

ABOUT TO BE FAMOUS

Third-Generation Longmonter Anna Nguyen Used Her Hometown Roots to Build *sắp sửa*, Now One of the Most Talked-About Restaurants in the Country

BY KATY IBSEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUDE CAT PRODUCTIONS

Those who were lucky enough to have experienced *sắp sửa* in its infancy will recall picking up Vietnamese takeout under the orange awning in the back alley of the 300 block of Main Street in Longmont.

"The instructions were like, 'Bang really loud on the door,' because we'd both be in the kitchen or in the dish pit. There was nobody other than the two of us," says Anna (McLean) Nguyen, referring to her and her husband Ni's pop-up at Tangerine during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time, the couple could never have predicted that her hometown would serve as the launching point for *sắp sửa*, their celebrated nontraditional Vietnamese restaurant in Denver.

Anna and Ni Nguyen (center), in the dining room of their celebrated Vietnamese restaurant, *sắp sửa*.

The pair, who met in Los Angeles during culinary school, had an ongoing dream of opening their own restaurant while working under the direction of culinary titan Nancy Silverton at her Michelin-starred Italian restaurant in Hollywood, Osteria Mozza.

They were 11 weeks away from opening a new restaurant concept for Silverton when the pandemic hit.

“The situation was inevitable, and what you do with that is really up to you,” says Anna.

They moved to Longmont, Anna’s hometown, where she knew people would be supportive.

“Growing up in Longmont, you were just raised to be a good person,” she says. “You kind of knew everybody, and everybody really had your back.”

Upon their initial return, they filled time by selling pies and baked goods through the holidays. “I knew I’d have enough of a network of family, friends, and people through my parents’ jobs that that would get us through December,” she says. “Then we kind of had to figure out what was next.”

sắp sửa was next.

Ni wanted to create a space that reflected his first-generation Vietnamese American experience.

“He didn’t grow up eating just traditional Vietnamese food, like his parents did. He grew up eating traditional Vietnamese food, In-N-Out, Korean barbecue, Chinese banquets,” says Anna. “He feels strongly that the more people are exposed to the bold flavors of Vietnamese food, the more accepting people become.”

To spread the word, they put together a menu and took it around to businesses downtown that would share them on their social media. Julie Benoit, co-owner of neighboring boutique Maker General, enjoyed the little bursts of activity out back in an otherwise lifeless time.

“We loved this sort of backdoor operation,” she says. “I would park in the back, and I’d see [Anna and Ni] dealing with their food in and out.”

The food was traditional—congee and duck soup—dishes that, according to Anna, made for good takeout. “There wasn’t much like that in Longmont at the time.”

To support the restaurant, Benoit and her business partner, Stephanie Sterling, tapped into their own mission of connecting with the community by hosting pop-ups. Anna and Ni would use the opportunity to sell baked goods and other savory Vietnamese dishes.

“It was just super cool to see someone trying something so terrifying at such a terrifying time,” says Benoit. “Then seeing it succeed.”



“You’re Only Ever About to Be Great”

For years, Anna and Ni had honed the concept of sắp sửa. It would draw from their childhoods, Vietnamese culture, and the influence of other chefs encountered along the way.

“Some points in time it would be like, ‘OK, we’re going to have this very fine-dining spot’ ... and [we’re like,] ‘No, no, no, we’re going to be super traditional,’” says Anna.

While the Longmont pop-up closed in April 2021, their years of planning and dreaming became reality in 2023 when sắp sửa opened in Denver to great anticipation.

Peering over Denver’s City Park, the chic dining room boasts earth tones and textures, a perfectly curated playlist of rap and rock, subtle notes of LA like the portrait of Kobe Bryant, a menu that lays out a playful take on Vietnamese flavors, and a culture that instantly transports diners to the family table of an Asian household.

The experience is both fine dining and not at the same time.

“Sắp sửa means ‘about to be’ or ‘almost’ so the principle has always been: You’re only ever about to be great,” says Anna, referring to the mindfulness of keeping their heads down and chipping away at their dreams. “We try to really stay grounded in that and keep the focus internal. And then if the accolades come, it’s really wonderful.”

