

ALL THE WONG MEN: GETTING PERSONAL WITH COMEDIENNE ALI WONG

on EVA AIR

nhana magazine

LIFESTYLE CULTURE IDENTITY

Fun with Fusion

Vietnamese-frying the
Traditional Thanksgiving Dinner
with 7 Fabulous Recipes

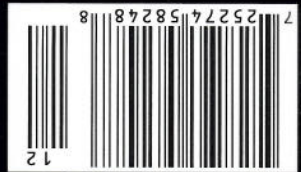
Thomas' Apartment

An Uncensored Interview
with the Boys in the Band

'East Meets West' Comedy Tour

Catching up with Dat Phan
and his Latest Project

Holiday Food and Entertainment

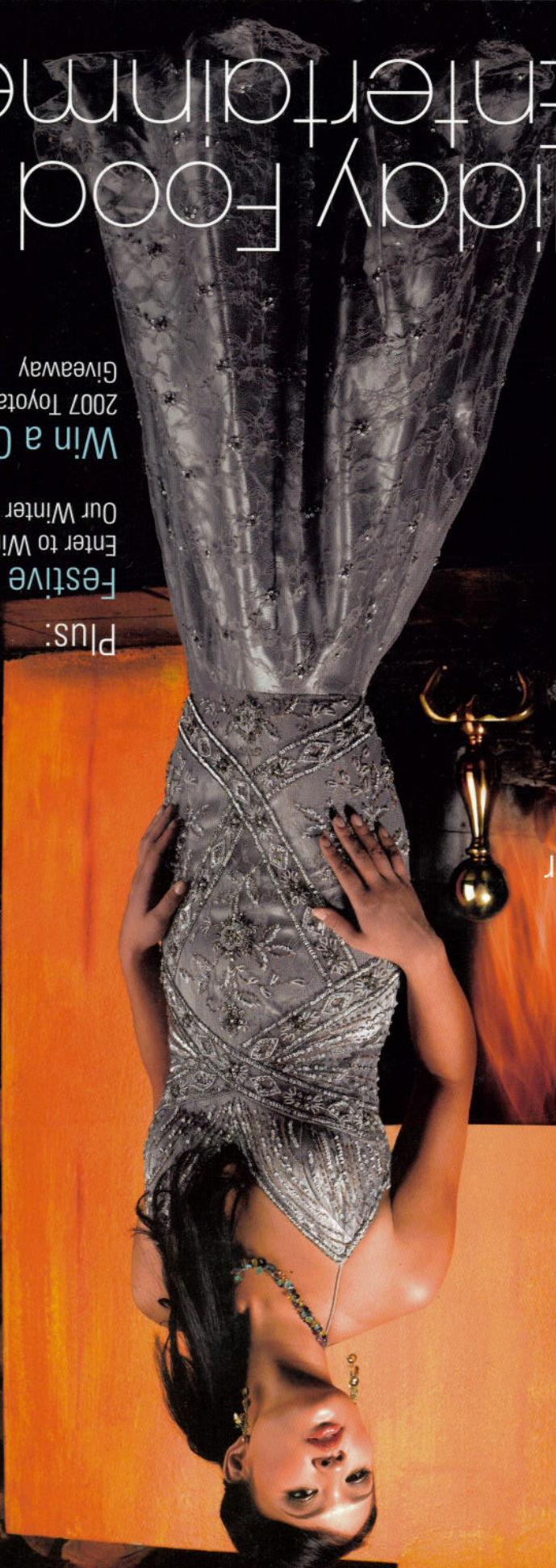


NOV-DEC 2006
\$3.95 US | \$4.95 CAN
www.nhanamagazine.com | info@nhanamagazine.com

Plus:

Festive Beauty Tips
Enter to Win Products in
Our Winter Beauty Giveaway

Win a Car
2007 Toyota Camry
Giveaway



Kids Singing in Coffee Shops

In 2004, Steven Trinh and his sister Thy noticed a new trend amongst Vietnamese-American high school students in the San Jose, Calif. area. According to Tien, "My brother saw a lot of high school kids hanging out in coffee shops, or even unsafe areas, just to sing. This gave my brother the idea to create a singing competition so that these kids had a better venue to display their talents." Once Trinh had the idea for *Vietnamese Idol*, he recruited Tien and together they founded Thy Tien Entertainment. Tien recalls the early days. "I was still in college, and my family wanted me to go into business, but my brother pulled me into the entertainment industry instead. We then organized the first *Vietnamese Idol* and have gone from there."

