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50-year legacy: Vietnamese boat people thrive as Monterey fishermen

War refugees who arrived with nothing but fishing skills have survived the industry's woes to feed the community

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Tai Huynh, 71, in the wheelhouse of his fishing boat "Four Daughters" in Moss Landing, Calif., on Friday, April 11, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

Aboard his boat in Moss Landing harbor, Tai Huynh, 71, bent over a pile of grenadier, then flung one of the deep sea fish into a large bin. Next to him, Tham Vo tipped them into a 500-pound crane lift box, swigging glass bottles of Heineken between loads.

In just over two hours recently, the pair offloaded 3,854 pounds of fish after spending 24 hours at sea and another 12 guarding their haul until daybreak.

These men are some of the oldest working refugees known as “boat people,” who fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon 50 years ago and once in the U.S., got right back on boats to fish. From California to the [Gulf Coast](#) to [Boston](#), they faced grueling labor, competition, [racism](#), [terror](#), climate change, the collapse of [fisheries](#) and ever-evolving regulations.

In Monterey County, they now stand alongside fifth- and sixth-generation Italians in a long line of [ethnic local fishermen](#) in [a declining industry](#) that just may rise again.

Huynh’s father taught him how to fish in the waters off Da Nang in central Vietnam when he was 12. He left home in his early 20s on a raft to avoid compulsory enrollment into the Communist military and entered the U.S. in 1978, sponsored by a church in Chicago. His wife joined him there.

On the city by the lake, Huynh washed dishes at a Hong Kong-style restaurant, developing a taste for roast duck with sauce on the side. But, weary of long winters and racist attacks at sundown, he and his wife went west after a friend in California sang the praises of the coastal fishing scene.

“It was all on a whim,” said Phúc, 40, the eldest of Huynh’s sons, born and raised in Marina.

In Monterey Bay, the calamari capital of the world, Huynh got started on a squid boat with the well-known Aliotti family of the strong-minded Sicilians.

“They don’t care if you work with them, as long as you know how to work,” he said.

Huynh worked hard and brought skills like net-sewing, which he taught fellow refugees so they could get jobs.

In 1991, Huynh built his own boat by hand, naming it Three Sons after his three boys. In 2001, he acquired Four Daughters to honor the rest of his seven children, who grew up with their father out at sea and their mother cleaning squid in Salinas, for by-the-bucket pay.

Huynh branched off on his own in 1996, but in 2000, the region’s fisheries collapsed and scientists and regulators intervened with protective measures. When Huynh couldn’t fish, his children, mostly grown and in the work force, helped pitch in.



Tai Huynh, left, and fishing partner Tham Vo offload grenadier fish from his fishing boat “Four Daughters” in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

[After resident groundfish rebounded in 2014](#), Peter Adame, a representative of local Lusamerica Foods, said the Portuguese-owned family company installed an offloading dock for returning local providers.

One of them is Huynh, who has specialized lately in [black cod](#), also known as sablefish, or butter fish, for its decadently oily white meat.

“It has more omega-3s than salmon — it’s just a rich powerhouse,” Adame said, gushing.

Huynh said fish in California overall are fatter and richer than tropical species because of the coldness of their habitats, which, with brutal winds, have also sent fishermen into hiding or watery graves.

Huynh’s father visited twice from Vietnam to behold the force of California’s ocean. “He was scared, too, but he liked it,” Huynh said.

A couple of years ago, regional climate change flooding sparked sustainability conversations at the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County.

CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez connected with Melissa Mahoney, executive director of the Monterey Bay Fish Trust, to discuss what the bay could bring to the community with minimal emissions.

Mahoney, running the [Community Seafood Program](#), which started in 2020 to support local fishermen and fisheries while feeding people in need, knew Lusamerica had access to the incidental catch of [grenadier, or rattail fish](#), which cruise at overlapping depths with black cod. They could also process the aesthetically intimidating fish, which often landed with its innards ballooning out of its mouth like bubble gum from the whiplash of atmospheric pressure change.

Second Harvest joined the program last year and orders frozen grenadier quarterly from Lusamerica.

Padilla-Chavez said immigrant farmers trade recipes for ceviche and rice platters while in line for the rare treat of freshly frozen and neatly packaged animal-based protein.

At Meals On Wheels of the Monterey Peninsula, another program partner, head chef Isaiah Cortright has converted thousands of pounds of the fish into hot meals delivered to the hungry and housebound.

The arc of people who came here with nothing now feeding the immigrants who put food on America’s table but can’t afford it themselves is a heartwarming one. But Phúc said the fishermen remain pummeled by the system, too.

