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## I Dream of Doughnuts: One Family's Sweet Saga of the American Dream

Rachel DeSimone

**A**t the historic intersection of Cambridge Street and Brighton Avenue in Allston, Mass., you might find yourself wondering if you've been blasted back in time, say, to the '50s. Before you stands a small retro-diner style building with a shiny silver overhang and an enormous sign towering over the roof that reads, "Twin Donuts." Written in dated red script letters, "Twin" is illuminated, while the "Donuts" lights are out. Even more old-fashioned are the visible white slats behind the sign, visibly holding it up. This childhood diner throwback sits directly on the point of the sidewalk where the two streets cross and has maintained that spot for almost 60 years now.

When you walk inside Twin Donuts,

the smell of toasting bagels and coffee waft around you. The walls are mostly white. Maroon tables fill the interior, along the sides and down the middle, set with wooden chairs that have maroon seat cushions, which all rest on maroon floor tile. Once you weave your way past all of the tables to the back right, arriving at the counter, fresh baked doughnuts are directly in your line of sight. Above the counter is a white menu board made up of red and blue letters that are clipped on and have begun drooping to either side. There are large, almost floor to ceiling windows lining both sides of the shop, some consisting of thick, clear glass tiles. Newspapers are strewn around most tables, and some stray empty plates linger



showing smears of ketchup and potato remains. A group of college students sits at the first big table chattering about what they are going to wear to a party. Next to them, at the “round table,” is a pair of older gentlemen conversing about peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cream of wheat and pickles. Then there are some single customers sitting quietly on the outskirts with the morning paper.

In a town where hordes of college students come and go each year, a city that runs on constant change also finds vitality in its antiquity. The building itself that Twin Donuts inhabits has been there since the 1800s, formerly occupied by the Odd Fellows Hall, a local movie theater. This iconic doughnut shop has been in its same spot since 1955, seeing its way through four or five different owners. The Taing family, who took over in 2001, currently owns the shop. Catherine and her two brothers, Woo and Wayne, manage Twin on a daily basis, in ad-

dition to Café Mirror and the Brighton Café, both of which the Taing family also owns.

Catherine’s Father, Leang Sim Taing, and Mother, Chiang Sou Pang, purchased the business from its previous owner, Henry La, who now owns The Depot Coffee Shop in Newton, Mass. Both Mr. and Mrs. Taing were born in Cambodia, though are ethnically Chinese. They survived the Khmer Rouge, escaped as refugees to Thailand, then the Philippines and eventually to the U.S. They both attended school in Cambodia, gaining about the equivalent to an eighth grade/early high school education. Mr. Taing went to both Cambodian and Chinese school, while Mrs. Taing only attended Chinese School.

With limited education and language barriers, Mr. and Mrs. Taing began work at various Massachusetts companies on the assembly line, making an hourly wage. Soon Mr. Taing realized his dream was to become a business owner, not having to work for anyone else but himself. “I always say it was his





*Left, Twin Donuts offers sit-down dining and to-go orders*

idealistic dream because in actuality it's a lot harder than working for someone else," says Catherine, "I feel he needed a goal to work towards, something more than just putting in 40-hours at the company." Mr. Taing never worked for anyone outside of his family until he moved to the U.S.; he grew up in a family that owned their own business raising and selling pigs and meat, amongst other things. Twenty years after Mr. Taing expressed his dream, it became a reality. Mrs. Taing was hesitant at first, but eventually gave in. "Mom is the practical one who understood the hard work of owning your own business and understood that my Dad's dream was just that, a dream," says Catherine. At the time Mr. and Mrs. Taing's three children were very young and Mrs. Taing knew that neither of them were ready to put in the long hours. When it did happen in 2001, the purchase of Twin Donuts was a joint decision and effort, "neither could have done it on their own," says Catherine. At that point their youngest

child was 13-years-old.

