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Urban Life 101

Professor Lim

Visual Essay Assignment

Phnom Penh – Nha Trang Market

Phnom Penh – Nha Trang Market is a great representation of Asian gastronomy amidst a highly dominated Hispanics and African American neighborhood. The distinctive Asian grocery store which has been supplying Asian ingredients and dishes for almost two decades is a significant witness of my physical and a preserver of my cultural growth.

Phnom Penh – Nha Trang Market, as I always call Nha Trang is located on 2639 Jerome Ave., Bronx, NY 10468 and first opened in 2001. The store is surrounded with other businesses: delis, Vietnamese restaurants Com Tam Ninh Kieu and Chinese Food take-out Double Dragon along with numerous Hispanic restaurants, McDonald's, nail supply stores, St. James park, apartment buildings, and number 4 Kingsbridge subway station. Though Nha Trang seems to be submerged by the glamorous and flashy LED neon sign panels or standee banners of other stores, the store still stands out with its own unique identity. A simple panel with a white background and the name of the store in a navy blue color delivers a sense of nostalgia of Vietnam golden time in the past to any passerby including me. As a person who appreciates our past and tries to maintain those precious values, why would I not miss a chance to pay a visit to Nha Trang? In addition to that is the convenience of Nha Trang. Goods are organized and made visible to customers and space is utilized to its fullness. There are narrow aisles and tall shelves full of goods within my reach. All I need to do is to walk to the shelves, tip my toes a bit and voila, get the items I want; another advantage is that I do not have to wander around for several hours to look for items. For all the reasons above, Nha Trang becomes a remarkable place to my personal preference. More than that is the versatility in ingredients Nha Trang can provide to local Asian.

Nha Trang is home of Asian ingredients that cannot be found in any other local markets. The store provides a wide variety of Asian spices, herbs, seasonings, and exotic ingredients that I use to replicate all my mom's Vietnamese signature dishes. When I need to buy ingredients to cook Bun Bo Hue (Vietnamese spicy beef soup), I can pop in Nha Trang and collect a bunch of herbs like Thai basil, recau, bean sprouts, cilantro, laksa leaves, as well as shrimp paste, annatto oil and Vietnamese udon to cook with my brisket in within 10-minute walk. On the counter next to the entry are Vietnamese and Cambodian special snacks like banana coconut milk sweet, mung bean sticky rice cake and fried sesame balls. Obviously I can never resist the temptation of getting at least one item! This is also a smart way to introduce to the non-Asian customers ordinary yet delicious and nutritious food. As Nha Trang not only sells Asian-related produce but also common goods to non-Asian, it is understandable if Nha Trang attracts different types of customers.

Ninety percent of Nha Trang's customers are Asian live around the block (about 300-400 of them), Hispanics and Blacks make up the rest ten and they all really appreciate Nha Trang merchandise. As Nha Trang is a family-oriented business, everyone in the family helps organize, stock and package goods. Every time I go there, there are a few of them listening to Cambodian songs while packaging fresh herbs and vegetables they brought from Chinatown. They sometimes yell in Khmer so one of them could break out from the very peaceful and profound atmosphere to help customers. The store owner, as I usually call Ms. Nha Trang is a lovely and kind lady. She always walks around to help customers get their items and loves to chat with her customers at the counter about their business and their family. She treats her customers as her family members and does her best to maintain their satisfactions. The recent COVID-19 epidemic has the local Asian anxious but Ms. Nha Trang tries to calm them down and provide any bulk orders of rice, fish sauce or instant ramens. The store constantly restocks to ensure that the neighborhood is well supplied and remains in peace. That is what I call looking out to the community!

Not only Phnom Penh – Nha Trang Market acts as a place to provide Asian merchandise to the locals but the store also strengthens Asian community, connects people, erases language barriers and stereotypes, diversifies the community as a whole, and enriches the value of this neighborhood. Since Nha Trang has been in the area since 2001, I wonder how much changes the owner has witnessed, how the store has survived through SARS and recessions, and why the owner chose to open Nha Trang in this neighborhood. If possible, I would love to conduct an interview with the owner to clarify my doubts!



