

[Tofu factory sounds]

CAMLy: Everybody can do the tofu

**You're listening to Shifting Subjects: stories from Asian Australian life... I'm Lisa Divissi.**

CAMLy: Everybody now, you know now they got the internet? YouTube? Yeah, but ... make the tofu the good taste and the best? Very long – make a long, long time.

**In this episode, we're spending a day with Camly Le.**

**Camly owns a small tofu factory in Maidstone... it's her life's work.**

**She knows the processes and production cycles inside out, having continuously made the tofu by hand since her mid 20s.**

**It all began in an old milk bar shop front in the early 90s, a two person operation... four if you include her kids who often helped out. It's now a factory floor with 14 staff and a breakroom.**

**Camly's tofu is still handmade, but it's happening on a larger scale.**

**Let's dive in...**

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**[Sounds of light traffic and morning birdsong]**

**It's 6am, it's a weekday...**

**The traffic outside is building, the flurry of morning bird activity is settling down. It's getting lighter but you can still smell that morning dew.**

**[Sounds of echoey factory floor]**

**Inside, it's steamy... to the right is a series of industrial gas burners and big boiling pots.**

**The room itself is cavernous. There's a milky scent that mingles with the thickness of the steamy air as you move further inside. There's around 20-30 large buckets filled with water and soybeans, waiting to be processed.**

CAMLy: We make from the fresh soybean. Some factories, they're not like that but they use the powder. Yeah. Soya powder easier and not take the time. Yeah. But this, we make very long long time.

Yeah, soak the bean overnight for a nighttime and after that we clean bean, and put in machine and boiler.

**Beside those buckets and that tap is an industrial soybean grinder.**

**There's a lot of metal in here... it's a factory after all. So the fluoros glint and bounce off a lot of grey, white and blue surfaces.**

**Once the beans are soaked and ground, the milk and pulp are separated. The milk is boiled in huge pots, before a coagulant is mixed through... that's when the curds and whey are formed.**

CAM LY: And after that we make from, look like the cheese? We put a little bit of vinegar like that. And we make exactly the cheese, [or like] with the yoghurt. And we mix slowly, slowly.

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**Soon after she came to live in Australia, Camly began making tofu. She needed to earn a living, and recognised a gap in the market.**

CAMLY: When I went to the Vietnamese market. Before they got the Footscray market, and I saw a lot food and I saw they got the tofu, but not Vietnamese tofu.

**Vietnamese tofu gets its softness from being hand made and pressed. It retains more moisture than firm tofu that's pressed by a machine.**

**If you were to compare tofu to cheese, Vietnamese tofu has the texture of ricotta, and when it's fried, it behaves similarly to paneer.**

CAMLY: But when you make with by hand you feel hard or soft or you feel good or no good and you stop and you balance with your mind, but the machine can't do that. That's why the machine different with the handmade.

**It's a well honed, hard earned skill... to be able to know by touch whether the tofu's texture is at the right place.**

**Camly knew how to make tofu. She had made it at home in Vietnam. But making it work in a different climate, with different ingredients presented a whole new challenge.**

CAM LY:

My auntie teach me how to do this, how to do that; but at the Vietnam make the tofu different. When I came here I do exactly in the Vietnam but can't... can't... can't work it. Because the bean different, the water different, and everything different.

I couldn't remember but I feel very tired and I say, "Oh no, I can't do that do that because very big job and very hard."

And I'm thinking, "If I don't do this job, what happened I do? And what job I do?" and I say, "Try again try again," like that.

You know the Australia water, they very clean? And they got little bit I think the floor? That's why at the Vietnam they tend the water underground. The water different, the beans different.

