

Interviewee: Tam Le

Interviewer: Emily Ma

Interview Date: June 6, 2022

Transcribed by: Emily Ma

Reviewed by: Hannah Son

Track Time: 1:04:26

Background:

Born in 1989 in Houston, Texas, Tam Le's steady passion for traveling and expanding her worldview has led her to work in New York, London, Central and South America, Istanbul, Singapore, and Vietnam at various points her life. Currently residing in Austin, Le is a brand strategist for Landor & Fitch, helping to bridge gaps between designers and her clients. On top of her career in marketing, she is also extremely passionate about food. Despite not developing an interest in cooking until after college, once Le's curiosity was sparked, it quickly took off; in Vietnam, she opened a reservation-only Vietnamese-Mexican fusion restaurant called Saigonita in her own apartment! Her background in both Vietnamese and Mexican cuisine (from growing up in Houston) placed her at a unique crossroads to successfully combine the two into creative dishes such as "Hue-vos Rancheros" — a mix between Vietnamese Bún Bò Huế and Mexican huevos rancheros. Although space restrictions limited the number of guests at each dinner, Saigonita rapidly grew in popularity as word spread. Unfortunately, in 2020, Le had to move back to Houston to undergo a liver transplant, because she was not born with bile ducts. Despite a formidable surgery and healing process, Le expresses gratitude for everyone who stepped up to help, especially Ann Le, a high school classmate who became her living organ donor. Currently, post-transplant, Le lives with her boyfriend and younger sister, and is rediscovering yoga and watercolor among other hobbies.

Setting:

This interview was conducted and recorded over Zoom, in the interviewee's and interviewer's respective homes.

Key:

TL: Tam Le

EM: Emily Ma

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

EM: All right, so today is Monday, June 6, 2022. My name is Emily Ma, and I'm here with Ms. Tam Le with—for the Houston Asian American Archive at Rice. So to start from the very beginning, could you tell us where and when you were born?

TL: Yeah, I was born in Houston, Texas, August 12, 1989, at what was Hermann Hospital at the time.

EM: And how would you describe the household that you grew up in?

TL: My household, so I grew up with—so, both my parents are from Vietnam. I'm the first child. And then two years later, we had a sister. And my grandma on my mom's side also lived with us. So that was my household.

EM: Cool. And are you still, like, close with your sister today?

TL: Yes, yeah. So now—then, when I was 15, my mom gave birth to another sister. So I wouldn't say I grew up with her. But she is definitely [laughs] still my sister. So I'm very close to both my sisters, and yeah.

EM: I see. That's like a pretty big age gap.

TL: Yeah, it's— [laughs] it's a really big age gap. But I—I think like once she turned 10, we were able to be friends a little bit more, like we could discuss books that she and I would both find interesting. And now she's 18, and she actually lives with me in the other apartment bedroom. So we're very close.

EM: That's cool, it sounds like a very solid relationship. So did you grow up speaking Vietnamese with your family?

TL: Yes. So my parents, they were fluent in English. They both actually got their college degrees in America. They didn't come to America to study, but—because they were refugees, but once they came over here, they were able to attend school in English. My mom graduated from University of Houston, actually. But my parents just felt like school would teach me English. So they only spoke Vietnamese to me when I was growing up, so until I went to preschool when I was four, I didn't speak English. [**EM:** I see.] But now it's—yeah, but then once I learned English, it was more like my parents would speak Vietnamese to us, sometimes English, and then we would reply back in English, so.

EM: I see, yeah, I kind of have a similar thing with my parents, but like in Chinese. [**TL:** Mhm.] Do you have any, like, favorite memories of your childhood that you'd like to share?

TL: Favorite memories? So, something that's great, I think, about being in Texas is—well, not great, but like a consequence of it being so hot is there's so many pools, and that's like very readily available. So our backyard had a pool. And yeah, and I felt like I spent so many of my summers there with my cousins, or with my friends, just, like, messing around or, like, making up imaginary games in the pool.

EM: That sounds really fun, nice. So what were your parents' occupations in—in Vietnam? And then also, I guess, in the US after?

TL: Yeah, in Vietnam—so my dad left when he was 18, so he was about to go to college. He managed to, like, score well enough on the exams to where he didn't have to get drafted. But once he, like, went to Saigon to get ready to like, go to college there, then the fall of Saigon happened. So then he had to leave and go to a refugee camp in Guam before coming over to America. Once he was in America, he was a busboy. But—oh yeah, so we're focusing on back in Vietnam. For my mom, my mom was—my mom is eight years younger than my dad. So she wasn't college age during the fall of Saigon. But because her dad, my grandpa, taught engineering to the Southern Vietnamese army and the Southern Vietnamese army lost, they put them in reeducation camp. And then they also, like, took away my family's land. And my mom, like, any, like, family from like—that's related to the Southern government wasn't really allowed to study in college unless they, like, happened to be brilliant. So my mom wasn't allowed to study until she came to America in her early 20s.

EM: I see, and then your parents, like, met in America?

TL: Yes. My parents met in America. Yeah, they met in Houston.

EM: Oh, nice. So, what would you say are some important values or lessons that your parents instilled in you?

TL: Important values or lessons? I would say something they emphasized is a respect of elders. I don't know if it's like a lesson that I really took away. And I don't know if they tried to teach this lesson, but a lesson that I did take away, I think, is just like the idea that at any time, like, things could happen and like, what you think you have, or what you think you are in control of is, like—can be taken away from you. And then I think with that, I'm just, like, very—I don't know, cautious or—yeah, or just like always, like, trying to think of backup plans or like, just like backup scenarios. And then something else that I also think I learned from them is that like, even if something terrible were to happen, and like America were to collapse, or whatever, and then like, you know, our banking system doesn't work anymore, or whatever, then I can start in a new country, because my grandparents and my parents were able to do it. So I know, like, that even if you throw me in a random country in the future, like, I'll be able to make it work.

EM: Yeah, that's really powerful. And so did your parents also tell you, like, any stories about their immigration process from Vietnam to the US?

