



THE FACE

LAUREN WILSON

meets

PAULINE NGUYEN

WRITER and RESTAURATEUR

PAULINE Nguyen is a delicate beauty: petite, fine-featured with high cheekbones, she speaks with a quiet intensity. But it would be a profound mistake to call her fragile.

Restaurant owner, filmmaker, boat person, writer and victim of abuse: all are labels one could pin on Nguyen, but she is not easily defined by one-dimensional tags.

With her brother Luke and her husband, chef Mark Jensen, she owns the award-winning restaurant Red Lantern in Sydney's Surry Hills, which runs to capacity nearly every night.

For most young mothers — Nguyen has a three-year-old daughter, Mia Angel — a busy, inner-city restaurant would be enough. But a year ago Nguyen found the time to write an immensely personal family memoir.

Secrets of the Red Lantern weaves the turbulent history of Nguyen's family, with the recipes it has passed down through generations. The result is a culinary and literary treat, but according to Nguyen the writing process was at times very difficult.

"My main motivation for writing the book was my daughter. Her father's story and my story are so different and mine was a story I knew needed to be told. I wanted to document things for my daughter, but at the time I didn't know what direction it was going to go in," she says.

It is fitting Nguyen's daughter was the inspiration for a book that focuses on her relationship with her strict Vietnamese father.

"It wasn't my intention to have the book scathing about my father, there is a lot of love and respect there. I was just looking back to try and understand why things were the way they were.

"And I had to look internally, as well as to the history, to find answers so I would stop holding on to all the anger and all the hate," she says.

Nguyen and her family escaped from Vietnam in 1977. They were forced to spend a year in a Thai refugee camp, before settling in Cabramatta in Sydney's outer west.

Nguyen describes her parents as workaholics who struggled to communicate emotionally with their four children. Her father, a natural entrepreneur who worked tirelessly to build a mini-empire for his family in Cabramatta, was also at times a harsh and violent disciplinarian.

Throughout the book Nguyen's treatment of the abuse she suffered at the hands of her father is subtle, but its effects permeate the memoir.

"There are things we've held back, there's a fine line between being open and being gratuitous. There was some of it that had to be told to reach the universal themes of forgiveness, hope and redemption, but there was a lot that was unnecessary to say at this stage," she says.

Writing the book has taken Nguyen's life in an unexpected direction.

When she was two chapters shy of finishing it, her parents paid an impromptu visit to the restaurant, on the day she happened to be working on the layout of the book with her editorial team.

Seeing family pictures and proofs spread out over the tables of the Red Lantern prompted her father to demand a copy of the unfinished manuscript to read.

"My intention was to finish the book and give it to him in its entirety,"



Nguyen says. But she decided that it was something that had to be done eventually, so she reluctantly handed the unfinished family saga over to her father.

“I actually didn’t hear from my dad for a few months,” she remembers.

On Father’s Day Nguyen went to see him with a case of his favourite red wines. She asked him what he thought of the book. “He just said, ‘Oh the fish sauce recipe is wrong.’ I was so deflated.”

After a few glasses of red Nguyen broached the subject again, only to get the same response. Finally, towards the end of the visit Nguyen asked her father one final time how he felt about the book.

“This time he said to me, ‘Do you know why

CLOSE-UP

Career highlight: Definitely opening the restaurant and writing the book.

Career lowlight: Realising I wasn’t very good at film production.

Secret indulgence: Massages and acupuncture.

Favourite dish: Spicy bun bo hue soup.

Favourite book: *Wuthering Heights*.

Pet hate: People with no manners.

Buddha sits on a lotus flower? There is nothing more beautiful than a lotus flower. It grows out of mud and watery chaos yet remains so pure and unpoluted by it.

“He said, ‘My children are lotus flowers; you grew out of the aftermath of war, you grew out of Cabramatta during its murkiest time and most importantly you grew out of me. I am mud, I am dirt.’ ”

With that Nguyen says she received the acknowledgement she had been searching for since her childhood. The restaurant owner-cum-writer has

since been able to move forward. She completed the family history in 2006 and now enjoys a greatly improved relationship with her parents.

“The book has done so many wonderful things, and my father is very proud of it, although he’s never said it.”

There is something remarkably assured about Nguyen’s demeanour. She carries the unmistakable air of reliance characteristic of a woman who has experienced suffering but has found contentment.

Nguyen says the most astonishing part of writing the family memoir is the response from readers.

“I’m just on this journey at the moment, I get four or five letters a week from people all around

Australia, which is an incredible honour.” She becomes emotional when she speaks of the letters sent to Red Lantern by people touched by her book and cannot hold back tears as she recalls a letter from one white Australian woman. The woman wrote to Nguyen confessing she was always unable to empathise with the migrant children she bullied at school, until she sat down and read the memoir.

Now 20 years later the woman said Nguyen’s honesty had prompted her to re-evaluate her own life find a way to make amends to all those she had bullied.

But despite the positive response her first foray into writing has received, and her invitation to speak at this month’s Perth Writers Festival, Nguyen still sees herself primarily as a restaurant owner.

“I really don’t think of myself as a real writer, I may have a way with words but it is not something I do every day,” she says.

Following from the success of the memoir, Nguyen has been approached to write a second book, but is yet to decide on whether she could put herself and her family through the confrontational writing process once again.

In the meantime she continues to juggle Red Lantern and motherhood.

Her face lights up when she talks about her young daughter, to whom the book is dedicated.

“When she’s old enough to really appreciate my words I want to pass on to her all of the lessons I’ve learned the hard way: forgiveness, compassion and all the stuff I have only recently learned though having a daughter and having the will to change.”

Pauline Nguyen will speak at the Perth Writers Festival.



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