

# ARTS & LIFE

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## Living the good life, and grateful for it

RESTAURATEUR/ARTIST CHINH PHAM fled war-torn Vietnam as a child, and has thrived after making his way in Montreal



Everyone calls him Romeo, and, on the surface, he has lived a charmed, romantic life.

He is the chef/co-owner of Shô-Dan, the popular sushi house on downtown Metcalfe St., which has seen the likes of Angelina Jolie, Catherine Deneuve, Beau Bridges, Britney Spears and Habs bon-vivants Carey Price and P.K. Subban pass through its doors.

He is also an accomplished artist. Dozens of his pastel-tinted abstracts line the walls on both floors of his resto.

Plus, he has just designed a line of jewelry and accessories, Romeo Jade, about to hit the marketplace.

But this Romeo's real name is Chinh Pham, and his early years could hardly be considered charmed or romantic. He was born in Saigon — now Ho Chi Minh City — during the height of the Vietnam War in 1968. And he feels most fortunate that he and his immediate family survived the war when so many other acquaintances didn't.

When Pham was 12, his father arranged that he and two of his brothers hop a boat — though unsure where their journey would take them — to escape the country. Needless to say, it was quite the gamble on the part of their dad.

Many Vietnamese "boat people" had already perished, unable to deal with the raging waters in overcrowded boats not meant to navigate high seas. Others had to contend with pirates.

"But it was still worth the risk for my father to try to get us out to find a better life somewhere, anywhere other than our war-torn city," reflects Pham, 46, in his upstairs office at Shô-Dan.

Fit, ever-fashionable and always smiling, his demeanour doesn't reflect the ordeal he went through as a kid. He doesn't dwell on his past, and



DARIO AYALA/THE GAZETTE

Vietnam-born restaurateur Chinh Pham is also an accomplished artist. "Making food came naturally to me, and it was as much art as my paintings were," said the man who is mostly known as Romeo — a moniker from one of his creations.

few of his co-workers or cronies know his story. Nor is he in denial. He vividly remembers every detail.

"It wasn't the most romantic of beginnings," Pham understates. "The boat we travelled on was really small, and our future seemed about as uncertain then as it was in Saigon. We had no idea whatsoever where we would end up — that is, if we managed to survive the trip at all."

Regardless, his father, a carpenter, feared the worst and spent most of his life's savings to get his three sons on the boat out of the country. Pham and his two siblings had to leave behind another two brothers and six sisters, as well as their mother, because his father figured that the three brothers, the oldest of the boys, would be in best position to survive the journey.

Pham and his two brothers

spent five days drifting at sea. "The sea was really rough, too. We had very little food or water. We had nothing with us — no clothing, no money.

"Although we were very happy to get out of the country, we were also really frightened about what could hap-

*"It still brings me to tears thinking about all those boat people who never had a chance at the good life like me."*

RESTAURATEUR CHINH PHAM

pen to us along the way. Only years later did I hear the stories about how an estimated 2 million people tried to get out of Vietnam between 1975 and 1995, and that more than one-third of the boat people were not lucky in making it and died along the way."

As fate would have it, Pham

and his brothers ended up in the southern part of Thailand and were dispatched to a refugee camp in the country. They spent a year at the refugee camp in the hopes of being adopted through agencies operating in the country.

The brothers applied to various agencies for sponsor-

ship and adoption. The Terre des Hommes adoption group agreed to take them in, but the brothers still weren't sure where they would wind up.

"I could have ended up in Australia or South America, but a family from Montreal took me in and two other families took my other two

brothers," Pham says. "I was happy to be going somewhere, but, frankly, Montreal was as foreign to me as the other places."

Pham spent two years with a couple in Ville Saint-Laurent, but because of a conflict with their son, his social worker had him moved to another family in Verdun for another two years. When he was 17, he was given permission by his social workers to live with his 18-year-old brother, who was working and had his own apartment.

Pham went on to graduate from Westmount High School and Dawson College before earning his bachelor's degree in fine arts from Concordia. While going to school, he worked part-time as a busboy at various restaurants.

Initially, he had his sights set on becoming an art teacher, but was unable to get into the program he wanted. He

was also a keen student of culinary arts, with a particular interest in sushi. So while working on his painting on the side, he set out to become a sushi chef. He got his break when he landed a job as a sous-chef at the Mikado St-Denis.

"Making food came naturally to me, and it was as much art as my paintings were. In sushi, you're also dealing with a lot of colour, and I love creating new sushi dishes."

Pham worked eight years as a chef at Mikado and quickly developed a following among the restaurant's patrons, so taken by his creativity and enthusiasm. One such client, Madonna Bailey, asked if he'd be interested in becoming partners in a new sushi venture.

Pham accepted her offer, and 15 years later, the Shô-Dan chef/co-owner has no regrets.

Nor does his partner or their patrons.

Oh yeah, the Romeo moniker comes not from his conquest of a Juliet, rather from one of his creations — a shrimp tempura roll with blueberries and strawberries — that he named for a regular customer, and the name just stuck.

This Romeo has been happily married to Suzy, a marketing exec, for nearly two decades and they are the parents of a 16-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son — the latter whom the couple adopted from Vietnam through the Terre des Hommes agency.

"I was given a rare opportunity, so I wanted to give back, too.

"Life turned out very well for me," he says softly. "Yet it still brings me to tears thinking about all those boat people who never had a chance at the good life like me. But I decided a long time ago that I would have to put all my energy into focusing on the positive if I was going to survive."

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