TL: Yeah, so my dad, he—his older brother—so my dad is one of 11, like one of the younger ones of 11 children. And so one of his older brothers worked, I think, for the Vietnamese Navy, or was in the Navy or something, and had some connections. So he was able to get out, like—the Navy ship, and then was picked up by the US ship. And then—then he was taken to Guam for the refugee camp. But he said he had—and like, when we think of refugee camps, we think of, like, terrible situations, which I'm sure is terrible for many people. But for him, he, like, loved it. And I've talked to many like Vietnamese men who were teenagers during their time at the refugee camps, and they, like, absolutely loved their time, like being on an island, and having no school and no responsibilities, and just, like, jumping and playing around. So that's what my dad did when he was there. And then, yeah, and then he got sponsored to go to America. And yeah, and he just talked about, like, how him and his brothers would try to find work, but then when they went to the restaurant, the restaurant—like, they didn't know how to use public transportation. So they were like crossing highways and just like running everywhere in, like, California. And then the—the restaurant's like, well, we can't hire you until you learn how to use the buses, like, you're gonna die getting over here. So then, yeah, so he had to, like, learn the public transportation system, and then, like, eventually he worked from that to getting an engineering degree. So it was just, like, such a whirlwind of experiences.

EM: Yeah, that's super impressive that he was able to do that. That's really cool. So I guess the last question of, like, your early life before we move on to education, so were there any, like, traditional Vietnamese holidays or customs that you practiced growing up?

TL: Yeah. For me, growing up, and still, my favorite holiday is Tết, or Lunar New Years. It's very similar to a lot of the Chinese practices in that there's a dragon dance, red lucky envelopes, all of that. And I just loved, like, ga—I have a big family—I don't know if I have a big family, but I think, like, the concept of family is a lot looser, to where it's like, literally anyone who's related to us within the Houston area will gather. And yeah, and I'll be able to see my cousin, get money, which was always like a thing I enjoyed as a kid, and then do just like very low stakes gambling on—yeah, playing bầu cua, like, some kind of thing where you, yeah, just like place your bet on where the die will roll and stuff. So that was always enjoyable. And yeah, I love the drums of the lion dances. Like, I still—I always get happy when I hear them.

EM: Yeah, that's great! So yeah, moving on to college. So you attended UT for undergrad and you started—you studied marketing and psychology. So what first drew you to those two fields? And how did they kind of blend together for you?

TL: Yeah, so I went to UT, which was like a controversial decision for my mom, because she wanted me to stay close and either go to Rice or go to U of H and then, like, live at home and just, like, never leave home until I got married. So, like, pushing to go to Austin was like a—like, very—like very much pissed her off, but because I had

gotten into the business school at UT, which is like a really good school to get into, I felt like I had a strong case to make for why I went to UT. And in the end, like, I ended up getting financial aid, and like I—I financed the whole thing, so they don't really have a huge say in where I go to college. But initially, in the business school, I didn't know what to pick, because I didn't know anything about business. I just applied because I thought business sounded impressive. And then, so my parents, since they both have computer science backgrounds—that's what they ended up doing in America, they wanted me to go to management information systems. And I did it just to do it for the first couple years. But I realized the only class at school I didn't fall asleep in was marketing. So that's how I chose my major. And then psychology was another class that I did really well in and definitely didn't fall asleep in. So I wanted to minor in that. And I felt like it worked really well with marketing, because we have to think about consumers and their behaviors all the time, so.

EM: Yeah, there's definitely a lot of similarities between the two. So what were some extracurricular activities, jobs, or clubs that you participated in during college?

TL: Oh, yeah. Ah, yeah, I participated in a lot of different ones. I—I felt like in high school, I had a lot of Asian friends. And so in college, I really wanted to branch out there, like I specifically chose not to join the different Vietnamese or Asian organizations at school, because I wanted to expand the type of friends I gained, or like the type of experiences I was exposed to. So one organization I was in was the University Residence Halls Association. I was, like, the treasurer, and I was able to get free housing for that year. So that was very enjoyable. Because I had majored in Management Information Systems, I was very involved in that organization too, which is, like, less relevant once I did marketing. But those are like some of the top ones that come to mind.

EM: Cool, and did you, like, do any food related clubs, or, like, when did you first get an interest in cooking?

TL: I actually did not become interested in cooking until much later in life. So after I already grad—I was a terrible cook in college. And a lot of my guy friends, like, would make fun of me for it. And then—I think girls are too nice to make fun of me, so that's why I emphasize guy friends. [laughs] And so it wasn't until I moved to New York after graduating, and I just had to save money because, you know, it was, like, a starting salary and I was living in Manhattan, so I was just like trying to save money by cooking, which—I didn't end up saving that much money. But by doing that, like a lot of my friends and I were cooking and going to each other's places. I felt like, yeah, it just got me really interested in it, and really interested in, like, a lot of the different dietary restrictions. I think New York is a lot more—New York and LA are just, like, a lot more conscious about dietary restrictions, or they have a lot more. And it's a lot less like meat-based than Texas is, which kind of aligns with the types of food I like anyways. So then I think through that, I was able to, like, really study things and play with levers and like understand why people choose the different diets they do, and really just, like, break down food in that way.

EM: That's so cool. Yeah, I didn't realize it was kind of like something that came later in life for you.

TL: Yeah, yeah, I didn't—my mom is not, like, a good cook, I never learned from her. So it's a very, like, different story than a lot of people have about cooking. It was never—it wasn't like I was always interested in it or anything. Like I obviously am interested in, like, food and eating good food, and I was like—I think even more so in New York, it accelerated, but yeah, but then cooking itself came later.

EM: Yeah, that's really interesting. So in college, what were some, like, most defining moments in general that you can think back to?

