

SHHHH...

'A Hidden Gem'



(PETER HVIZDAK - NEW HAVEN REGISTER)

Four Seasons Market co-owner Pheng Ky, his wife Hong Key and his brother, co-owner Cheang Ky, left to right, at their family-owned market/health food store/luncheonette in Branford. The Ky's, fleeing Cambodia's khmer Rouge, immigrated here from Cambodia in 1979.

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Four Seasons Market quietly thriving after more than a decade

By Lisa Reisman

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BRANFORD » Quick. Name the family-owned lunch-hour place of choice for the Branford and East Haven Fire and Police de-

partments, employees at the Branford Post Office, at Tweed New Haven Airport, and General Appliance, as well as those from Home Depot, Carmax, and Premier Subaru.

Hint: It's not Five Guys, Jersey

Mikes, or Dunkin' Donuts. Their employees lunch there too.

Hint #2: In 2006, its current owners opened the market, which formerly specialized in organic foods and supplements. They changed its name,

but neglected to indicate on its storefront sign that beyond the fresh produce and the supplements and the wide assortment of organic foods, there's a well-stocked deli, hot bar, salad bar,

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Market

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and bakery in the back.

Which effectively has preserved The Four Seasons Market's status as, arguably, the best kept secret on the Shoreline. With the exception of the groups above. As well as all those who at midday reliably fill the parking lot, jealously guarding their hidden gem.

It's a hidden gem that almost wasn't. "It really took three or four years before we took off," said co-owner Pheng (PENG) Ky, sitting at a table in the sun-drenched eat-in area amid lively chatter and the vibrant paintings by local artists. "A couple times we were on the brink of closing this place."

The reason they didn't, Ky said: "Something inside me said to keep it going. Don't look back. Keep it going."

According to Ky, it's a mantra that he, along with his parents and six brothers and sisters, have followed since 1979 when they walked through the Cambodian jungle to Thailand, fleeing the Khmer Rouge. The brutal regime was responsible for the deaths of at least 1.7 million Cambodians, about a quarter of the country's population,

as reported by the Cambodia Genocide Program at Yale University.

"There was no food, no work," said co-owner Cheang (CHANG) Ky, Pheng's older brother, who was 13 at the time. (Pheng was 6.) "I was skin and bones." They ended up in a refugee camp on the Cambodia-Thailand border. For six months, they contended with "very harsh conditions," as Pheng put it, before finding a sponsor in the International Institute of Connecticut, a nonprofit human services agency, in Bridgeport.

Their first months in the U.S. the family spent sleeping on the floor of a church; there was no housing at the time. Then a house became available. Gradually the family acclimated. Cheang earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the University of Bridgeport, then worked at a company that developed computer chips for nine years before being laid off. Pheng graduated from UConn with a degree in accounting.

The brothers were running a successful convenience store in Stratford when they learned, in 2006, that a space was empty and available on the Branford Hill. They named it Four Seasons Market in recognition of



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The dining room is a gathering spot for regulars in the know. Here you can enjoy everything from parm subs to sliced blackened turkey clubs to Jamaican jerk chicken wrap or even breakfast for lunch - it's served all day.

the four seasons enjoyed by New England; Cambodia has a tropical climate year-round. Almost 11 years later, having weathered the early growing pains, it's thriving.

"It's a great place if you're looking for something healthy and fresh and it's really clean," said Branford's Vince Cacace who was dishing tomato-mozzarella salad and sesame noodles onto his plate as another customer ladled butternut squash soup.

"I like it because I have dietary restrictions and I know what I'm getting," another customer remarked as she considered the spicy turkey with brown rice marked "dairy" and "gluten free."

Mary Thompson of Branford comes for the Gorgonzola chicken at the hot bar. For Branford's Francis Kelley, it's the hibachi chicken with sesame seeds on Thurs-



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Four Seasons Market in Branford offers fresh baked goods - even gluten free treats.

days; the cabbage gives the dish a certain sweetness, he said.

Then there's the deli, where Pheng's father-in-law, Nguon, and his wife, Hong, prepare anything from parm subs to sliced blackened turkey clubs to Jamaican jerk chicken wrap; they also offer breakfast all day. And the fresh treats baked on-site each day at the bakery, including raspberry linzer bars, cream cheese brownies, and cupcakes, both gluten and gluten-free.

Which is likely why

glutenfreeconnecticut.com proclaimed Four Seasons "your everything" for "GF folks," referring to the hard-to-find gluten-free items in the market. There's also the assortment of organic foods as well as vitamins, natural supplements, and homeopathic remedies, and a staff on hand to offer advice.

"We help people one on one," said Jen McNabola, the face of the bakery and the go-to person on most matters natural and homeopathic for the last seven years. "We take the time."

It's that same friendly atmosphere that has the long queue of regulars forming each day starting at noon. That, and the sitting area, where "you never feel rushed if you want to sit and spend time chatting with a friend," Branford's Kathy Kessler said. Not to mention the outdoor patio which, with its pot-

ted trees and everything in blossom, is like "another world in the summer," according to Kelley.

Given this kind of acclaim, it's no wonder the Four Seasons Market has simply relied on word of mouth. Even during the struggles of the early years, Pheng said, he's depended on his customers, "keeping his ears open" as to what they want and giving them, in turn, a place to return again and again.

"This is my temple," proclaimed Chris Piccolo of East Haven, who was having his late lunch from the hot bar weighed at the counter. "I love this place." And then, quickly, he looked around.

As if, it seemed, he'd inadvertently disclosed a highly confidential matter.

Four Seasons Market is located at 875 W. Main St., Branford. 203-488-4248.



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Choices, choices: Four Seasons Market hot food bar offers diners lots of menu options. There is Gorgonzola chicken or hibachi chicken with sesame seeds. You might want to stop at the bakery portion of the store for a sweet reward.