

# Los Angeles Times

## From Virtual Slavery to Being Boss

By [Karen Robinson-Jacobs](#)  
[October 25, 2001](#) in print edition C-1



GEORGE WILHELM / Los Angeles Times

Win Chuai Ngan and his girlfriend, Sokanya Sutthiprapha, survived years of servitude in an El Monte sweatshop. Last year, they opened Win's Thai Cuisine, honored Wednesday as the Asian Pacific Islander Small Business Program's small business of the year.

Desperate to end four years of virtual slavery at a now-infamous garment factory in El Monte, Win Chuai Ngan climbed the perimeter wall, jumped down and hurried off into the darkness, uncertain where the path would lead.

Now, nearly 10 years later, he is about to mark another milestone, also begun as a leap of faith. Nov. 4 will be the one-year anniversary of the debut of Win's Thai Cuisine, a successful Van Nuys restaurant co-owned by Chuai Ngan and his girlfriend, Sokanya Sutthiprapha.

Like Chuai Ngan, Sutthiprapha worked at the S.K. Fashion factory in El Monte, an apartment building converted to a sewing sweatshop. She was freed in a 1995 raid that generated worldwide headlines.

The operators, who imprisoned scores of Thai immigrants with threats of violence or deportation, were convicted of civil rights violations and received prison terms of up to seven years.

Chuai Ngan and Sutthiprapha met shortly after the raid, and both initially returned to the garment trade. But they longed for something more.

What money they did not use for living expenses, or send back to relatives in Thailand, they saved. They fattened their nest egg with money borrowed from Chuai Ngan's younger brother, Suwichai Chuai Ngan, also an escapee who had opened a garment factory cooperative.

With help from a Thai business assistance group, the two navigated the murky waters of municipal permitting. They scoured business-for-sale ads in Thai newspapers searching for a bargain.

When they found one, they made the leap.

"The fact that they moved from virtual imprisonment to entrepreneurship is the embodiment of the ideal of entrepreneurship," said H. Cooke Sunoo, director of the Asian Pacific Islander Small Business Program, which honored Win's with its small business of the year award Wednesday.

"They overcame remarkable odds, coming out of a difficult situation to accomplish something significant," Sunoo said.

The restaurant and garment factory co-op are the only successful businesses launched by the former captives, according to officials with the Thai Community Development Center, which gave social service and business assistance to the El Monte sweatshop workers.

For Chuai Ngan and Sutthiprapha, language proved to be one of the biggest bumps along the path to proprietorship.

The two speak little English—so little that Chuai Ngan spent the first few months after opening the restaurant afraid to answer the phone, lest he confuse his English-speaking customers. (They spoke with *The Times* with the aid of an interpreter.)

To compensate, the couple hired a Thai waitress who speaks English. And, thanks to the efforts of the local Thai Chamber of Commerce, the two were able to take the required food-handling exam in Thai.

A second hurdle—one faced by many minority entrepreneurs—was access to capital.

#### Restaurant Idea Born in Trip to Thailand

Chuai Ngan, 45, said he left the sweatshop in 1992 with \$300 in his pocket.

Later he, Sutthiprapha and the other workers won settlements totaling more than \$4 million from three Los Angeles garment makers—with most workers getting \$5,000 to \$80,000. The couple declined to reveal the size of their allotment and said most of that money was sent back home long before the restaurant opened.

"After working for years we have some savings," said Chuai Ngan, the oldest of six children in a farming family in northeastern Thailand.

The idea of opening an eatery came during a visit to Thailand, said Sutthiprapha, 41, who handles the cooking.

"Everyone is eating and talking about food and somebody said, 'This kind of food foreigners like.'"

When Sutthiprapha returned to Los Angeles, she took a job as an assistant cook at a Thai restaurant in Eagle Rock, where she trained for five months.

The two mulled the idea of starting their own place, then took the plunge.

Chuai Ngan found a Thai restaurant in Van Nuys that the owner was willing to sell for \$10,000. They spent another \$10,000 on equipment, food and other expenses.

Not long into the process, they contacted the Thai CDC, which had helped Sutthiprapha get her bearings after the raid.

For many of the former captives, life on the outside was daunting enough, even without the added pressures of business ownership, officials there said.

"They did not know how to navigate the city, how to take a bus, how to use a microwave. We had to show them all of that," said Chanchanit "Chancee" Martorell, executive director of the center.

"For Win to take that next step is quite remarkable, and risky," she said.

Rachanit "Keh" Triandha, a business counselor for the Asian Pacific Islander small-business program who works with the Thai CDC, helped the couple negotiate a lease with the building's landlord.

And she shepherded them through the municipal permitting process.

#### Neighborhood Warms to New Business

The opening-day receipts were only about \$150, largely because friends and family outnumbered paying customers.

"The first day, the money we get from customers is not very much money," Sutthiprapha said. "So we are very afraid."

But things quickly picked up as a mix of white, Latino and Thai customers from nearby offices began to swing through to sample Sutthiprapha's tom kah kai (hot and sour coconut chicken soup) and yum woon sen (noodles tossed with shrimp and onions).

Today, the daily receipts are several times the first-day's modest take, they said.

It was escape, more than enterprise, that filled Chuai Ngan's thoughts in May 1992 when he decided that life in the sweatshop had become unbearable.

"I worked nonstop, 16 to 18 hours a day, making seams," Chuai Ngan said. "After the work, we'd just move around the house, not outside. They threaten us if we tried to go outside, if we tried to run away. I was afraid."

During Chuai Ngan's tenure, there were no armed guards or barbed wire blocking his escape, only a 7-foot wall—and threats from the factory operators that they would be beaten or reported to immigration authorities if they tried to flee.

Finally, at 4 a.m. one night, desperation propelled Chuai Ngan over the wall.

"I waited until everyone went to bed. Then, I sneaked out," he said.

As entrepreneurs, the couple's working hours are long—Win's is open seven days a week, most days for 11 hours—but the pace is far less onerous.

There are other differences, both obvious and subtle.

Beyond pride of ownership, there are

"The old work is harder, you have to concentrate a lot so you can finish everything," Chuai Ngan said. "You have to push, push."

"In here, we can stop and rest any time we want," Sutthiprapha added.

And, Chuai Ngan said with a broad grin, "We can go anywhere we want."

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