TL: Most defining moments in college? Let's see. I—well, on the topic of college and food, I think I had, like, three dishes that I could make. I made a soy—honey and soy sauce glazed salmon, I made a Cajun, like, creamy pasta, and then I made naan pizzas. So it was like such a random assortment of food, [laughs] but those were, like,

the only foods I knew how to make. So yeah, so then a lot of my, like, food memories are me in my apartment doing that. Something that I think really shaped my college experience was studying abroad. I did it the second semester of my junior year. I went to England, even though that's such, like, a half step in studying abroad, [laughs] because we have so much in common in culture, and obviously there's not a huge language barrier or anything, but I think it just opened my eyes up to traveling a lot. Because I—I had like five day weekends when I went over there. So I was just constantly traveling and going to different countries, interacting with a lot of the people who were in the study abroad program, who became friends with me, and later on in life, I've visited them and everything. But that, I think, was really the start of what became a more international career.

EM: Cool, are you still in touch with any, like, friends or professors from—either from UT or from studying abroad?

TL: Yeah, friends or professors? Or just—okay, okay. Yeah, a lot of my close—so, a lot of my friends, after graduating, we kind of, like, expanded. A lot of us went to New York, which felt very much like UT part two. And then a lot of us, like, went to San Francisco as well, or eventually migrated from San Francisco to New York—or I mean, New York to San Francisco. But now what I'm seeing with a lot of my friends is that we're slowly coming back. So in the past two years or so, my two closest friends from UT have moved back to Austin, which was, like, a big thing kicking me to want to move to Austin too. So there's that. And then, yeah, and then from study abroad, I think there's still some friends that I have definitely seen, like, when I'm there. Like, during my first trip to Hong Kong, I—I met up with my Hong Kong friends, or like, there's been a couple times where I've gone to the Basque Country in northern Spain to see one of my good friends there. But it hasn't been too much lately, because now that I think about it, I'm like, now it's been over 10 years since we've been together. But, yeah.

EM: Yeah, that's—that's definitely understandable. And it's cool that people like kind of go to these same cities, like New York and like San Francisco, yeah.

TL: Yeah, yeah, it made it very easy to stay in touch, which is why I would say, I'm, like, closer—well, obviously, my college friends, I had been with them for four years, but a lot of my college friends were also, like, from—either from like my high school, or like the suburb that—or from Katy, where I grew up, or like, whatever. And so we just had many more years together, because then we also, like, were together in New York, or later on, when I moved to Asia, one of my friends was also traveling and living in Asia as well. So we're able to keep it up.

EM: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And kind of on the topic of traveling, it seems like you did some really cool traveling after graduating college, like going to New York, Central and South America, Singapore, and Vietnam. [TL: Mhm.] So could you walk us a bit through that post graduation time period?

TL: Yeah, yeah. So post graduation, there weren't very many companies I wanted to work at full-time, of the ones that came to recruit at McCombs. So I looked into getting an—being able to intern in London. After college, there's like a special visa program, so I did that. And that was when I first worked at a branding agency. And I was like, this is it, this is what I want to do. But I don't want to return to the US quite yet. So then I went to Istanbul. And I was an au pair for like, three months. I hated it. It really, like—I was supposed to spend six months there. But it really, like—having to wipe a four year old's butt really made me appreciate working a corporate job. [laughs] So—so after that, I found a job in New York at the same branding agency I interned at in London, and actually, the agency I work at now is the same agency. I've gone back to them. This is my third time. So, yeah, so then I lived in New York, and I worked there for four years, hung out with a lot of my college friends.

And then I felt like my view of marketing was just, like, very limited. And I wanted to get a non-Western experience. Like, I had the London experience, I had the New York experience, and I wanted something that was a lot more different way of looking at marketing or looking at branding. So I found a job in Singapore, and from Singapore, I could work throughout the Southeast Asian region, or even all of Asia. And there's so much diversity

in Southeast Asia, in terms—and all of Asia, in terms of, like, language, culture, religion, even the alphabet. Like, it's so much more variety than you would get in Europe or South America. And so yeah, so I got a job there. Between my New York, Singapore time, I took a break for a few months and I traveled around South America, where—where I was able to stay with a lot of people that—I had—I had done Airbnb hosting in New York. So I was able to stay with a lot of my Airbnb guests and just like—and then meet up with some friends from studying abroad who were Chileans. So lots of connections there. I definitely felt, like, connected to a lot of people in the world and just, like, had that personal connection with these different cities.

Then when I was in Singapore, my job took me all over Asia. I was traveling probably two weeks out of the month. Singapore is so small, and flights are so cheap, that's what most of us ended up doing. So I rarely spent any time in Singapore. Yeah, went around Southeast Asia. I would say my favorite places were Bali and Vietnam. I loved Vietnam so much. Obviously, there's that cultural connection. But also like, I think, objectively, the food is, like, just very good. And the people are very nice. Not that they're not nice everywhere else, but it just, yeah, was like extra special for me. I was sent to work there a lot as well.

So then, after a year and a half or so of living in Singapore, I, yeah, I realized I was, like, not very happy in Singapore. And I was much, much happier in Vietnam. So I moved there, found a job there in Vietnam. And yeah, and then also my exploration turned inwards, more towards Vietnam, or more towards staying in Saigon. I was so much happier, like, being in one place, versus Singapore, where I always wanted to leave. And yeah, and then in Vietnam, I worked at another branding agency. But on the side, I started cooking and hosting these dinners in my apartment, doing Vietnamese-Mexican food, and then that just took off. So then I quit my job and concentrated on that for a while. And then after two years of Vietnam, almost four years in Asia, I went back to Houston, because of—I had, like, a health issue. So I needed to go back to get American healthcare, and then also to get—to have my parents be able to take care of me. So I was in Houston for about, like, two and a half years or so, before moving to Austin one month ago.

EM: That's a ton of moving around. But it sounds like you've had a lot of, like, personal growth moments, like, all around the world. [**TL:** Mhm.] That's really cool. So correct me if I'm wrong, are you currently, like, a brand strategist?

TL: Yes, yes.

EM: Cool, could you kind of take us through a day in your life?

