

The Blind Goat
409 Travis St. #367
Houston, TX 77002
Www.theblindgoat.com

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Sub-Committee on Select Revenue Measures
Committee on Ways and Means
U.S. House of Representatives

Chairman Thompson and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony as a restaurant owner during the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Christine Ha, and my foray into cooking began when I was in college at The University of Texas at Austin. As the child of Vietnamese refugees who fled Saigon on April 29, 1975, just one day before its imminent fall, I grew up eating a lot of Vietnamese food. Back in the 1980s, pork belly and oxtail were not the trendy cuts of meat they are today, but rather the cheap parts that were what my family could afford. My mother took these less desirable ingredients and transformed them into tasty dishes that went a long way feeding our family.

I never got to learn these recipes from my mother as she died five days before I turned fourteen. Five years later, I found myself at college greatly missing the flavors of my youth. I decided to teach myself how to cook Vietnamese food simply by reading cookbooks and attempting to recreate my mother's dishes from memory. Our little campus apartment kitchen reeked of onion and fish sauce, but the stink was all worth it when I placed a pot full of chicken braised in ginger on the table, and my friends gobbled everything up.

Coincidentally in my twenties, I also began losing my vision due to an autoimmune disease that affects the optic nerves and spinal cord. I had to leave my corporate job as my health continued to deteriorate, and I eventually decided to do a complete career change and return to school for creative writing. The semester I was supposed to graduate with a Master of Fine Arts from University of Houston, I decided to audition for a televised cooking competition for amateur home cooks called MasterChef. While being the only blind contestant was a definite disadvantage, the story of my parents leaving everything behind to escape on a U.S. Naval ship reminded me of the cruciality of perseverance, and as their daughter, I possessed the very same grit. In September 2012, Gordon Ramsay declared me the season 3 winner of MasterChef America.

Seven years later, in July 2019, I finally opened my very first restaurant in Houston, The Blind Goat. We are a 400-square-foot station inside a food hall in downtown Houston, a true independent, small “mom-and-pop” shop. At The Blind Goat, we serve dishes reminiscent of my mother’s cooking, but with my own personal twist and sensibilities. As an American-born child of immigrant parents who lived most of my life in Houston, there’s a little Texas barbecue and a dash of Tex-Mex among the predominantly Vietnamese flavors on the menu.

Immediately when we opened, The Blind Goat was slammed. There were still many fans of the show who were curious to taste my food. We were beginning to see our sales revenue climb above \$80,000 a month. On December 31, 2019, the Houston Chronicle published a restaurant review of The Blind Goat and awarded us three stars. A few weeks later, I learned The Blind Goat made the James Beard Foundation’s long list for Best New Restaurant in America. Never in a million years did I ever think a blind home cook like me could open a little stall in a food hall and be recognized with such an honor.

As many of you may recall, it was shortly thereafter when we learned that the novel coronavirus had made its way to the United States. On March 16, we quickly pivoted to doing only take-out and delivery, closing our doors to outside traffic in

order to ensure our staff felt safe. We purchased Personal Protective Equipment in a scant market full of price gouging, and we saw our cost of goods sharply rise as a result of shortages due to the COVID-19 outbreaks at meatpacking plants and a crumbling supply chain. In May, The Blind Goat made \$7,600, more than a ninety-percent drop in sales. The steep decline in revenue combined with the increase in cost of running our business made it obvious that we would not be sustainable for much longer.

My first priority was to do whatever it takes to keep the lights on at The Blind Goat. We have been a source of joy for so many, from our staff to our guests to our community, that I knew I could not close our doors, even if it eventually meant John and I would have to figure out how to inject more operating capital. My second priority was to take care of our team. I affectionally call them my GOATs (after the great boxer Muhammad Ali's moniker, "Greatest Of All Time"). I lost sleep over concern for their health and safety, and their ability to feed their own families and pay their bills. I spent countless hours every day applying for financial relief programs so that I could pass along the aid to my GOATs.

I applied for the Paycheck Protection Program and was denied in the first round of funding. Fortunately, we did receive \$91,080 in PPP money during the second round. Quite frankly, without this PPP forgivable loan, The Blind Goat would not be open right now.

We had about sixteen to eighteen employees on staff at The Blind Goat pre-pandemic. Before COVID-19, my staff was making an average of \$24 to \$33 per hour, inclusive of tips. After we ostensibly shut down in the interest of public health, tips became non-existent. In order to mitigate their income losses, I gave many of them temporary pay bumps and supplemented their tips so that no one on staff was making less than \$20 per hour. This was only made possible because of the PPP—it has undoubtedly been our lifeline.

Out of the ten or so financial relief programs I'd applied for, the only two The Blind Goat received were the PPP and a \$2,500 grant from the Texas Restaurant

Association. These funds were used to help us pay for PPE and inventory. It also allowed us to donate individually packed meals to first responders working the COVID-19 frontlines at our county hospitals and clinics. One of the core values at The Blind Goat is “Commit to helping others around you,” and so in spite of our own challenges, we did what we did best to lift others’ spirits, and that was to feed them.

As I write this, our PPP money has just been depleted with the most recent payroll. I will have to tell my GOATs this week that they will all be seeing an upcoming decrease in their paychecks as I have no more financial aid to give them.

I got into the hospitality industry because I love welcoming people to my table and feeding them good food. This week, I am opening my second restaurant in Houston called Xin Chào, which means “hello” in Vietnamese. I had signed the lease on this stand-alone space in December and obviously did not have a clue what would unfold in 2020 with the pandemic. But if my parents have taught me anything, it’s to figure out how to play the hand that I was dealt.

Local, independent restaurants such as The Blind Goat and Xin Chào are the neighborhood spots you frequent with your family on the weekends for a piping hot bowl of goat curry or a glass of iced coffee with sweetened condensed milk. We’re the place you come to when you want to celebrate a special occasion with a Texas Wagyu ribeye steak cooked in butter and oyster sauce with a glass of pinot noir. We say to you, “Xin chào,” when you sit down at your usual table with your friends and colleagues for a round of Saigon Old Fashioneds and scallops grilled with kim chi butter. But without additional financial help from the federal government, small, independent, family-run restaurants like mine will not survive.

My parents came to America to make a better life for themselves and their future daughter. Whether it’s to practice law (my mother’s dream), be financially independent (my father’s dream), grow a business and serve others through hospitality (my dream), or just cook an amazing meal (the dream of many of my GOATs), we all see The United States of America as the ultimate Land of

Opportunity. Mr. Chairman and Members of this Committee, I urge you from the bottom of my heart to please consider passing legislation to help the hundreds of thousands of individuals like my mother, my father, my staff, and me continue to realize our American Dreams.

With best regards,

Christine Ha

Partner & Chef

The Blind Goat & Xin Chào