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St. Louis Character: Suchin Prapaisilp

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Suchin Prapaisilp longed for the American Dream. So in 1975, at the age of 23, the Thailand native moved to the U.S. in search of opportunity.

Today, he is living that dream with his portfolio of international grocery stores and ethnic restaurants. As the owner of Global Foods Market, King and I Thai Restaurant, Oishi Sushi, Oishi Sushi & Steakhouse and United Provisions, and co-founder of Jay International Food Corp., Prapaisilp is bringing food from around the globe to be enjoyed in St. Louis.

Prapaisilp, 63, grew up in Thailand in a large family with little money, and always had a vision for a bigger, brighter future. As one of eight children, he couldn't afford to go to college. So he followed his brother, Jay, to America — the land of opportunity they had seen in



DILIP VISHWANAT

movies. Arriving with little business acumen, Prapaisilp began taking odd jobs. He started his day early, working from 4:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. as a donut maker, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at a tool factory, and from 5:30 p.m. until after midnight as a busboy, making just a couple of dollars an hour at each job. "I would sleep outside the donut shop to make sure I wasn't late the next day," Prapaisilp recalled. "I would always give my boss 100 percent, because I was so appreciative that he gave me a job."

After saving about \$3,000, Prapaisilp and his brother opened Jay International Food Corp., the first store its kind in the city, in the '70s.

"It was really the lack of international cuisine back in the day in St. Louis that inspired me to open my first business," Prapaisilp said. "St. Louis is a diverse city, full of people from all over the world. Many of them have migrated to the U.S. in search of better opportunities just like I did. But, oftentimes, culture shock can be difficult. One of the strongest memories people have of their homelands is their food. So I wanted to try to give people a little piece of their home."

Prapaisilp's international grocery stores — Global Foods Market, United Provisions and Jay International Food Corp. — sell Asian, African, Japanese, Eastern and Western European foods and more from the native lands themselves, all with respect to each culture's food preparation traditions. And Prapaisilp's native cuisine has been being served at his King and I Thai Restaurant for 35 years, while his Oishi Sushi and Oishi Sushi & Steakhouse restaurants offer authentic Japanese fare.

For his business success and commitment to the Thai community in the region, Prapaisilp recently was named the Asian Business Owner of the Year by the Asian American Chamber of Commerce of St. Louis (AACC).

"Suchin is a visionary who has altered St. Louis' culinary scene, and is a notable example of Asian entrepreneurs in the region," said Al Li, president of AACC.

In addition to gaining loyal customers through the years, many of Prapaisilp's employees have been working for him for almost 30 years. The business also has remained a family affair, with Prapaisilp's wife and business partner, Sue, and his daughter, Tiffany, working at Global Foods Market, and his oldest son, Shayn, working in an executive role overseeing strategy and operations. Prapaisilp's youngest son, Jay, is attending George Washington University, and hopes to return to help with the family business upon graduation next year. "I always tell my son," Prapaisilp said, "if you try as hard as you can and don't give up, you can make it."

What was it like when you first moved to the U.S.? Once, when I was making a delivery on Christmas Eve, a man asked me why I was working on a holiday. He told me to come inside out of the cold, and he gave me a cup of tea. It made me warm and appreciative. Sometimes, people see foreigners, and they are afraid to talk to them. But he wasn't. After that, I came back to his house and helped him work on his car and cut his grass. From that one cup of tea, we became friends.

Tell us about your career background. I came to the U.S. with little formal business experience. The jobs I took on were not about building a resume. Working multiple jobs was a necessity. So in the 1970s, when I opened my first grocery store, Jay International Food Corp., with my brother, it was a gamble. It was either going to work or it wasn't. Luckily, it did, and I was able to pursue the American Dream even further.

Describe your other markets. In 1999, we opened Global Foods Market in Kirkwood, and today we offer 42,000 products from around the world. I knew we had proven the concept with Jay International. With a growing immigrant population, I was confident that the customers were out there. We just had to earn their trust. We're constantly adjusting what we order based on our customers' needs. If someone asks for a product we don't carry, we will try our best to get it to them. Much later on, we opened United Provisions in the Delmar Loop in

2014. It has a much more modern feel, but the foundation is the same as Global Foods Market. We still sell groceries with an international twist, but we also serve food to go, and even fresh sushi. It was our intention to give people even more access to foods that they're familiar with — and maybe even expose them to new cuisines.

How have your businesses grown through the years, and what's next for your company? When we opened Jay International in the 1970s, an international grocery store was a totally new concept. My brother and I would have to drive back and forth to Chicago to source our products. Now, we work with many suppliers around the world to ensure a diverse array of products. As for the future, the grocery and restaurant businesses require lots of attention to detail. We're always focusing on customer satisfaction and making sure that we have their trust.

Do you plan to open more markets? I will never say no to new opportunities. But, right now, we are more focused on growth of our current businesses — especially with United Provisions since it's our newest venture. The grocery business is very grueling and requires a lot of attention. You can't really take your eye off it, or it will get the better of you. That's why a lot of my energy is on Global Foods Market and United Provisions. We have been asked about expanding to different states, but you have to wait for the right time. I want all of our businesses to be strong and stable. I don't want to go too fast.

What is your typical weekday like? I wake up early in the morning, go to work, and then I'll come home to be with the family. With multiple businesses, you have to be disciplined with your time management. Every night, I write down a list of what I will do for tomorrow. There are only a certain number of hours in a day, so I try to make every minute count.

What do you enjoy doing outside of work? I have a lot of family in the St. Louis area, and we will get together a couple times a month to relax and catch up. If it's a nice day, we'll grill outside and enjoy the weather.

Tell us about your volunteer work. I'm involved with Wat Phrasriratanaram, the Thai temple in St. Louis. I believe it's important to keep the Thai community together and to make sure that our culture stays strong and vibrant. Every year we celebrate Songkran, the Thai New Year, and we invite people from all over St. Louis to come experience the food, the dance and the culture. I'm also involved with the Asian American Chamber of Commerce.

What is your advice to young people who are starting their careers?

Don't be afraid to work hard. A lot of the time when I look at the younger generation, they have these grand dreams and want to be successful, but they fall short in their work ethic. Sometimes success won't come so easily, and you'll fail multiple times. The key is to stay determined. If something doesn't work, try something else. Next time you'll know not to make the same mistakes, and you'll be prepared for the future. When you're in business, you have to pay attention, work hard, never give up and look at the big picture, then you will succeed.