

CLASSIC INN RESTAURANT

How the American Dream Led to a Local Classic

When Linh Reiter came to the United States, she tried a little Chinese food. It didn't take too many bites for her to realize she could use her knowledge to create more authentic and tasty menus.

And now, 42 years later, the Vietnam native is still operating a restaurant in Great Bend. She owns the Classic Inn, 230 S. Patton Road, where she has been attracting customers since 1987. "I have lived in Singapore, Hong Kong, The Philippines and Thailand," Reiter said. "I know how good oriental food is made and how it should taste."

"I love food," she continued. "I don't drink; I don't smoke. But I do have this love for food and want to share it with others."

Prior to the Classic Inn, Reiter operated the Oriental Restaurant in the 2000 block of Forest and at 10th and Washington. She also spent a year in the kitchen of the old Holiday Inn on West 10th Street.

While Reiter and her team of chefs use the same spices and herbs as others, "it is the way we put them together that is a little bit different," she said, indicating her dishes are a blend of Vietnamese, Chinese and other Asian cuisines.

And then there is the Saturday night prime rib. On a recent evening during hunting season, Classic Inn served five, 15-pound prime ribs. On the usual Saturday night, she carves "only" three. "They always ask me how an Asian restaurant can make such good prime rib," Reiter laughed. "Whether it's oriental food or prime rib, people start lining up. They say I must put a drug in my food to keep them coming back."

A number of customers also get their fix at the lunch buffet, which she started after noticing many Chinese restaurants offer this convenience. "Our buffet is popular because it is fresh. I don't want a buffet to sit around for hours. It has to be fresh. You could make another one for dinner but we don't have enough people for that."



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In addition to the dining area, Classic Inn has two rent-free private rooms for civic organizations and other groups. One seats 40, the other 20. Currently, the groups using the rooms include the Lions Club, Pilot Club, The Shriners, Rotary Club, N.A.C.E., a book club and the local bar association. "We don't charge rent, just the food costs," Reiter noted. "It is better to have the rooms in use than leaving them sit vacant because of rental costs. When you charge rent, you are not filling the rooms."

A large majority of lunch customers choose the buffet but the menu is available with some American selections. However, the buffet includes American favorites such as chicken wings and meatballs, with an oriental twist.

In addition to the day-to-day offerings, Classic Inn also caters to crowds that attract at least 100 people, such as the Sunflower Diversified Services Charity Gala and the Chamber of Commerce banquet.

Many home cooks may be surprised to hear Reiter's reason for catering only to large groups. "If you are going to cook for 10 people, it might as well be 100, considering the containers and the labor. It's the same thing."

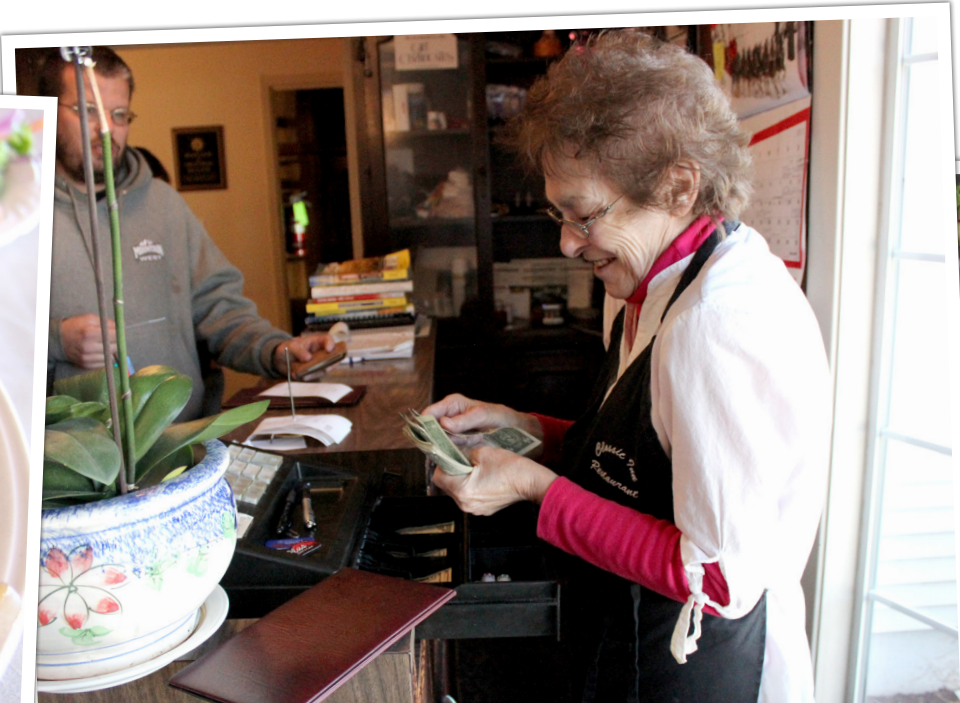
In the beginning, Reiter had about 10 employees – all family members. Today, there are 15; she and her husband, Bob, are the only two family members. She gives much credit to her team for the Classic Inn's success over the years.

"I treat my staff right and I treat the customers right," she said. "Great Bend is my home. I have lived here longer than I did in Vietnam. Great Bend has helped me a lot and it has been good for business."

Before getting into the full-time restaurant business, Reiter worked at the Petroleum Club and Social & Rehabilitation Services, both formerly of Great Bend.

Her background also includes setting up the food-and-beverage service at two casinos – 4 Bears in New Town, N.D., and Morongo Casino & Resort in Cabazon, Ca. Reiter won a merit award for being Business Woman of the Year from the Kansas Department of Commerce. "I have always worked hard. It takes the same amount of time to do a bad job as it does to do a good job. Actually, it takes more time to do a bad job because you have to go back and fix it."

Reiter acknowledged there were some struggles early on. "Being a woman and a foreigner in business was kind of tough," she recalled. "We had to face a lot of challenges. But we have overcome them. I am a survivor." —



The Trip of a Lifetime

In 2017, Linh Reiter was one of 19 family members to visit Vietnam, where she lived in an orphanage and was later adopted. Her grandson suggested the trip after earning his degree in electrical/mechanical engineering.

"This is what he wanted," Reiter said, noting she is proud of her five children and the rest of her family. "The trip to Vietnam was a good education for all of us. My kids and grandkids refer to it as the trip of a lifetime. We saw an old woman and a young boy selling fruit and other items along the road. It is very hard there and you can't find work. This is why America is great; you have opportunities."

The good thing about a large group is "you get your own tour bus. They treat you like kings. They hope tourists will come."



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