

# FAMILY TIES

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*Past student, Founder and Managing Director of Vietnamese hawker style food franchises, 'Roll'd' and 'Mama's Buoï', Bao Hoang's ability to embrace opportunity is taking the franchise world by storm. Son to Vietnamese migrants, Van Quy and Thi Phien Hoang, Bao speaks candidly about why family is central to his global business model and his own personal quest to living an authentic life.*

*Today, Bao is Global Winner of the NextGen Award in Franchising, and 'Roll'd' is ranked #4 on the BRW Fast Starters Lists of all business in Australia. In his own considered and progressive style, Bao reveals how his family's personal migrant journey is a constant reminder to embrace each day with perseverance, optimism and genuine faith in humanity.*

**Bao, as the third son of Vietnamese refugees, Van Quy and Thi Phien Hoang, tell me the story of your family's journey to Australia.**

If I ever learned courage, risk-taking and opportunism from anyone, it's from my parents. In June 1980, my parents decided to take the ultimate risk in hope of finding a better life for the family. Half past midnight on June 27, 1980, my Dad, with Mum, two older brothers, some extended family and two hundred other hopefuls quietly left the family home in absolute darkness to board an old boat built for much fewer than were on board. After three days on the open ocean, the boat began to take on water, and many of the children were exhausted and starving, so once they spotted land, they docked, despite hesitation from the Captain. The following day they flagged down a small boat, only to find they had not left Vietnam at all, and the boat was soon followed by a large Vietnamese Communist navy ship. They were forced to board and were taken back to Ho Chi Minh City, where they were imprisoned, the women and children for a month, and the men for six months. Still unsatisfied by the state of the country, and despite the pain of failure the first time, my parents decided to try again. So on June 1, 1981, they hiked two hours out of the village to board a much smaller boat crammed with more than eighty people. The children were sedated to keep them quiet during the escape. They sailed for eight days with nothing in sight, until a Thai boat on its way back from Singapore approached. Fearful of pirates, they tried to pull away,

but they soon realised that the Thai boat had good intentions. The women and children were invited to board the larger ship, and the Thai captain offered to tow their boat to Thailand. On top of the already rough waters, they faced a number of hurdles, but each time the Thai captain risked his own safety to save them, and eventually got them to land. In gratitude, everyone on my parents' ship gathered some jewellery, including my parents' wedding rings, and gifted it to the crew. After moving around various refugee camps within Thailand, my parents finally received approval papers to migrate to Australia. At 6:00am, on January 3, 1982, they landed in Melbourne, and were taken to a hostel in Nunawading, where they lived for 8 months, learning the English language and the Australian culture. We are very thankful for the aid of the Government and Catholic community in helping my parents find jobs in various restaurants and fruit picking farms. They worked countless hours to save enough money to buy and settle in their present family home in Oakleigh South.

It's not until we began the *Roll'd* business that my parents really opened up about their journey to Australia. There's so much more detail in the full story that I'd love to share one day. But every time I hear it, or attempt to retell it, it re-establishes the values I was taught growing up, and motivates me to create my own meaningful journey to make an impact in the world, even if just for my family, and in gratitude for the opportunity that was given to me by my parents.



**After completing your Bachelor of Physiotherapy from Melbourne University in 2004, you immediately joined a Physiotherapy franchise, and after only 2 years, opened 5 clinics. In this time, you were influential in growing the corporate services unit, *Actif*, and founded the aged care services unit, *Revita*, now worth \$7M. In May 2012, with no hospitality experience, you took the risk to share your Vietnamese family food with the world. What drove you towards this decision?**

I've always had a passion for business and, like many Vietnamese families, food is central in both the everyday and special occasions. On top of that I was born with a big appetite, and blessed with a mother who loves to cook, and even more fortunate that she's amazing at it! So it was really only a matter of time until the two passions met. My mother, Phien, would cook all the meals in the house, pack the extras (because there is always extra!) and do food deliveries to the siblings who weren't able to make it, and for all of our and many other occasions, she would be the caterer of choice, even throughout the wider Vietnamese community. People would often ask if they could order food for weekly meals, and she would just smile kindly and proceed to fill their plates. Those comments really stuck with me and my wife, and I often spoke about how rice paper rolls could easily be an alternative to sushi, for their portability and, more importantly, for their amazing flavour

and freshness. So one day we raised our ideas of opening a restaurant with some friends whom we had over for dinner (of course!), and they were immediately excited by it. This then fuelled the fire, and we began the planning. Two years later, our first store in a little Melbourne laneway opened to a waiting crowd of thirty to forty people, with our only marketing being a small A4 menu stuck to the shop front. Our hunch was right; the world was ready and waiting!