TL: Yeah, so I work remotely. So right now, I'm in the Chicago office of Landor & Fitch. I've worked in their London office, like I said, in their New York office, but now I'm with their Chicago office. And yeah, and I have clients like Coca Cola or Procter & Gamble, so, like, very big brands, which is always, like, yeah, big brands is always very interesting. I like working on small brands, but there's, like—yeah, there's, like, different challenges that come with larger brands. So I will—let's see. Yeah, so even though I'm working remotely, I'm still trying to, like, draw clear lines of delineation between when I work—or like when I'm at home, and when I work. So my boyfriend and I will take these, like, walks to work for like 15 minutes around the area, just to feel like, okay, this is—this is the difference.

And then at work, I don't know how to describe it, so I'll say a brand strategist is someone who—you know how, like, designers create packaging design and logo designs and things like that? And so as a brand strategist, we come before the design phase. We define what the brand is and what it stands for. And then we help give the designers territories or directions that they can then design off of, to—to help them be more creative. Because I know I hate it when I'm just given a blank piece of paper, and it's like, "Oh, do whatever you want," like make—cook whatever you want, whatever it is, the prompt, the—like, that actually hinders my creativity. Whereas, like, when you put constraints on it, like in New York, when I had the constraints of, like, "Oh, I have to

cook gluten free or whatever, or vegan,” or whatever the situation is, it allows me to be a lot more creative once that's channeled. So that's, like, the role of the strategist. It—we just help clarify things, or we just help point things in a specific direction, whether it's, like, our client or them. But yeah, it comes out as PowerPoints, I would say. That's mostly what I'm producing: PowerPoints—words and PowerPoints.

And yeah, and then I do that from 8:00 until, like, 4:30 or so, and then I stop. And so far, it's been a lot of moving, like, moving related stuff in Austin, or—because now I have such a big social network here, since so many of my friends ended up moving to Austin, yeah, just spending time with them, which, you know, I haven't been able to because of the pandemic. But also, like, being in Houston, there were just like a lot—surprisingly, even though I grew up there, there were just like a lot less people I knew there, versus in some other cities.

EM: That's great. It sounds like this is, like, really the spot for you. [**TL:** Mhm.] So like, as a brand strategist, it seems like it's a very like people-person field, where you have to interact closely with your clients. So what's your favorite part of working closely with your clients, and then also the most challenging part?

TL: For me, I—I actually—so there are people who do client services. And so they have to work with our clients a lot. And I've done client services before as well. And I would say, when I was in that role, the most challenging thing is it feels like you're just constantly putting out fires or responding to, like, time-based things. Like it's—it's so—there are so many reactionary parts to the job. Whereas as a strategist, yes, there's a lot of—it's a lot of internal meetings that I'm attending more, but then I'm able to, like, spend time and do work without having to, you know, like, deal with every client request or whatever that comes up. But I would say, as a strategist, the most difficult thing is—the best thing is when you have a client who really trusts you as a partner, or can just like—doesn't, like, nitpick the details, but can see like the bigger picture of where things are going, versus being like, "Oh, we would never, like, say that or use that," or whatever it is. The challenging thing is when there's very little consumer data. Like I remember in Vietnam, I was working with some energy drink, and it sounded like their target audience was, like, people 18 to 45 who get thirsty. Like, it was just something like that, where I'm like, how can I—like I said, like, I need to have constraints in order to be creative. So it's like, how can I work with that? You know, like, where does that take me? Literally anyone with a mouth? Okay, great. [laughs]

EM: Yeah, that sounds—that sounds like a pretty challenging thing to work on. So I guess, reflecting on your experiences growing up in the US, and then venturing into like a wide range of opportunities and work environments over the course of your life, what do you think is the key to success for younger generation Asian Americans, or, like, any pieces of advice you would give?

TL: Yeah, I would say the key to success, or something that I wish I did more or I'm trying to do more, is just, like, owning your Asian Americanness. Like, I feel like—or at least maybe it's been my experience, and I'm just projecting. There's so much, like, just fitting in or, like, you know, like how you hear in some places, like, they don't want to, like, consider us like minorities for things, and—and like, I just feel like a lot of times people forget, like, your coworkers forget how different you are. Or like, you know, how your point of view isn't necessarily like theirs? And yeah, and then so I—I would say like, I would hope with this future generation that people just, like, speak out more, or like are more proud of, like, where they're from, or just like, I don't know, bring it up more, instead of trying to hide it.

EM: Yeah, I think that totally makes sense, thank you for sharing. Yeah, so I guess moving on to Saigonita, so I read how it combines Vietnamese cuisine with Mexican—Mexican cuisine. And I thought that was a pretty unique fusion. So how did you kind of come up with that idea? And are you still, like, actively opening Saigonita now? Or I guess you did it in Vietnam, but are you thinking of doing it in—also doing it in—

TL: I just did in Vietnam, yeah. So I came up with that idea because—so yeah, growing up in Texas, I ate a lot of Mexican food. And it's, yeah, and it's definitely one of my favorite cuisines. But it's like how I describe other

cuisines, or like, for those who aren't familiar with Vietnamese food, I'll just, like, use like Mexican, like, terms. Like for Bò Nhúng Dấm, which is like this beef that you dip—dip it in vinegar, and then you'd roll your own rice paper, and I'm like, "Oh, it's kind of like fajitas," where, you know, you have to like, do it on your own and add all these extra things inside. And then, like, yeah, and then I think I did it enough times to where I'm like, oh, I think there are a lot of similarities. And then, like, in ingredients too, like the limes and cilantro, things like that. And so to me, it felt like they really naturally fit together. But I saw a lot of, like, Korean-Mexican fusion, which I also love, and is delicious.

But I remember seeing a Korean-Mexican place open up in Vietnam, and I was like, "What the heck, we're in Vietnam, if, like, a Mexican-Vietnamese fusion were to happen anywhere, it should happen here! I can't believe no one's doing it. I've waited for so long, just like I've waited for naan pizzas to be a business for so long." [laughs] Like, I just want to do it on my own. Yeah, so yeah, so then I just, like, I felt like it naturally fit together, no one was doing it. I—compared to other people in Vietnam, I felt like I had, like, a very deep knowledge of Mexican food. I mean, there were Mexicans in Vietnam, of course, and there were like—and there were other Mexican restaurants in Vietnam. But a lot of them were created by—a lot of the other Mexican restaurants were created by people who were either from Mexico or from America, or whatever.