Now in its third year, *Vietnamese Idol* has grown by leaps and bounds. In previous years, the winner of the competition received a \$3,000 cash prize. For this year's *Vietnamese Idol*, the winner will receive a \$5,000 cash prize and a one-year contract to perform with Tien Entertainment with the option of a possible contract extension. Tien explains, "We perform a lot of traditional dance, hip-hop, and fashion shows throughout the year, and the winner of *Vietnamese Idol* will get to tour with us and sing."

The possibility to sing on stage for an audience is definitely a step up from singing at the local Starbucks.

It's Called Vietnamese Idol, so I'm Gonna Sing Vietnamese Songs

Vietnamese Idol is an annual competition that only has two basic requirements for its contestants. In order to compete, contestants must be between the ages of 16-30 and must have never won a prior singing competition. At the beginning of every calendar year, the application process for *Vietnamese Idol* begins. Contestants submit an application that includes a video of them performing. And out of the 420 applications we received this year, 125 contestants were chosen for auditions," say Tien.

Vietnamese Idols Entertainment

Aspiring *Vietnamese Idols* are judged by the same criteria in every round of the competition. Judges in each round give the contestants a composite score based on the following criteria: 70% vocal voice, 15% performance, and 15% singing technique. In the first round of *Vietnamese Idol*, two judges use this score system to narrow down the field of 125 to about 20-25 contestants. For the second round, four judges must narrow down the field even further to only 12 finalists. At the finals, a five-judge panel is used to determine an overall winner. Judges can vary from round to round, and are usually drawn from leaders within the Vietnamese-American community in northern California. In every round of competition, contestants have the option of singing in English or Vietnamese for their audition. These

"I believe that there are many talented young Vietnamese people out there, but there are not enough opportunities or connections. We need more."

idol hopefuls can sing anything from Luu Bich to Justin Timberlake. Although most of this year's finalists are students in their twenties, many of them have chosen to sing Vietnamese songs instead of today's American Top 40 hits.

As finalist Thao Truong puts it, "It is called *Vietnamese Idol*, so I'm gonna sing Vietnamese songs for all the rounds. By this, I play a small role in bringing Vietnamese songs to the Vietnamese community."

Sharing this sentiment, finalist Cindy DT Tran comments, "I want to carry out the tradition and heritage, so I will be singing Vietnamese songs for the audience and judges." Finalist Nam Tao has chosen to sing in Vietnamese because of the connection he makes to the music.

"I sing in Vietnamese because I think the Vietnamese poetry is deeper and when I sing Vietnamese songs I can feel it more," says Tao.



- Commercial Lines of Credit
- Commercial Term Loans
- Commercial Real Estate Loans
- Construction Loans
- Apartment Loans
- Land Loans
- Home Equity Line of Credit
- Equipment Leases
- Trade Finance

Lending

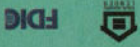
- Checking
- Analysis Checking
- High Yield Money Market Account
- Time Deposit
- Online Banking
- Bill Payment
- Safe Deposit Boxes
- Lock-Box Services
- Credit Card
- Courier Services
- Wire Transfers

Services



Relationship Business Banking

Tel: 510.809.8888 | **Fax:** 510.809.8889 | **Dir:** 510.809.8810
 47065 Warm Springs Blvd., Fremont, CA 94539
 www.panpacificbank.com | ghuyen@panpacificbank.com



For Vietnamese speaking, please contact Gina Huynh at 510.809.8810
 For Chinese speaking, please contact Nancy Lee at 510.809.8868

As *Vietnamese idol* executive producer, Tien appreciates the fact that many of this year's finalists are singing in Vietnamese. "The contest provides an opportunity for the contestants to display their musical talents and creativity, while preserving the rich Vietnamese culture," says Tien.