The accolades did come, and fast. The restaurant was quickly named one of *Bon Appétit*’s most anticipated openings in the summer of 2023 and later to *Esquire*’s Best New Restaurants in America list in November 2023. After just a year in business, sắp sửa was named a 2024 James Beard Award Semifinalist, Best New Restaurant.

The honors continued when they appeared on the *New York Times* 2024 list of the 50 best restaurants in America, and in early 2025, the couple were named (again) a James Beard Award Semifinalist, Emerging Chef.

This May, Anna and Ni joined friend and chef Kevin Tien, founder of the contemporary Vietnamese restaurant Moon Rabbit in Washington, D.C., at Platform by the James Beard Foundation to kick off Asian American

and Pacific Islander Heritage Month (May). Platform is an educational space dedicated to outstanding culinary-arts programming.

“You figure out pretty fast that the accolades are really awesome. They’re motivating for the staff; it just feels good to be recognized for doing something,” says Anna, who jokes they also have a good PR team. “I think a few of the accolades we have received are because of the culture within the building.”

That culture is one that fosters the contributions of others, as is the case with the trứng và trứng, one of the menu’s most popular dishes, created by former chef-de-cuisine Ben Carolan. Imagine the creamiest scrambled egg punctuated with fish sauce and brown butter served over rice.

The restaurant has participated in Mile High Asian Food Week three times. The Denver-based event celebrates and raises awareness for the various businesses and leaders within the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities by hosting panel discussions on topics surrounding AAPI creatives and their work in and out of the community.

YES, CHEF!

Foodies always want to know where their favorite chefs dine. So, it's no surprise we asked James Beard–nominated chef and former Longmonter Anna Nguyen where she eats—and drinks—when she's in town.

Anna laughs. “As a joke among our [Denver] friends, they call me the Deputy Mayor of Longmont because I will sneak Longmont into any conversation!”

Dry Land Distillers

“We usually carry one of their spirits at a time. I think it's a very proper cocktail. I also love the space. I think the interior design feels kind of West Coast, and the people there are so fantastic.”

Tacos Al Molcajete

“Hands down, my favorite thing to eat in Longmont is tacos at Tacos Al Molcajete. It was an A&W when I was a kid! There's one option called trompa, which I've actually never seen anywhere else, and I've eaten at an obscene amount of fantastic taco stalls and trucks in LA. But it is just snout meat that's been braised, and then they crisp it up on their plancha. That's, I mean, that's the best.”

Rosalee's Pizzeria

“We eat a lot of Rosalee's! Squares—soppressata and basil.”

Wibby Brewing

“We drink a lot of beer at Wibby. My dad and I love Wibby.”



Building the Denver Vietnamese community is an important role of sấp sũa. Anna explains that their long game includes creating a world where children who grow up eating fish sauce—or in Ni's case a fish sauce scrambled-egg sandwich—never see it as something “other than” or contributing to a stinky lunch box, but rather an ingredient widely used and loved.

Foundations of a Chef

A third-generation Longmonter, Anna knew since middle school that she wanted to be a chef. She watched a lot of *Martha Stewart Living*, tested recipes at home, and even wrote a food column and recipes while serving as the coeditor of the *Trojan News* at Longmont High School. Before she could even drive, her parents gifted her with classes at Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts (formerly the Culinary School of the Rockies) in Boulder.

For six weeks Anna attended an all-day Saturday class, learning the essentials of baking. Around the same time, during a birthday celebration for her mother (who died of cancer in October 2024), Anna purchased the *Tartine* cookbook, which many consider to be the first book that illustrated advanced practice in culinary arts.

“That's really what helped me build some of the foundational techniques on my own,” says Anna of the book.

Testing her skill and passion, she entered a baking contest hosted by the Great Frame Up, a gallery and frame shop in downtown Longmont.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRANDED BEET, LDDA, RUDE CAT PRODUCTIONS

“You're only ever about to be great.”

-Anna Nguyen

“I remember I did a white cake with poached pears as the filling and a buttercream and then ... won,” says Anna, still somewhat surprised. She was even featured in the local newspaper. After graduating high school, she enrolled in hospitality management at Colorado State University and got a job behind the counter at the newly opened Little Bird Bakeshop in Fort Collins.