But I'm like, "Okay, I also have that deep knowledge of Vietnamese food," and like, deep in the way where you just, like, when you grow up with a type of cuisine, you just, like, know it in that way. And then so I felt like, "Okay, I'm at a very unique space in Vietnam, where I have a deep knowledge of both these foods." I wouldn't say the same as like—I wouldn't say I would be as rare in Houston. I think there's plenty of people in Houston who have a deep knowledge of both those cuisines. But in Vietnam, I was like, that was the thing that made me like more rare, or stand out. So then yeah, so then I felt like it could be a thing. And my friends and I were just messing around with it. I had a Czech friend, a Czech—Vietnamese-Czech friend, and he wanted us to enter this, like, taco festival. And he's like, "Oh, yeah, you always told me about your, like, Vietnamese-Mexican food idea." Because I say it, hoping that someone will overhear it and do it themselves, but then he was just like, "Oh, you want to do it?" And I was like, "Okay, sure. Let's—let's try it." And yeah, and then it ended up working out really well.

EM: Yeah, good for you for taking that plunge. Yeah, so yeah, I remember there's a—a food truck, I think, in Houston. I forget the name, but it's like Korean-Mexican fusion. So I think that's like, definitely more popular or, like, more common, but yeah, yours is the first I've heard with Vietnamese and Mexican.

TL: Yeah, yeah, I think there's, like, maybe one or two things going on in California, but it's definitely more rare.

EM: Yeah, for sure. So, like, logistically for Saigonita, was it, like, closed door? Or like, was it open to the public? Or was it like invite only, or—

TL: Yeah, so how I did it was I would—I could seat—because I had these special tables made, so I could seat 14 guests. So I would open it up to, like, four—like, I would open up, like, "Hey, there's 14 spots, like, just like, sign up, or ping me to sign up," or, like, whatever it is, like, "once you put in your deposit, you're in here." And then whoever didn't get in, I would just put on, like, a waitlist for next time. So then I would—so then for the next dinner, I would message them first, give them like a, you know, few hours or one day advance, like, sell—or sale or whatever, and then—and do it that way. So it was kind of public, but very limited in scope, because I could only physically fit so many people. But there were a lot of people that I did not know how they heard of it, or how they came there, and like—and there were plenty of people who read about it in like Vice or different articles. And so they were visiting Vietnam, so I've had people, yeah, visiting from America or visiting from Singapore, or, like whatever, who had read about it and wanted to come.

EM: That's really cool. Did it—like, did the list fill up pretty quickly?

TL: Yeah, yeah, it's usually within a day. Yeah. By the end of the day, I'll have it filled. And then yeah, and then I can be happy and know that, okay, I can buy my ingredients now. [laughs]

EM: So I know you mentioned your Vietnamese-Czech friend. Did they work with you on that, or like, how—how many people were on your team, I guess?

TL: Yeah, so he worked with me, my team was very—it rotated a lot. There was always two other people helping me out. Someone would act as, like, my sous chef, and then someone would act as my bartender. And we were all the waiters and the dishwashers. [laughs] So it was, like, a lea—like, it's crazy what you can accomplish with just like three people. 'Cause we had a seven course meal and three drinks, three, like, accompanying, like, cocktails or whatever. So yeah, so it was a lot. And yeah, in the beginning, it was my Vietnamese-Czech friend. But he had no knowledge of Mexican food. So he was rolled off eventually. [laughs] Then, I had a friend who was from Houston, who I met in Vietnam, but she's Cantonese. And she helped me. But she was not a professional chef in any way. So she eventually—so she knew Mexican food, but rolled off because cooking wise, it was like, just like very slow.

And then I—yeah, and then another friend was my bartender, like, one of the guests from the first dinner wanted to be my bartender. And so—so then that was like my initial, like, scrappy team. And then it just like—then I could advanced to—then eventually, like, it became established enough to where I could advance to another level, where I ended up working with this Vietnamese chef, he was actually on MasterChef Vietnam, like season one or two or something like that. And he came in second place when he was in college, and he just, like, dropped out of college to, like, cook full time. I—yeah, I loved working with him. He really, like, leveled up the cooking that we did there. And so he brought in that experience. I brought in the Mexican, like, the Mexican food knowledge and ability to cook that, and he brought in the ability to cook Vietnamese food, and just, like, general, like, technique. And then the bartender I had was actually—my friend—my friend owned a coffee shop, and his barista was interested in bartending as well. And then so I hired him, and he was just, like, fantastic. And so when the three of us got together, it was just, like, we worked so smoothly, and things, like, just went super super well.

EM: Very cool. That sounds like a—like a dream team.

TL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And the barista was also Vietnamese. So that's also what I enjoyed doing, that I was working with Vietnamese people, and yeah, and then, like, employing them. And yeah, and then also, like, definitely having people around that I could ask about Vietnamese food.

EM: Yeah, for sure. So what are some examples of dishes that you would serve?

TL: Yeah, so a big dish we would serve was the Hue-vos Rancheros, which is a play on words, because Hue is the imperial city of Vietnam, it's where my ancestors are from. And it's, like, what Bún Bò Huế is named after, that beef noodle dish. So in our Hue-vos Rancheros, we have, like, the tostada base of huevos rancheros, and, like, that salsa, and the fried egg, but we would use our meat, like the Bún Bò Huế, lemongrass, like spicy beef, in—that like—in a braised way, so it kind of like pulls apart. And then instead of, like, a chicken egg, fried chicken egg, we would have fried little quail eggs on top, or like a little fried quail egg, as well as Vietnamese sate, which is sometimes added to Bún Bò Huế. So we added that, and yeah, it was just like really fun to bal—try to balance the different elements of Vietnamese and Mexican food, and add something new to it. But then also, like, stay true to some of the dishes' roots.