Just Been Here for Nine Months

So who exactly competes in *Vietnamese Idol* every year? With its base in San Jose, Calif., the vast majority of these idol hopefuls are young twenty-somethings that reside in Northern California. However, one side in Northern California is a recent Northern California transplant by way of Viet Nam. Thảo Truong is not only new to *Vietnamese Idol*, but she is new to the United States as well. She found out about the competition through a friend and then registered to compete online.

"I thought I would have a good chance to meet great people and learn a lot from them. Moreover, I want to challenge myself in this field. I have just been here for nine months only," says Truong.

A student from the University of Viet Nam, Truong is interested in seeing the differences between performing in America versus Viet Nam.

"Vietnamese singers in Viet Nam spend their whole day preparing songs, practicing dancing, and preparing clothes because they can sing almost every night in a bar club or theatre. This is not the same here," explains Truong.

Vietnamese Idol has been a great cultural learning experience for Truong, and it has helped develop her as a performer also. "I love that I've learned a lot from *Vietnamese Idol*. Hopefully, I will have a chance to join other programs beyond this contest too in order to practice and improve myself day by day," says Truong.

The Adrenaline Rush...

Finalist Nam Tào is no stranger to *Vietnamese Idol*. Tào has competed in all three years of the competition and has made it to the final rounds each time. "I learned about *V-Idol* three years ago on a poster so I joined. All three years I've made it to the Top 10 but I haven't won first yet," admits Tào.

there you go, I got my talent from her," states Lê.

Three Girls from Sacramento State

Out of the 420 applicants in this year's contest, three Sacramento State USA students made it to the finals. Christine Nguyễn, Leena Nguyễn and Cindy DT Trần will all be vying to take the *Vietnamese Idol* back home to Sac town.

Finalist Christine Nguyễn recalls, "We're all in USA (Vietnamese Student Association) at Sacramento State, and one of our friends read about it somewhere, so a bunch of us signed up for fun."

For Christine Nguyễn, singing is her release from her daily studies as a pre-dental student.

"Singing is so relaxing for me. I can sing in the car or in the shower. I'll sing anywhere," says Christine.

Christine grew up singing Vietnamese karaoke with her mother, which is how she also developed her Vietnamese reading and speaking skills. Correspondingly, Christine enjoys singing in Vietnamese because "it allows me to keep in touch with my culture."

Christine has a very happy go-lucky attitude towards *Vietnamese Idol*, which is probably based on her career goal of becoming a dentist.

"I am here to just have fun, do what I love, and make friends," says Christine. Although Christine has a career pursuit of dentistry, she admires her fellow Vietnamese-American singers. "I look up to all of the artists in the Vietnamese community and anyone who's putting themselves out there. Everyone is an idol to me," says Christine.

Unlike Christine, finalist Leena Nguyễn is considering a future career in entertainment. However, Leena is aware of the challenges that lie ahead.

"I want to become a singer, but it's very competitive. There are a lot of Vietnamese people who want to pursue singing. It's really, really hard," explains Leena. She realizes that there are many obstacles to overcome as an aspiring singer, but this does not take away from her passion for music. She has many musical influences, including world artists like



He has competed in the contest every year because of his immense passion for singing.

"I compete because I love being on stage. The feeling when you see so many people watching you and the adrenaline rush that runs through your blood when you first walk out is unexplainable," he professes.

This love of singing is also shared by finalist Lanthý Lê. One of the youngest finalists in *Vietnamese Idol*, Lanthý is a first-time competitor.

"I just want to sing with my heart and hope that everyone can enjoy what I have to offer," says Lê. Although Lê has made the finals in her very first singing competition, she remains humble. "I am very happy and that cannot be denied. I think that even if you don't get into the finals doesn't mean that you can't sing, it just means that maybe you haven't tried your best yet. So, I hope that the results didn't upset anyone who didn't get in because I thought that the 20 people that I have competed with in the previous round were all really good," says Lê.