“Amy, the owner, was the only baker at the time ... After a few months of working the counter and just expressing a continual interest in being in the kitchen, she brought me back,” says Anna. “It's really that job that made the difference in my career.”

Little Bird's owner, Amy Corliss, is still in awe of Anna's culinary journey but not surprised by her success.

“She showed great potential in those early days and has demonstrated the tenacity and commitment necessary to succeed in an industry that requires so much,” says Corliss, who still recalls Anna's fennel-ricotta muffin recipe. “The secret to a great pastry is to have a light hand and let the ingredients shine through. She came to the job understanding this and therefore was so easy to guide and was such a joy to mentor.”

Anna was back and forth between Fort Collins and Longmont until she traveled to Europe for a baking internship. By 2013, she returned to the States and enrolled in school at the International Culinary Center in LA.

There she met Ni.

“Ever since we got together, it was this kind of very fast and creative explosion of a relationship,” she says.

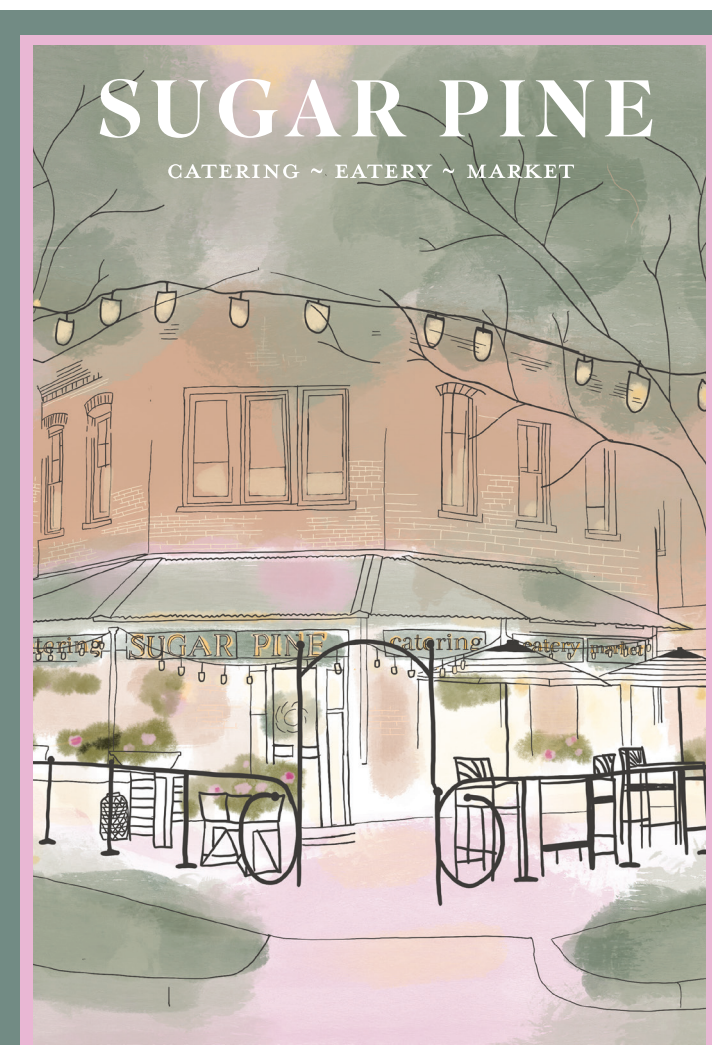
The exposure to Ni's family, as well as the vibrant community of San Jose where they lived after culinary school (the city is known to have one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the U.S.), cemented the cultural interest for Anna. At first, she asked a lot of questions.

“It's easy from the American perspective to think Vietnamese food is all kind of one thing,” she says. “But it's a lot like American food. There are huge regional differences, or there's also just familial differences.”

After getting married, the couple spent their honeymoon in Vietnam and later lived with Ni's parents for over a year where Anna often cooked and ate with them, all culminating into an independent love of Vietnamese cuisine.

“Over time, my understanding of [the food and culture] has deepened,” she says. “Now I feel like I have a decent understanding of it.”

Those watching—and tasting—would agree. **IL**



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