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A LOCAL LINK TO ASIA

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Abstract/Digest:

SOME SAY A MAIN ROAD IN NORTHEAST MIAMI-DADE HAS BECOME SOUTH FLORIDA'S BUSINESSES SERVING THE REGION'S ASIAN COMMUNITIES

Article Text:

Shirley Liu dreams of looking out of her family's North Miami Beach shop and seeing a stories-t welcoming drivers as they drive west along 167th Street in Northeast Miami-Dade.

She dreams of the stretch being officially recognized as "Chinatown," similar to the well-known Francisco.

"This is already like South Florida's Chinatown, without the formal name," says the 23-year-old Miami China City store -- where you can get everything from bamboo to Kung Fu movies -- sinc

With or without a formal designation, Winnie Tang, president of the South Florida chapter of the says the area will always be known as a primary destination for Asian businesses and visitors.

"It is the only place that you can send out-of-town guests and know that they will be able to find Tang.

Over the years, North Miami Beach's main thoroughfare -- which curves into Northeast 163rd St -- an unincorporated Miami-Dade -- has attracted dozens of businesses that are owned by Asians or a bank, bakery, restaurants, salons and acupuncturists.

Why North Miami Beach? Demographers may cite factors such as cost-of-living and a central location. There is also a Chinese practice of feng shui, which translates to "wind and water" and deals with creating or adjusting the arrangement of objects and surroundings.

SET FOR SUCCESS

More simply put, the corridor's location is well-placed for success.

Shirley's father Robert Liu says that's why he opened Miami China City on 167th Street 15 years ago. It's located on Interstate 95 to the ocean to a dragon, with I-95 being the head and the ocean being the tail. He wanted to allow people easy access to the store, while the tail represents the water, which symbolizes

"More water means more money," he said.

There are some notable differences between South Florida's "Chinatown" and the more well-known San Francisco.

Here, the businesses are not concentrated in a compact area, but interspersed along a stretch of

NEARLY 'HIDDEN'

"It's almost like we're hidden," Tang says.

Another difference: the bustling Asian business community -- which includes other immigrant groups from China, Tang said -- does not translate to a huge residential enclave in the city.

According to U.S. Census figures from 2000, the latest available, 1,673 of 40,768 North Miami Beach residents are Asian, about 4.1 percent.

Tang, whose organization draws members from Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, is spread throughout South Florida, with residential concentrations in Pembroke Pines, Coral Springs and

But Tang said the domino effect played a role in the development of North Miami Beach's Chinese community. "When immigrants came over, they would see a business open and then they would follow," she said.

SPECIAL ITEMS

At PK Oriental Mart, fish heads sit on ice and pork, duck and chicken hang from wire hooks. Customers can order items like lechon kawali, a deep-fried pork dish, and turon, an egg roll stuffed with

One shopping plaza at Northeast 163rd Street and 12th Avenue houses at least five Asian businesses, including restaurants, a travel agency, an Asian market and a nail salon -- all announced with signs bearing the word "Asian."

"When I first came here about 24 years ago, there were not that authentic Chinese restaurants, like Garden. "A lot of people are looking for some real Chinese cooking besides the chow mein or things like that."

FRESH FISH, LOBSTER

Inside Bamboo Garden, fresh tilapia swim in a tank next to lobster, both waiting to be someone's dinner, placed on tables while customers decide what they want to order.

"This dish is very special," Cher Chamroontad said, pointing to what was left of a steamed fish (and other dishes) at very many places."

A few stores down, Mary Ann Bakery specializes in Chinese desserts.

On a recent Friday, Annie Cheng of Boca Raton made her weekly stop at the bakery, where fruit tarts, cookies and roast pork buns line the shelves alongside SpongeBob SquarePants birthday cake.

Cheng said the difference between Chinese and American bakeries is not just what's on the outside. She said the desserts are often less sweet than American fare. She added that getting a traditional whipped cream icing that tastes more buttery than sugary, and is made from a light sponge cake.

"It is worth the drive," she said as she toted a chestnut cake.

Aside from consumer goods, the stretch also includes several businesses that serve a large Asian clientele, including a lawyer and CPA and a bank -- by virtue of having staff fluent in Asian languages.

ABLE TO TRANSLATE

At Great Eastern Bank of Florida, employees can help translate banking forms for customers who don't speak Mandarin.

"People feel comfortable in their own language," said Michelle Li, a customer service representative.

Though the city has not officially designated a Chinatown, it does accommodate the Asian population. In response to a string of robberies -- one fatal -- targeting Asian restaurants and shops, the police department hosted a crime prevention workshop for Asian business owners.

Last month, the city's performing arts center hosted the Miss Florida Asia pageant.

And the city's library offers an extensive collection of books and magazines in Cantonese and Mandarin.

CO-EXISTING CULTURES

Befitting its place in South Florida's melting pot, North Miami Beach's Chinatown co-exists with markets that mark the city's other prominent cultural enclaves.

While there are no immediate plans for an official Chinatown designation by North Miami Beach reflects the city's diversity.

"We encourage everyone of any culture to bring their business here," he says.

Miami Herald staff reporters Rob Barry and Lisa Arthur contributed to this report.

Caption:

PHOTOS BY ALEXIA FODERE/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD ELEGANT ITEMS: Victoria Liu, left, the Miami China City store, which is one of many Asian businesses concentrated along the 167

ON THE MOVE: A busy waiter carries a tray at the Bamboo Garden Chinese restaurant.

PHOTOS BY ALEXIA FODERE/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD RESTAURATEUR Paul Yan, owner stands before a fish tank in a dining area of his business. 'A lot of people are looking for some r

A DELICACY: Xue Yee picks out a cooked duck for a customer at PK Oriental Mart.

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