EM: Yeah, that sounds really amazing. You're making my mouth water. [**TL:** laughs] So I guess another question is, like, what is your favorite—what was your favorite memory or aspect of Saigonita, now that I guess it's closed?

TL: Mhm, I would say my favorite memories are—and this will be like a little more—ah, no, I'll—I'll name this, maybe, specifically. Maybe it's like top of mind because it was, like, the last experience. But towards the end, our last two dinners, I really wanted to—I knew I was moving to America—or no, I had been offered a job, like, in Vietnam as, like, a head chef of another restaurant. And so I knew Saigonita was ending. And so I wanted to do something big for its ending, so I rented out this event space from, like, a friend of a friend. And yeah, and then like, yeah, working with that Vietnamese family there.

And in the event space, it was enough room for 40 people, which is, like, crazy to go from 14 to 40 people. And it was crazy, because the first dinner was, like, a disaster. Like, it was just, oh, wow. You know, it's like a new building or new area, so we didn't know the acoustics are terrible when you put 40 people in there. I was trying to cook and I had to be, like, hostess and oversee everything. So then it obviously wasn't work—no, I was hostess. I—I was, like, being a waitress, and then also trying to oversee things, and then also like checking in on the kitchen. So it was, like, a disaster. And then the food was just like, served in a weird order. So then, like, people were like, oh, should I wait for the whole table to, like, have food before I eat? And then they would, and then their food would go cold by then. And just like a thousand mistakes were made.

And I'm—I felt like it was bad. I think some people, a lot of people had a great time. But to me, it wasn't, like, the level that I wanted to be at. So the next day, I sent out surveys to all the guests, and then of the ones who answered—it was painful to read. But all the ones that answered, I would read their different criticisms. And then after that, I went and I brainstormed with someone on my team. And then like I had to let go of some new team members, where I—where it just, like, wasn't working out. And, like, try to figure out: how can I improve this within 24 hours? Because the next day, I had my second dinner there. And yeah, and so it was just like a scramble coming up with an action plan, hiring new people, hiring new waitstaff, and like new kitchen help and everything, and just like turning it around.

And that last dinner, I felt like it just went really well. And I could really, like, enjoy myself. I didn't give myself the task of being waitress or being a cook. I could just, like, manage the whole experience and interact with my guests. And yeah, and then afterwards, so many of us, like, stayed later and just, like, watched music videos on giant screens, and hung out and stuff. And that's what I really enjoy, that feeling of community and knowing, like, so many people have, like, met through my dinners. I met my roommate in Vietnam through one of my dinners. And—and yeah, that connection. And yeah, and it just felt like, okay, I was able to, like, have this impact on Vietnam in some way, like have an impact on the people I worked with at these different dinners, or yeah, introduce people to the venue, things like that.

EM: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, food is an amazing way to bring people together. And I'm sure, like, a lot of people met—met each other for the first time, yeah. So is your family still in the US? And have you cooked for them recently, and if so, what were their reactions?

TL: Yes, my family is still in the US. They're all—my immediate family was all in Houston until my sister and I recently moved to Austin. Yeah, all in Katy. We were all in—under one roof for the long—for the past couple years. So very close, I cooked for them. I don't cook for them too often, because everyone has different tastes. Like, my younger sister is very picky. My parents only like to eat Vietnamese food. And—and so it's just, like, it becomes very hard or very limiting. I don't enjoy cooking Vietnamese food when it's for my mom, just because sometimes she'll have comments and stuff like that. I mean, there have been things that have been well-received by them that were Vietnamese, but—or not, but yeah, in general, I think if I cook more Western dishes, I'm more likely to have a better reaction. I can't remember the last time I cooked for them though, because I really do not enjoy doing it. [laughs]

EM: I see, that's valid. [**TL:** Yeah.] I guess, could you imagine ever opening something similar to Saigonita in the US? Or do you think, like—could you imagine like other people maybe doing that?

TL: Yeah, I have thought about it a lot, and at one point, when I returned to Houston, I had started at another agency, and then I quit. And I was thinking of opening up a fast casual chain, doing vegetarian Vietnamese food. And I had developed the menu and everything, and done recipe testing, and looked at sites, and did, like, the financial projections and everything. And it just, like, really didn't make sense. Yeah, it didn't make sense in terms—like as a business, because the first couple years, I would just never—I would have to work every day, and never have a sick day, and never take a vacation, and—and since—so my health issue was that I had to get a liver transplant. And so like post-transplant, I was like, that's not possible. I have to go to the doctors all the time. I am like—I physically cannot do that, like, being a cook is very physically challenging. And I cannot physically do that as a post-transplant patient. I mean, some post-transplant patients can, but, like, a new post transplant patient. And so—so then that, I was just like, okay, it doesn't make sense.

And I thought of it on smaller scales, because the problem with Saigonita was, I could never think of: "How do I scale this in a way where I can just do this full time?" And it's like, I would obviously have to hold more dinners or whatever. And it's like, okay, well, I don't want to live in a restaurant, like I don't want to, like, live where I work. And then if I rent a place, it's so expensive. So there's a lot of considerations. And in the US, they were, like, more picky about, like, having health licenses, or, like, food and cooking licenses and stuff like that. Whereas in Vietnam, it was, like, more laissez-faire, or I knew, like, okay, my cooking sanitary practices is way more sanitary than a lot of the street food vendors. So I'm good. Whereas, like, in the US, there's a lot more restrictions on it. So, yes, I thought about it. No, I have not come up with a good way to do it, though. [laughs]

EM: Yeah. Sounds like there's a lot of, like, logistical complications that go into it. [**TL:** Mhm.] Yeah, so moving on a bit to your identity. So you mentioned on the A Viet—A Vietnam podcast that you identify as Viet Kieu, which, like, broadly speaking, is any Vietnamese person living overseas, even though there are, like, other various definitions. So would you like to elaborate on that? And do you still identify that way?