[Crabbing season was delayed](#) and [closed early this season for humpback whales](#). The Pacific Fishery Management Council [shut commercial salmon fisheries](#) for a third consecutive year. The closures have hurt Huynh, who has gone as far out as 41 miles, as far north as Fort Bragg and as far south as Morro Bay to chase shifting targets. Phúc, who runs his father’s numbers, estimates that at least half of his earnings burn off as diesel expenditures.

Emily Hess, program manager of the trust, said empowering small-scale fishermen to sustain themselves is best in the long run. Since people won’t stop eating seafood, far more environmentally detrimental importation rushes in if local supply gets squeezed.

The area’s iconic squid travels to plants in China before being reimported. The majority of American wholesalers send black cod to Japan. Lusamerica trucks Huynh’s catch to Morgan Hill for processing and distribution to California and other Western states [warming up to the locally-caught staple](#) available year-round.

“Exporting is not our jam,” Adame said, but the Trump administration’s tariffs have impacted the company’s importation of tuna, branzino and some farmed Atlantic salmon. The U.S. [imports up to 85% of all its seafood](#), and the prices shoppers see could rise.



Tai Huynh, left, and fishing partner Tham Vo offload grenadier fish from his fishing boat “Four Daughters” in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

“Thankfully there are some domestic alternatives,” Adame said. But the fishermen who catch them are on the razor’s edge of consumption and conservation.

In 2016, a dry dock [sank and crushed](#) the [4,000-foot deep coral habitat of Pioneer Canyon](#) 20 miles west of Half Moon Bay.

The accident site was beyond repair, so the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary last year proposed prohibiting longlines and traps in [underwater canyons south of Monterey](#) to help heal the deep-sea environment.

Mahoney [notified the Vietnamese fishermen](#) about the potential closures. The impact statement they submitted as a result led to the decision to restrict just one, not three, areas.

Back in Moss Landing, Huynh and Vo were baiting 10,000 hooks with squid scraps before motoring for five hours into the darkness to their secret but legal spot 28 miles offshore. As the line reeled in, they dislodged thrashing fish from sharp hooks, keeping neon red chilipepper rockfish, or hardheads, alive in a foaming barrel that would go for \$10 per pound.

Huynh said he has never been seriously injured. “My whole life is the ocean, knowing how to take care of people and boats,” he said. “That’s why we got fishermen jobs, and that’s why we are lucky.”

In the wheelhouse of his boat, Buddhist deities look out from an altar with a pyramid of fresh tangerines and burnt sticks of red incense.

Huynh took no chances with Phúc, whose name means happiness, blessings and good fortune, nor with any of his other children.



After 24 hours at sea and another 12 guarding the haul overnight, Tai Huynh motors his fishing boat “Four Daughters” through the harbor to the Lusamerica seafood processor dock to offload 3,854 pounds of grenadier, black cod, and hardheads in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

“I wanted to keep them on land,” he said. And he taught them Vietnamese because his own limited bilingualism restricted his opportunities.

“I told them, okay, you go out there and be American. But when you sit at my table, you talk my language and you learn my generation,” he said, proud that his self-sustaining children are raising 13 grandchildren and can communicate with Vietnamese speakers, including family in Vietnam.

Huynh said none of his descendants will take over after him. But Phúc, a Honda mechanic, confided, “To be honest, I always wanted to be a fisherman.”

Not hearing his son’s whispers, Huynh showed off videos of Phúc’s 10-year-old son steering the boat. By his feet, a bucket of [pipefish](#) — that dwell where the Mekong River meets the sea in Vietnam as in the kelp forests of Monterey Bay — awaited the fascination of the next generation of Huynhs.



Tai Huynh fillets fish on his fishing boat “Four Daughters” as seagulls circle for discarded fish scraps, in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)



Tai Huynh, 71, offloads grenadier fish from his fishing boat “Four Daughters” in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)



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Fish are moved along a conveyor belt at the Lusamerica dock in Moss Landing, Calif., on Friday, April 11, 2025. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)





Tai Huynh, left, and fishing partner Tham Vo offload grenadier fish from his fishing boat “Four Daughters” in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)



Tai Huynh’s fishing partner Tham Vo offloads grenadier fish from his fishing boat “Four Daughters” in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)



Grenadier fish, whose innards ballooned out of their mouths due to the whiplash of atmospheric pressure change, are placed in a crane lift box on the fishing boat "Four Daughters" owned by Tai Huynh in Moss Landing, Calif., on Saturday, April 19, 2025. Huynh and other fishermen now get paid for the incidental catch of grenadier from the seafood processor and distributor Lusamerica, before it is given to the Second Harvest Food Bank. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)



Article Link: [Vietnamese refugees buoy Monterey fishing industry](#)