

# THAI DANG

|            |                           |
|------------|---------------------------|
| RESTAURANT | <b>HaiSous, Cà Phê Đá</b> |
| LOCATION   | <b>CHICAGO</b>            |



Octopus Salad, \$14,  
Thai Dang, HaiSous,  
Chicago. **RECIPE,**  
[plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com).

by **Liz Grossman**

**This** year, *Forbes* dubbed Chicago's Pilsen, a Mexican neighborhood rich with colorful murals, galleries, and cafés, one of the coolest enclaves in the world. But Thai Dang and his wife/partner, Danielle, weren't trying to start a trend when they opened their Vietnamese restaurant, HaiSous, there last summer; in fact, they were trying to buck it. Their previous restaurant, Embeya, was located in the white-hot West Loop area, and though Dang's fine-dining Southeast Asian food

received accolades while he and Danielle were there (he as chef/co-owner, she as beverage director), the experience also bankrupted the couple.

They were two years in when they suspected the owners of misappropriating funds, and almost two years later, they were both fired. The owners abruptly closed the restaurant in 2016 and skipped town after a federal investigation was opened (they are still on the run), leaving the Dangs out half a million dollars.

"A lot of things go through your mind when you go through something so

hurtful and painful, but then, there's clarity in it all," says Dang, who's had time to reflect on the traumatic experience that ultimately fueled the birth of HaiSous and its adjacent all-day café, Cà Phê Đá. "We wanted to control our destiny. We have no investors; it's just my wife and me," says Dang. "No one's breathing down our neck, no investors eating around the city bragging about their investment and how they're trying to convince their chef to open seven days, and open a patio, and put this or that on the menu. I'm fortunate to be able to rebuild, not just by





MISTEY NGUYEN

**“A LOT OF THINGS GO THROUGH YOUR MIND when you go through something so hurtful and painful, but then, there’s clarity in it all.”**

— Thai Dang

**Q+A**

**What is your favorite ingredient?**

Fish sauce—do you even have to ask? I’ve grown to love fish sauce. I made nuoc mam toi noodles with Laurent Gras at L20. Then when I started cooking my own food, I created some really cool techniques or better yet, improved upon it. Even my own family was like, “Dammmmmmmn, Thai!”

myself, but with my wife and life partner, personally and professionally.”

HaiSous has allowed Dang to put his heart, soul, and history not only in the décor (a mix of Vietnamese art and imports and murals by Pilsen artists), but in the food, inspired by his upbringing in Southern Vietnam before he moved to the U.S. as a refugee at age six. “I remember coming home to stuff my mom would be preparing, and I would help finish,” he recalls. “That’s where my love of cooking started. I saw the satisfaction my family had after I finished a soup or fried

something.” Today Dang is both elevating and changing perceptions of Vietnamese food. “That was the challenge, to change the landscape of what Vietnamese food is,” he says. “You go to every Vietnamese restaurant and see a slice of cucumber cut into a moon shape, a tomato, and maybe a sprig of cilantro. And to them, that’s garnish. To me it’s like, ‘Oh my God, shoot me now,’” he laughs.

Dang’s take includes refined but homey dishes like pork skewers with lemon-grass and fish sauce, whole fried fish with Vietnamese herbs, Hanoi-style grilled

pork, and a cold octopus and confit eggplant salad he considers “100 percent Thai” (\$14, recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)). “The Vietnamese love cold salads and I love the texture of octopus, but I wanted to kick it up a notch, so I added fried garlic,” says Dang, who served a similar salad at Embeya, but for that version, covered the colorful mélange with coconut foam and dehydrated black garlic. “For HaiSous, I wanted to do

the same dish, but we put coconut cream on the bottom of the plate instead and add fried shallots and roasted peanuts on top.”

The dish is just one example of how HaiSous has inspired Dang to find the courage and confidence to show his true colors on the plate again. But he also credits his staff: “When we’re asked how we overcame such a painful time in our life, I would say it’s our crew. I live for them. I live to see their happiness. I live to see them inspired because of what we went through,” he says. “I want them to come through these doors swinging, guns blazing, because I want to bring the best out in them.”