TL: Yeah, I—I identify—maybe I identify less that way, because now I'm in America, so it's less of a term, like—whereas like Vietnamese American is more of a term. So here, Vietnamese American feels appropriate. But there, I felt like "Vietnamese American" would have been too limiting. Like if—if those were the people I really connected to and related to, it would have been—there were plenty in Vietnam, but it would have been a lot more limiting. Whereas in Vietnam, I felt like anyone who grew up either in Europe or the Americas or Canada or whatever, but who was ethnically Vietnamese, we had so—and living—and currently living in Vietnam, I felt like we had so much in common. And that—that was, like—yeah, just like having that in common automatically allows you to relate to someone and be able to, like, befriend someone off of that. Yeah. And then here, I don't know, I don't relate to everyone who is like ethnically Vietnamese in Texas. So—so then there's a lot more of a disconnect here.

EM: I see, yeah. And I guess the way you identify yourself can also be pretty fluid as time changes. And it's also kind of interesting that you like reverse migrated to Vietnam, since you—before you came to Austin, I mean, like you returned to the country that your parents immigrated from. So have they ever, like, told you anything, how, like, they feel about this?

TL: Yeah, my parents were not happy that I was doing this. They wanted me to stay in Singapore. They were very happy with the move to Singapore, much happier than my move to New York. And so I don't know what the fascination was with Singapore. It's just some old holdout from Singapore's reputation as, like, a rich, nice country compared to Vietnam. So they were upset about it. But I felt like they don't understand, and a lot of the older Vietnamese who have—who immigrated over in the '70s or '80s and haven't been back to Vietnam in a long time don't know how much Vietnam has changed. And they don't realize, like, how good life there can be. Like I remember it was Thanksgiving and I was preparing a Thanksgiving dinner for my friends. And my mom's, like, you can get turkey in Vietnam? And I was like, yes, you can literally get anything if you have enough money.

Like, it's just, like, it's fine. Like I'm—yeah, like, things are different, like, it's—the apartment I lived in there is probably going to be the nicest apartment I live in my whole life, you know? Like, it's just, like, yeah. It's not the Vietnam that they remember. Which is great. I really wanted to make my own memories with it in Vietnam and have my own relationship with Vietnam. And not have it just be something that is filtered through my refugee parents who left in their, like, early years.

EM: Yeah, for sure. And kind of, like, related to that, like looking back on your own experiences as a child of immigrant parents, what would your—what would be your advice to current immigrant-immigrant parents?

TL: Oh, to current parents who are immigrants and raising their kid in America? That's hard, because I've never been able to see it from their point of view. It feels like such a huge chasm. I would say, I don't—I don't know if they would, like, take this seriously. But I think it's just, like, accepting that your child is going to grow up differently than you did. And that's the reason you immigrated over here. Like, just, like, letting go and not—trying not to compare them to like, "Oh, like, a child in Vietnam would never do this," like, "If you were in Vietnam, and you had handwriting like this, you would be slapped so your hands are red," or like, whatever. And it's just like, 'Okay, well, we're not in Vietnam. You came to America for a reason.' I mean, I guess they were—since my parents were refugees, it was more like they were forced over. But like, if someone were to willingly immigrate to America with the hopes of raising their children there, they are doing it, like, for a reason, like in hopes that their child will have this, like, American way of life or education. And I think you have to accept the cons that come with that, if you're going to accept the pros that come with it.

EM: Yeah, I think that's a solid piece of advice. I think probably a lot of people resonate with that as well. So switching gears a little, as you mentioned—and like also, I read a little bit about your liver transplant on your Instagram. Would you feel comfortable, like, sharing the amazing story behind of it?

TL: Yeah, of course. Yeah, so I— [train horn sounds] oh, sorry. I live near a train station. [laughs] So I found out I needed a liver transplant back when I was 22, working my first job in New York. And—and that was, like, almost 10 years ago. Well, it's 10 years ago now. But I had gone in for a routine checkup, my bloodwork was off, then they, like, looked into it more. And they found—they realized that when I was—well, I knew this. When I was a baby, I didn't have bile ducts. And I had a surgery for it. And I thought, and my parents thought, that's the end of that, we're done. But apparently it's not the end of that. It's like a temporary bandage on the problem, with transplant being, like, the option that usually comes later. And so I was just, like, very fortunate that I didn't need a transplant as a child, which most people do as a baby or a child with my condition.

And so my doctors were very vague. They were just, like—at first I thought I needed it that summer. But then they were like, oh, actually we don't—you're doing fine. We don't know when you'll need a transplant. It might be next year, it might be in 10 years. So just keep doing bloodwork, or like, just like keep us posted, or like whatever, keep going to regular checkups. And so I was doing—yeah, so I would do bloodwork, like, once a month. Every time I moved, I would have to find a new doctor and make sure that, you know, I was getting labs done or following up with, like, a liver specialist in Singapore and in Vietnam. And so in Vietnam, it got to a level to where my liver doctor there was like, "Hey, it's getting worse. You're probably going to need a transplant soonish, in the next few, couple of years. And in Vietnam, we've only done one liver transplant before, ever," and the doctor was from Korea. So, "I recommend you go to America and, like, get it done there." And then so I was like, "Yeah, definitely. I don't want to be number two, this—you know, like, I want to be number like 2000 or whatever."

