think we will reach those numbers again very soon."

The Start

After being asked by others in the skincare industry how they could also get natural, herbal formulations in their product line, King and Nandoo launched the **JBK Wellness Labs** in 2012. Kim, formerly the primary formulator for a skincare company, and Nandoo, then the chief operating officer for a company in the spa industry, decided to leave their corporate jobs and use their backgrounds and expertise to manufacture products for other brands.

JBK Wellness sources its ingredients from all over the world, as long as it is the highest quality ingredient, said Kim. The self-funded brand, with 17 employees locally, manufacturers, packages and distributes from its Miramar lab. It has two other offices, in Orange County and in Portugal. ■

JBK Wellness Labs



FOUNDED: 2012

FOUNDER: Dr. Jenelle Kim
HEADQUARTERS: Miramar

BUSINESS: cosmetic product formulator and design

REVENUE: \$15M

EMPLOYEES: 17 locally

WEBSITE: www.jbkwellnesslabs.com

NOTABLE: Kim is the first female guardian of her family's herbal formulas.

CONTACT: info@jbkwellnesslabs.com

Yi Chao's Journey Started With a \$500 Loan

TECH: Seatrec at Forefront of Area Blue Technology Cluster

■ By RAY HUARD

Yi Chao came to the United States in 1985 when he was 21-years-old with \$500 of borrowed money in his pocket and a scholarship to graduate school at **Princeton University**.

His introduction to the U.S. was a stroll down New York City's 42nd Street – notorious at the time for its collection of adult book stores, strip clubs and porno theaters.

"It wasn't the city I read about," Chao said.

He was looking for an inexpensive hotel to spend the night before catching a bus to Princeton after flying to New York with a stopover in San Francisco.

"I remember when I landed at JFK and even transferring in San Francisco, it was really hard to ask questions in the airport and even navigate," Chao said. "My English was still terrible."

Seatrec

In 2012, Chao formed his own company in Pasadena, **Seatrec**, and in March, moved the company to Vista.

Seatrec is on the forefront of a growing blue technology cluster in San Diego County, companies whose business is related to



Yi Chao
President and CEO
Seatrec



Photo courtesy of Yi Chao

Thomas Valdez, co-inventor of Seatrec's core technology, with Yi Chao testing a prototype.

ocean technology. **Seatrec** makes devices that use temperature variations in sea water to generate electricity needed to power underwater sensors.

Along the way, Chao earned a doctorate in atmospheric and oceanic sciences from Princeton University and a master's degree in geophysical fluid dynamics from Princeton University.

About half of his classmates wound up coming to America for graduate school because work was hard to find back home for recent college graduates.

Before coming to the U.S., Chao earned a bachelor's degree in atmospheric physics from the University of Science and Technology of China.

It was there that he met his wife, Yuan, who is a professor at the **University California San Diego Medical School** doing research in cancer treatment and drug discovery.

They both came from the same hometown, Shenyang, a city of about 7 million in northeastern China, but never met until college.

Chao's late father was an electrical engineer. His mother is an accountant. She and Chao's two sisters still live in China. One is teacher at a community college and the other is a physician.

Taking a risk

Since as long as he can remember, Chao said he wanted to be a scientist.

Before forming **Seatrec**, Chao held a variety of positions at the **Jet Propulsion Laboratory** at the **California Institute of Technology**, was the principal scientist at **Remote Sensing Solutions, Inc.** and is an adjunct professor at **UCLA**.

He worked on a program to develop satellites that studied the oceans from space.

"After that, I got involved in underwater robots," Chao said.

He formed **Sdeatrec** to commercialize the technology he developed at the **Jet Propulsion Laboratory**. ■

Seatrec



FOUNDED: 2016

PRESIDENT AND CEO: Yi Chao

HEADQUARTERS: Vista

BUSINESS: Blue technology

REVENUE: \$2M

EMPLOYEES: 8

WEBSITE: www.seatrec.com

CONTACT: 1-626-386-5988

Wake Up, Make Ramen, Repeat

RESTAURANTS: Takashi Endo Goes to Great Lengths to Make Fresh Ramen at Menya Ultra

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

Every morning, **Takashi Endo** starts his day no later than 4 a.m. to make home-made ramen noodles. Sometimes he gets to the kitchen at 2 a.m., if it is a busy day and sometimes one of his four sons wakes up early to help him make the noodles. However, the owner of Japanese ramen house, **Menya Ultra**, always insists on making his noodles from scratch daily.

