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Refugees taste American Dream

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Cambodians see doughnut industry as icing on cake

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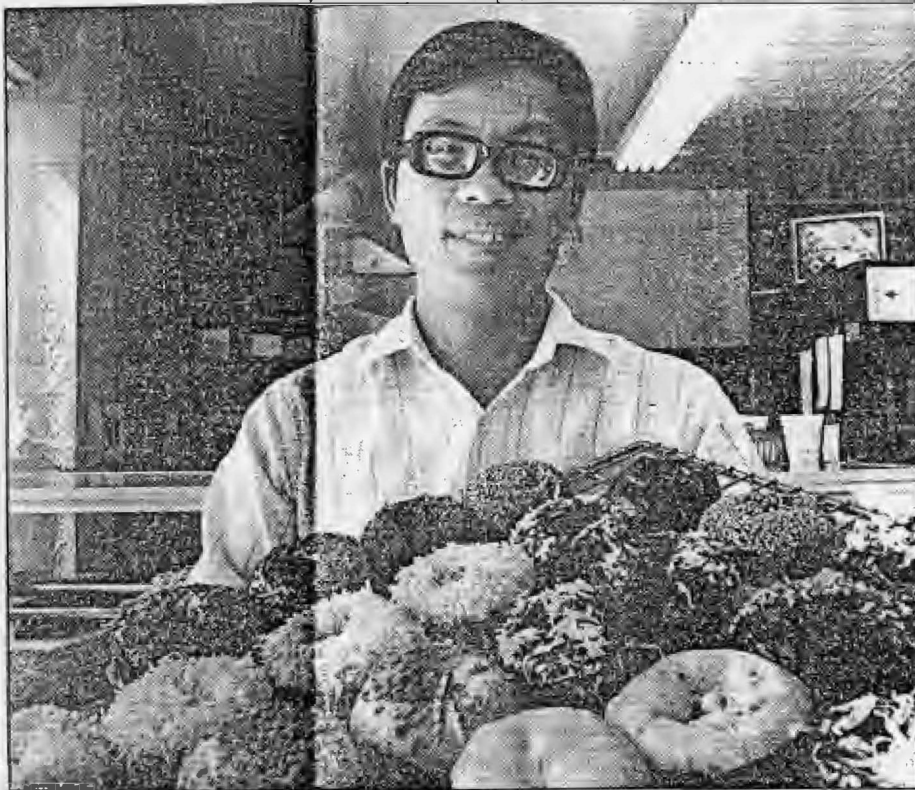
At night when he closes his eyes after 14 hours on the job, Frank Nhul envisions a doughnut empire. He sees franchises, wholesale bakeries and an army of deliverymen.

He and two partners already own seven doughnut shops in the Bay Area. This summer, they will open up a supply center in Hayward that will cater to dozens of Cambodian entrepreneurs who run their own shops.

Nhul is part of a wave of Cambodian immigrants who are seizing the doughnut business as a way to make the American Dream come true. Despite the fact that Nhul doesn't have a taste for the fried pastries, selling them has allowed him to buy two new cars and pay the rent on his four-bedroom San Francisco house.

"It seems my people are taking over the business," said Nhul, sitting in Jelly Donut, his shop at 24th Street and South Van Ness Avenue. "The reason we took it over is because it's hard and you have to work all the time. Most people don't want to get up at 5 a.m."

Nhul believes that many more than half the independent doughnut shops in the state are run by Cambodians, a figure that is impossible to corroborate. But Joe Castor, vice president of Westco Products Inc., a major wholesale supplier of doughnut ingredients in California, says a growing number



EXAMINER/STEVE ESSAFF

Frank Nhul, at his Jelly Donut store on 24th Street and South Van Ness Avenue, has built a strong business.

of his customers are Cambodian immigrants. In fact, they have gone from being some of his most loyal customers to serious competitors.

"We've had good business success dealing with them," he said. "But they are now competitors in (Southern California). It's almost become fierce."

The doughnut business appeals to recent immigrants, Nhul said, because it doesn't require fluent English or much money to break into. It also is an enterprise that can employ whole families. Nhul, 37, has become partners with his brother-in-law and a cousin who lives in Southern California. His

wife, Chanrith Pak, who is expecting the couple's third child this month, and other relatives work in the stores.

An estimated 170,000 to 200,000 Cambodians live in California, with approximately 25,000 in the Bay

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Area, according to Vu-doc Vuong, head of the Center for Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement in San Francisco. An increasing number have opened small businesses, but Cambodian entrepreneurship still lags behind Vietnamese, Chinese and Koreans, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Commerce.

"The Cambodian refugees have been through a lot more than other groups," Vu-doc Vuong said. "It takes more time for them to get back on their feet. They lived through a great deal of trauma."

Nhul was a medical student in Cambodia when he was forced by soldiers of the Pol Pot regime to leave his home. He and his wife were resettled on a farm, where they worked planting rice and fishing.

When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, Nhul left and went home to his village. His parents and four brothers had been killed. "It is hard to live with the memory that they are all gone," he said.

In 1981, Nhul fled Cambodia. Traveling mostly at night and carrying his 1-year-old daughter Kannyka, he and his wife walked to the Thai border. He brought no money, pictures or personal possessions.

At the refugee camp where he lived for two years, Nhul studied English. He spoke haltingly when he arrived in Minnesota to live with an uncle in 1983.

After a few months in Minneapolis, he heard about a cousin in Palm Springs who was successfully running a doughnut shop. He traveled to California and spent six months as an apprentice. Shortly afterward, using money borrowed from the Center for Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement, he opened his own shop in Rodeo with his brother-in-law Aun Pak.

The two worked long hours. They woke up early to bake, waited on customers all day, then stayed up late to clean the store and finish paper work. Scrimping from their earnings and borrowing more money from nonprofit agencies in The City, they bought a shop in Santa Rosa and their first San Francisco store, Bell Donuts at Market and Sixth streets. Pak, 24, now manages that store and another in the Tenderloin.

Unlike Nhul, Pak had only five years of school in Cambodia and knew little about business. He worked briefly for a janitorial firm when he arrived, but knew that was a dead-end job.

His dream, like Nhul's, is to save enough money to expand the business.

"When I came I was on welfare for about six months but I didn't want to get money from the government," Pak said. "I didn't want job training that would be for minimum wages. I wanted to make more money."