At the Vietnam before a long time ago they not cook with the gas but they cook with the rock? You know the rock but look like the barbecue, they look like that

Lisa: Ah, yes! Like coals

CAM LY: The coal. They slowly, slowly to boiling and in here very far and different, more different

And in Vietnam very hot, easier to make the tofu... if I came here the weather cold and wet, the different with that... that's why very hard but everyday I make everyday I learned how to how to do, how to do

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**It's around 10am.**

**At this point, the curds and whey are separated. I watch as two of the workers dip plastic buckets into the large industrial pot and discard the whey, leaving the porridge-like curds at the bottom.**

**Soon, another worker scoops the curds and plops them into a mould.**

**Each mould is roughly the shape of a plank of wood... they're metal and lined with a cheese cloth.**

**I watch as the curds are nudged gently together. One side of the cheese cloth is lifted up by hand. Then it's gently, but firmly pulled over to the other side. It looks similar to how you'd swaddle a baby, or wrap a present.**

**This pulling and wrapping motion squeezes more whey out and sticks the disparate curds together.**

**I watch as one of the workers guides another on how to do this.**

[One woman guiding another in Vietnamese on how to go about hand pressing the tofu effectively. She says, 'go slow' and 'pull the cheese cloth this way'.]

**She's saying "yoop"... as in "pull", "Pull the cheese cloth *this way*". It's quite a tricky technique, and requires a certain amount of gracefulness.**

**Another plank of metal fits snugly in over the top of the mould, and a screw on clamp ensures the right amount of pressure.**

**After ten minutes, the clamp is removed and put to the side. The metre long tofu-cake is turned out on a table, where it's measured and cut.**

[clicking of knife on metal table]

CAMLy: And after that we put in the shelf for the water come out and keep them cold

[sound of industrial sized fan]

**After the tofu has cooled, half of it goes into the cool room, and the other half is fried.**

[sound of frying]

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**These days Camly has less of a hands-on role. She oversees the production processes and takes care of the administration.**

**But before that she did everything.**

CAMLy: I couldn't sleep a lot because at nighttime I sleep for three or four, four hour a day. Yeah when I take the kids, go home and cooking, look after them, and work, work, like that I think for 15 years... 7 days a week. They keep long days but the labour very hard.

My kids very good. They helped me a lot with the packaging and took the tofu in the car for your delivery. Yeah, they help a lot.

And when I got the um, some sad, or when I'm not happy with the my life and I always talk with them and Vyan told me, "You don't stress, you don't sad because you - I'm thinking - she told me, "You are very strong and you are very powerful. Don't worry, don't worry." I say, "Good good. Keep going. Keep going," like that.

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**It's now around 2pm... the main tofu production line is humming along and in full force... that's when I spot two of the workers off to the side.**

**They're pouring silky tofu pudding into plastic circular containers, scooping off the bubbles that form on the top... and discarding them into a container with a light tap.**

**In time the tofu will set.**

CAMLy: Before we don't make tofu pudding - we don't make - we just make the tofu only.

And when I went to the shop delivery tofu and they say, "If you don't have the tofu pudding, we stop the tofu because you must got the pudding." But I don't know how to make that one. And make me very sad. Yeah, I can't sleep and I'm thinking, I make the tofu pudding.

And I try make everyday, I try make everyday. But not good, not good. And I cook and throw away, cook and throw away. And one day I do the tofu pudding and I try – oh, very yummy! I say, "Oh I get it!" And now we sell a lot with that. I proud with that because I - now, I'm too old, but I make that. Yeah because when I was younger I'm not care, not worry, but now I'm little bit old but I make the tofu pudding, and I say "Very, very good, very good!" [laughs]

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**It's getting to 5pm. The boiling, curdling, and pressing has stopped for the day. The workers overseeing that part of production are starting to clean up.**

**The last batches of tofu are being fried. The packaging is nearly all done. The light outside is fading and the birds are back.**

**By the time the roller doors come down it will be about 6pm.**

Lisa: Have you gone back to Vietnam since?

CAMLy: Yeah, we sometime we go to the holiday

Lisa: And do they know that you run a tofu business?

CAMLy: Yeah, I got the video and I got the picture when I do the good job, and I video call, and I say to them and they say, "Ahhh, you very good, you good, you good girl," and [I] say "ahhh, thank you!" [laughs]

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OUTRO:

Shifting Subjects is a LIMINAL podcast and a proud member of the Broadwave podcast network.

It was written, cut and hosted by me, Lisa Divissi.

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It was fact checked by Mell Chun.

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If you liked this podcast, tell your friends about it! Especially if they have a thing for soybeans.

I'm Lisa Divissi, see you next time.