“His kitchen is next door to a fitness center and it opens about the same time at 4 a.m., so they open together,” said Endo’s spokeswoman,

Yoyo Sasaki, who translated from Japanese for him and runs the restaurant’s marketing.

Endo’s attention to detail translates to the bowl and has garnered national recognition — he has won the Tokyo Ramen Festival, the largest ramen event in the world, four years in a row.

He uses a special blend of three flours imported from the Hokkaido region of Japan, a northern island known for its wheat and spent time studying with the wheat farmers on how to make the best noodles. This blend gives Menya Ultra’s hand pulled noodles — which contain no preservatives,



Takashi Endo
Owner
Menya Ultra



Photo Courtesy of Menya Ultra

In March, Menya Ultra opened its third location in Hillcrest — all three of owner Takashi Endo’s U.S. restaurants are in San Diego County.

no GMOs or artificial colors — a distinctive sweet wheat scent, springy and smooth texture that will surprise you, Sasaki said.

Mastering Ramen Noodles

Growing up in Tohoku, Japan, Endo enjoyed cooking and the first dish he learned how to make was tempura around the age of 10. Later, like most 20-year-olds, he mastered the art of making pre-made ramen. Then, it was around this time that his brother returned to their hometown after working at a ramen store in Japan and he taught Endo how to make homemade ramen noodles.

In 1994, he opened his first ramen restaurant called Nishiki in Odate, Aki-ta, Japan and today, he owns eight restaurants in Japan, four in Taiwan and three

in the United States — all in San Diego County.

He came to San Diego to visit a friend and ended up staying because he liked it here and he didn’t find authentic ramen like the kind he made in Japan, said Sasaki.

In 2017, he opened his first Menya Ultra in Clairemont and since then, his stores have had a line out the door. The Japanese word “menya” translates to “noodles” and although there is no word for “ultra” in Japanese, Endo added it to the name because it means better than super, and he wants to be the “ultra noodle house” Sasaki said.

One of the most popular dishes is the classic tonkatsu ramen which features a house made recipe of pork broth, and topped with a slice of pork chashu, bean

sprouts, green onion, wood ear mushroom, roasted sesame seeds and a soft-boiled egg.

Adjusting for the Future

In March, Menya Ultra opened its third location in Hillcrest, and although the past year has presented Endo with challenges, he’s made adjustments to maintain his standard of quality.

Prior to the pandemic, Sasaki said that Endo traveled about 80 times annually for the past five years so he could check in on all of his restaurants and ensure the quality of the ramen was being kept up. He would spend three weeks in San Diego, fly to Japan for two weeks, then to Taiwan for two weeks and repeat the cycle again.

Menya Ultra now offers takeout, delivery and at-home ramen kits, all of which did not exist before the pandemic. ■

Menya Ultra



FOUNDED: 1994

OWNER: Takashi Endo

LOCATIONS: Clairemont, Mira Mesa, Hillcrest; Japan, Taiwan

BUSINESS: Restaurant serving authentic Japanese cuisine such as tonkatsu ramen.

EMPLOYEES: 60

WEBSITE: menya-ultra.com

NOTABLE: From 2010-2013, Endo’s ramen won four first place awards at the Tokyo Ramen Show, the largest ramen event in the world.

CONTACT: info@menya-ultra.com

Sandwich Shop a Crossroads of Cultures Since 1974

RESTAURANTS: Garlic Rolls and Sourdough Bread Meet Southeast Asian Influences

■ By BRAD GRAVES

Framed by an aluminum door frame, **Angela Lopez** serves customers from a table blocking the doorway of **Sandwich Emporium** in Bay Park. From the back of the shop comes the smell of bacon.

The shop’s homey interior is lined with imitation brick and wood paneling. A high shelf on one wall holds antiques and knickknacks — an old time supermarket scale, several signs — but no one can enjoy the interior while COVID is still a concern in the wider community. Chairs are stacked up.

“I feel like I’m waking up from a weird dream,” said Lopez, who owns the business with her husband **Peter Le** and his twin brother **John Le**.

Not long ago, Sandwich Emporium generated about million dollars in revenue, but then COVID came along. The three business partners let leases to other spaces expire in 2020, and reduced the business to one location in a two-story shopping center on Clairemont Drive. Once COVID is over, the three will consider expansion.