And then yeah, and then so when I got back—yeah, so when I came back to Houston, there was only one hospital, Houston Methodist, that had the certification to do a living donor liver transplant where, you can get it—where someone who is alive can donate half their liver to you, and then their half will grow back in them, their—half in you will grow back as well. And then—and then that way, you don't have to wait for an organ to come onto the

market. Which is great, because you can actually plan your transplant. It's not like I'm waiting on the phone for the chance that someone in my, like, you know, within 100-200 miles of me who has the same size liver as I have will—but who was healthy, will like die and also be signed up to be an organ donor. And like, you know, like, it's just like so rare for all those things to come together. And I would probably be, like, really sick by the time I can move up the transplant list enough to like get one of those organs. So I wanted to do it through living donor instead. And at Methodist Hospital, they had actually never done a living donor liver transplant before. So I was actually going to be number one, or actually ended up being number one. Which is funny, because I left Vietnam because I didn't want to be number two. [laughs]

But my—yeah, so originally, I thought my sister is going to be my donor, the sister who's two years younger than me, who's really close with me. Because when I was in New York, she was evaluated to be my donor, everything looked good, and evaluation processes a lot of, like, health checks, and, like, looking at the liver and the size and everything. But suddenly she, like, wasn't, or like the hospital didn't accept her as my donor, and it wasn't going to work out. So I was really, like, panicked and stressed because I didn't know who else could be my donor. Like I said, I didn't have, like, a huge network within Houston. My parents were too old to be my donor. My youngest sister was, like, a minor, she—and she had no interest in being my donor. And so I just, like, didn't know where to look or where to go. So I just like posted about it on Instagram, like, just like that I was, like, upset with the situation. It's not like I wanted anyone to do anything, but just to express, like, “Hey, today sucks because this happened.” And a lot of my friends were asking, like, “How can I help?” And I was like, okay, well maybe we can, like, spread the word that I need a donor. Because I've heard of that happening, you know, in other places where a stranger will donate. And then it was crazy. So many people came through. People are so good. Like, three or four strangers in Houston, like, just reached out to me. I don't even know, like, you know, like, what their—a lot of their connection to my post was, but it had spread.

But one of the people who came through was a friend of mine from high school, Ann Le–Ann Le. And we're actually like, very distantly related. And we weren't that close in high school, but we stayed in touch through Instagram. And I had—and we had met up when she was visiting Vietnam. And yeah, and then so, she was the only one of the people who volunteered that—who was someone I actually knew. Even though she was living in Austin, I thought, like, okay, let's try this. Like, let's try to go with her, just so—it's better with someone I know versus, like, a stranger. And yeah, it ended up working out. She donated her liver to me. She underwent a huge surgery to go from, like, a healthy person with a full liver to having half a liver. Yeah, and now we're super close. The other day, I was at a pool party at her place. So yeah, good. Now I have, like, a lifelong friend from the process.

EM: That's so amazing and inspiring. And I really love how, like, so many people, like, were so willing to help. So I guess like moving on to more, like, "fun" questions, if you were stranded on a desert island, and you could only make one recipe for the rest of your life, what would you choose?

TL: Oh, uh, if I can only make one recipe, I always—when I think of, like, oh, you can only have one food for the rest of your life, I always think salad, but I'm like, oh, I know that's cheating because, you know, you would just, like, change the salad. But if I had to make one recipe, I don't know. Oh, I know. I know. I know. I would make gyozas, like pork and chive gyozas with—with like a soy sauce—or like, with a great dipping sauce as, like, soy sauce, sesame oil, black vinegar, chili crunch, and like, yeah, it just has like all these elements, and I could eat it all day. And I know that's not, like, a practical thing because I would probably die of thirst on this island very quickly. But yeah, that's something that I would be very happy to eat for every meal for a very long time.

EM: That's cool. Yeah, I actually just made, like, frozen gyoza. [**TL:** Oh, nice.] But that's very, very different.

TL: Oh, frozen gyozas are very good too. I had them the other day. My boyfriend's more of the gyoza maker. So when it was, like, my week to cook, I was like, "Okay, I'll just buy some frozen ones." [laughs]

EM: Yeah, yeah. Also, like, what are some of your current, like, hobbies and interests, like, outside of your career?

TL: Mhm, yeah, I try to practice a little bit of yoga every day. And last week, I went to my first, like, in person yoga class since my transplant. Because I've been trying to, like, work up to the stamina. And so I was like, super happy I was able to kind of, like, keep up. But it definitely kicked my butt. I was sore for like three days afterwards. So that was not great. But, you know, I'm still going to keep doing it. And hopefully my strength will build up—or my endurance will build up over time. I've also recently have—well, not recently. I've been into painting since high school, but it's been—watercolor painting, but it's been, like, in and out. And so I have this one watercolor of poppies that I had taken a picture of in California that I really need to finish, but I think it'll be my best one yet. So it's well worth the two months—or however long I've been spending painting it bit by bit. [laughs]

EM: That's awesome. I'm—I'm sure it'll turn out very beautiful. Yeah, so how often do you go back to visit Vietnam? And are you planning any upcoming trips there?

TL: Yeah, so I left Vietnam right before the pandemic. And then—and my thing has been, like, “Oh, I want to return as soon as possible.” And—and then I didn't even realize how possible it was until my dad took a trip. Like my dad recently went to Vietnam for like a month. And I was like, “Oh, that was an option? How did I miss that option?” [laughs] So hopefully, this winter, I can return. Hopefully.

EM: Yeah, fingers crossed. That's—that's pretty exciting.

TL: Yeah, but I would want to return, like, once every—I mean, in an ideal world, once a year or something, spending months there. But in a realistic world, maybe, like, once every two years or so.

EM: I see. And for my last question, if you could go back in time and give a piece of advice to your younger self, what would you say?

TL: With my younger self? I think I would say to—yeah, I was thinking about this recently, where I'm, like, okay, I'm imagining my younger self as an elementary school child. And I was, like, I feel like elementary school children care about so little in life. And so for me, I think I would—if I were to, like, meet up with 10-year-old me, I would tell her that—so I hated junior high, it was a terrible experience. I would just tell her that, “Hey, like, the next three years, or next two years, are gonna suck a lot, or you're gonna be, like, very self conscious, or you're gonna, like, you know, like, want to be away from everyone and angry and slam doors and stuff like that. And that's totally normal, and it will pass, and you will feel better and it will be fine. But just brace yourself for these next couple of years. And then eighth grade will happen and it'll be good again.”

EM: Yeah, that's awesome. So yeah, that's pretty much all the questions that I had planned. But do you have any like—anything that you'd like to add?

TL: Ah, nope. I think you covered such a wide range. Thank you so much, Emily.

EM: No problem. Thank you so much for this interview and for sharing your experiences with me, and I wish you a full and speedy recovery. And best of luck with your yoga and your painting as well.

TL: All right, bye.

EM: Bye.

