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'I thought I'd take a chance'

By KURT BEGALKA - kbegalka@nwherald.com
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ALGONQUIN – Sombour “Sam” Phounsavat arrived in the United States 23 years ago, a 17-year-old from Thailand who spoke little English and had few marketable skills.

But Phounsavat, who owns the new @ Bangkok Thai and sushi restaurant, insists that he had everything he needed to succeed – most of all, an adopted country.

“I did not want to study Russian and go to the Soviet Union for secondary school,” Phounsavat said. “A lot of young people were coming to the United States. We were looking for something better. We wanted an education, something challenging.”

Phounsavat grew up near the Laotian border in Nong Khai, Thailand. He speaks Thai, as well as fluent Vietnamese.

He learned English mostly from reading – as well as his exposure to American TV and movies. His favorite actors are Brad Pitt and Madeleine Stowe (“The Last of the Mohicans”). His favorite movie is “Heat,” starring Robert DeNiro. Music? He loves Metallica.

Phounsavat, 41, of Lake in the Hills is a big fan of American culture and lifestyle. He became a citizen 13 years ago in Detroit.

He graduated with a degree in business marketing in 2001 from Eastern Michigan University and went to work selling exhaust systems for a company in Orlando, Fla.

It was there that he noticed a shuttered fast-food restaurant near the University of Central Florida campus.

“I thought I'd take a chance,” said Phounsavat, who said he was pretty unflappable.

He hired a sushi expert and spent three months learning the tricks of the trade. While visiting a cousin in Huntley over the July 4th holiday, he heard a rumor that the former Mai Thai restaurant was going out of business.

He bought the business, remodeled the place at Algonquin and Square Barn roads, and opened Aug. 29.

“I love this area outside Chicago so much,” he said. “It’s not too busy. There are cornfields. It is relaxing. I felt it right away.”

He relishes that sense of place, that sense of history. In his home country, he said, many young people were clueless about the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail – a network of roads built from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia.

Entrées at Phounsavat’s restaurant cost about \$10. Lunch specials range from \$8 to \$11. They include Jade Dragon Rolls filled with tempura shrimp and asparagus, and wrapped with avocado slices. Phounsavat favors Spider Rolls, filled with soft-shell crab, and Thai Panang curry.

Although he lacks the skills to prepare the likes of blowfish, Phounsavat works his magic on octopus, tuna, eel, salmon and red snapper.

Coupled with his people skills and penchant for modern marketing, he hopes to attract many McHenry County residents – even if it means 12-hour days.

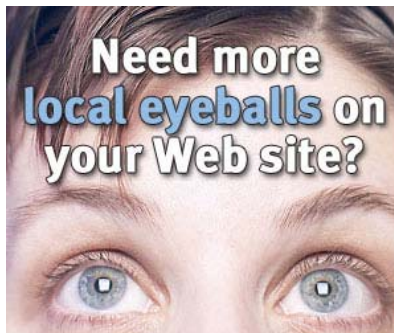
The restaurant is capable of seating 75 diners amid a couple flat-screen TVs and warm decor. He anticipates getting village approval Tuesday to serve beer and wine.

“I hope this concept works,” he said. “We’re offering upscale food at good prices. Even in college, I was planning already.”

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A sample of sushi and appetizers from @Bangkok. (Shaun Sartin photo)



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