Not only is Lê modest about the finals, but she is also unassuming about her singing talents too.

"If we want to talk about my idol, then that would be my mom. She's a very smart woman and she can sing too! So

the "Madonna of Japan" and the "Britney Spears of Korea."

"I like to sing, and this is a chance for me to perform. I love being in the spotlight and singing my heart out, hoping that the audience enjoys my performance," says Leena.

Like Leena and Christine, finalist Cindy DT Tràn also has a love for singing and finds it therapeutic.

"Singing helps me when I'm stressed out or bored, so it's really important to me," says Tràn.

With three finalists from the same college, Cindy sees *Vietnamese Idol* as a bonding experience for her fellow Sacramento State USA sisters. Within USA, there is a small singing troupe that performs at many community events in the Sacramento area. Many of the girls in the troupe decided to compete in *Vietnamese Idol*, and Cindy saw this contest has a chance to expand her horizons.

"You gotta go out there and explore and have some fun. A lot of my friends were competing, so we decided to make a big trip out of it," says Tràn.

Cindy, Leena, and Christine have made several joyous road trips from Sacramento to San Jose throughout the various rounds of competition. As Christine puts it, "We're all here to make new memories."

Every Community Needs Entertainment

For Thy Tien Entertainment, *Vietnamese Idol* is more than a singing competition. It is an attempt to fill a glaring void in the entertainment industry: the lack of recognized Vietnamese-American artists in the mainstream.

When asked about this lack of diversity, Tien replies, "Every community needs entertainment. It is a part of our daily lives. This is why we're working with the youth to promote them and find new talent."

Many of the finalists have also identified the absence of Vietnamese Americans in entertainment.

"We gotta stand up and tell the world that we are very bright and talented people and pursuing our entertainment careers is a step in this direction," says competitor Nam Tào.



careers, which many of the finalists have encountered in their own lives. Many of the contestants at *Vietnamese Idol* are still students, so they must weigh the pros and cons of chasing an entertainment career.

"For me, my mother would not be very happy if I chose entertainment to be my career because as you know, Vietnamese families in America want their children to become doctors and engineers, and definitely not singers," says Lanthi Lê.

Although Lê is competing in the finals, she is uncertain about her future career as

"It is called Vietnamese Idol, so I'm gonna sing Vietnamese songs for all the rounds. By this, I play a small role in bringing Vietnamese songs to the Vietnamese community."

While *Vietnamese Idol* provides a stage for emerging Vietnamese-American talent, finalist Tràn understands the need for additional platforms.

Tràn explains, "I believe that there are many talented young Vietnamese people out there, but there are not enough opportunities or connections. We need more."

Another factor in the lack of Vietnamese-American in entertainment is the parental pressures of pursuing traditional

Finalist Leena believes that this contest allows "people to see young Asian Americans stay in touch with their roots and heritage."

Tràn states that, "People need to believe in themselves and grab what you can and try it out."

Thy Tien Entertainment sees *Vietnamese Idol* has a form of outreach to help people in the community express themselves through song.

"When you're new, you need some help to promote your career. Entertainment is hard, and we want to help young Vietnamese-Americans advance their careers."

Finalist Thào Truong appreciates this notion. "We really want to bring our voice and our performances to the community and make life happier. We hope that some of us can go further than this contest and reach towards real entertainment careers for more Vietnamese-Americans," says Truong.

With *Vietnamese Idol* making strides to expand the possibilities of Vietnamese Americans in entertainment, there may be a day when I see Ryan Seacrest standing beside a girl named Trinh on *American Idol*. Or maybe I'll buy a single by a singer named Vinh, who just surpassed Kelly Clarkson on the American Top 40. In the meantime, there is a group of talented young Vietnamese-Americans who are out there singing for the love of it, whether it is on a stage or inside a coffee shop. **U**

For more information on *Vietnamese Idol*, log on to www.thytiensentertainment.net.

David Ngô is a writer and filmmaker, but not a singer. He can be reached at david@doubleshree.com. His website is www.doubleshree.com.