Sandwich Emporium was founded in 1974 and has been owned by a succession

of people with strong ties to other countries. Lopez is originally from the Philippines. Peter and John Le were born at Sharp Hospital one year after their family departed Vietnam in a boat.

Childhood Memories

The brothers once lived three miles away. Peter Le recalled his first turkey sandwich at Sandwich Emporium, and what a contrast it was to his mother’s Vietnamese cooking. The dinner table was always the place his family — including the twins and their eight siblings — bonded, Peter Le said. He described his mother as someone who “loves to make people feel happy through food.”

They attended local schools, including University City High School. Peter Le went to study at **Cal State Northridge** while John Le went to **San Francisco State**. Lopez, for her part, lived in New York and Los Angeles and studied at the **Fashion Institute of Technology**.

Peter Le said he had long entertained the idea of working in hospitality. In 2004, the brothers learned the sandwich shop they knew from childhood was for sale. At the time, Peter Le and Lopez were living

in the Los Angeles area, reselling designer clothes and overstock fashion items on **eBay**. The online sales space, however, was growing more crowded. Meanwhile, John Le was laid off from a San Diego job. That, however, turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

The brothers jumped at the chance to buy the shop, helped with financing from their family.

“I rediscovered the place,” Peter Le said. Today it feels like home.

The Saigon Grinder

It’s an extensive menu at Sandwich Emporium. Food mixes the tastes of East and West. The most popular sandwiches include the Saigon grinder, a mash-up of American and Vietnamese tastes, with roast turkey, cucumbers, house Asian coleslaw (which is vinegar-based rather than cream based), house pickled jalapeños, cilantro and mayonnaise on a garlic roll.

A “Pho-wich” is inspired by the Vietnamese soup of the same name, with roast beef, basil, tomato, onion, cucumbers, pickled jalapeños and hoisin mayonnaise on a buttered garlic roll.

Other popular items include the



Angela Lopez
Owner-Operator
Sandwich Emporium



Peter Le
Owner-Operator
Sandwich Emporium

California, the Cali melt with avocado, the bacon clubhouse melt and the Southwest chicken chipotle.

Catering has helped carry the business along. However, orders from tech businesses in Sorrento Valley thinned out when offices closed. In recent months, the business has provided meals for hospital staffers. Online sales have turned into an important channel for the business.

Sandwich Emporium supports the **Asian Business Association of San Diego** and does its best to help out the wider Asian community, Peter Le said.

Happily, the business was able to stay open all through the COVID emergency. “The community has been amazing. We are grateful,” said Lopez. ■

Sandwich Emporium



FOUNDED: 1974

OWNER-OPERATORS: John Le, Peter Le, Angela Lopez

ADDRESS: 3054½ Clairemont Drive

BUSINESS: Sandwich Shop

EMPLOYEES: Five, including the owners

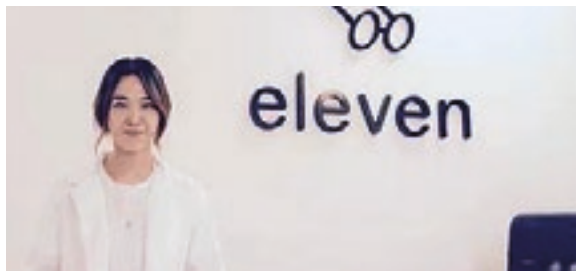
WEBSITE: www.sandwichemporium.com

NOTABLE: After leaving Vietnam in 1975 and living temporarily at a Texas military base, the Le family ended up in San Diego with the help of sponsors from Our Mother of Confidence Catholic Church in University City

CONTACT: (619) 275-1351

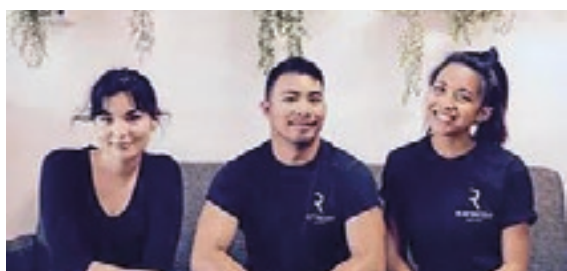


Asian Business Association San Diego represents the interests of more than 30,000 Asian-owned businesses countywide.



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

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