Unfortunately, Mr. Taing only got to live his dream for one year, as he passed away in April of 2002. Rather than closing the shop's doors, the Taings kept it running in honor of their father/husband. "We continued his dream, it's a nice sentiment," says Catherine. As other businesses have come and gone throughout the years in the Allston-Brighton neighborhood, business has continued to do well for Twin Donuts, even through the 2008 recession. They have maintained very reasonable prices, a doughnut only costing 89 cents. Catherine, on behalf of her and her family, expressed great gratitude for this fortunate reality.

Twin sees a variety of customers, along with their steady regulars, some of whom have been coming since it opened in '55. Arguably the most important part of the whole establishment, the "round table," inhabited by the regulars, has been around for about 25 to 30 years. The table is held up by



*Right, the daily morning rush has wiped out many favorite flavors.*

a large aluminum pole that is scratched and covered in duct tape, which stands, hard to miss, in the middle of the restaurant. When the Taing family took over in 2001 they did some minor renovations, adding more sit-down tables to cater to the full-service breakfast that they pioneered, but left the “round table” untouched.

Today three members of the “round table” remain from the about eight that originated it. Gail is one of the members, a long-time Allston resident who used to work in auditing. Dressed in loose jeans, a navy windbreaker, and white sneakers with a long black purse draped over her shoulder, she has short wavy white hair and wears a medium shade of red lipstick. Gail comes to Twin three to four times a week now to enjoy her small coffee and Boston cream doughnut that she has always ordered. “I come to talk to people,” says Gail who is greeted with a warm long-time familiarity by the other two older gentlemen at the table, both

of whom are still wearing their coats and have wrapped up their pickle conversation. A fourth friend, a shorter gentleman wearing a Bruins jacket, who apparently doesn’t come around as often stops by and the three “round table” members joke with him to “stay out of trouble.”

Before the “round table” crew arrives, Twin Donuts opens in the wee hours of the morning, at 4 am, to host a crowd of bartenders just getting off work and truck drivers starting their day. Catherine arrives bright and early to start the coffee, preparing some customer’s cups just how they like it before they even reach the counter. Throughout the day you can find Catherine serving food and drinks to people at their tables, manning the counter, re-organizing the Sriracha and ketchup bottles, maintaining the valuable relationships with the regulars, making new ones and making sure that the shop runs smoothly.

Mrs. Taing currently deals with most

of the finances and paperwork. Once she retires, the family is not sure if they will continue the business, according to Catherine, who is an English major from Tufts. She never imagined that she would be running a doughnut business. “My pipedream is to write a book,” once her three children have matured that is. The family also stays busy running the Brighton Café, which they acquired in 2003 and Café Mirror, which they acquired in 2004.

Why doughnuts though? “It’s an Asian thing,” says Catherine, “especially in California,” where she has cousins who also own doughnut shops. The Taing family is part of a larger Cambodian-American owned doughnut shop movement that really started around 1975 with Ted Ngoy, according to Audrey Magazine. The man who has been behind Twin Donut’s doughnuts for 25 to 30 years has carried over from the previ-

ous owners. In his tiny kitchen he provides all of the doughnuts for Twin, Café Mirror and the Brighton Café.

In an area that once held Allston-Brighton’s agricultural community and cattle trade, remains one essential piece of history that has endured, continuing to carry on Union Square’s historic legacy, thanks today to the Taing family. Twin Donuts still remains the culmination of Mr. Taing’s long-awaited dream. Sometimes the American Dream can be as sweet as doughnuts. “The shop is our livelihood, we may not be crazy passionate about doughnuts, but I think that’s our subdued personalities, we have become a part of the Brighton community, a force amongst the Dunkins,” says Catherine. ■

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Rachel DeSimone, a native New Yorker, is passionate about unique food and it fuels her writing. She is currently Editor-in-Chief of Spoon University, an online food resource for college students made up of over 1,800 contributors at more than 50 campuses. Rachel is a senior at Boston University in the School of Hospitality Administration and minoring in journalism. After graduation, she hopes to participate in the BU Gastronomy Masters program.