To be honest, the core of what really drives me is the entrepreneurship, my love of numbers and that little bit of a gamble. I love to listen and learn about what's going on in the world, discover opportunities and then see what can become of them. I began with Physiotherapy due to my love of sports, and whilst I do still love it, I moved on to do *Rolld* because it sits closer to my heart. *Rolld* is not only about me; it's about my family, my heritage and its culture. It's about sharing our journey and making more memories along the way.

**You have been quoted as saying that *Rolld* and *Mama's Bui* are very "family centric" businesses. Why is it critical for you to keep this family element a part of your business strategy?**

The word "family" means something different to everybody, because everyone comes from such different walks of life. For myself, my family and consequently

the business, the word 'family' represents a core set of values that fundamentally govern how we go about life. These values are: Love (the golden rules of respect and reciprocate), Honour (Do what is right, even when no one is looking.), Share (Collaborate and communicate, truthfully; be authentic.), Dream (Be daring, take risks, try again.), Be Compassionate (Be generous, enrich lives.) and Make Memories (Love the journey.). So whilst the business is still heavily supported by our biological family members, it has fast become a much larger family of people from all walks of life, with varied degrees, interests and expertise, but bound together by these same 'family' values. So for me 'family centric' means upholding those values, and is a critical element of our business strategy because they are what ultimately guides all of our decision making. The values act as a compass or moral GPS, and with Vietnamese food in the format we've created being new to market, navigating through unknown territory can be very challenging, even crippling, without guidance. Ultimately, for me 'family' is one of those essential checks and balances to ensure that we all stay on the correct path.

**What was the greatest influence in you being able to foster your potential, and did Salesian College play a role?**

I'd say the greatest influence in my life would have to be my parents. Their decision to leave their village and all they knew, and their journey to get

here, portray so many admirable qualities that I'm sure many would see as inspirational. From them I learned to take risks, seize opportunities, persevere, have faith in the goodness in people, and show gratitude for the kindness of others. Throughout my childhood, typical of many Vietnamese refugee families, we watched our parents work 16-hour days in the rag trade out of half of the home garage, only coming up for meals and bedtime. There was no better example of work ethic, determination and making the most of opportunities. Growing up, we didn't have many of the comforts we do now, nor did we ask for them or expect them. I remember that we all got a Happy Meal on Sunday after church and, if we were lucky, a little play at the local arcade. We were otherwise left to our own devices, and our devices weren't electronic. They were cushion-made fortresses, hide-and-seek in the living room, marbles and shared bikes, but what made them memorable was that we were always surrounded by family – siblings, cousins, uncles, aunties – laughter and noisy banter that signifies a happy home. I now have an immense appreciation for the simple things in life, and it's this upbringing that always keeps me grounded.

Salesian has given me a lifetime of friendship, as well as nurtured and cemented the values that my parents instilled in us as younger kids. I began my high school years in Salesian, and

actually left for one year to join my older brother after having successfully passed the entry exam to a selective State school, which for my parents was a great achievement. Unfortunately, however, I spent a year going down a path of disappointment, as my grades dramatically dropped. So after only a year, my parents quickly decided to send me back to Salesian. I was like the Prodigal Son returning home! I instantly picked up where I left off, and went on to finish very well academically.

**What encouraged you to take on the risk as a franchisor with co-founders Ray Esquieres (a Salesian classmate), and cousin Tin Ly?**

I was quietly confident *Rolld* would be well received by the market, and so I always planned for reasonably fast expansion. Being a part of a franchise system with the physiotherapy business, I knew the advantages of going down the franchise route. Franchising gives you the ability to expand, despite having limited capital, as it's the franchisees who invest their own money into opening the store. So if you're able to demonstrate a solid business model and strong brand identity, potential franchisees aren't too hard to come by. We were fortunate to have an exciting new business model that was supported by snaking queues every day. The franchise enquiries piled up very quickly, and we were able to open two more stores within six months of opening our first store, and now we have established over sixty stores



in just five years. The challenge with franchising is ensuring that you choose only like-minded individuals who are willing to uphold your values, policies and procedures and retain the standards expected. Having been on both sides of the coin, as franchisee and franchisor, I can better manage expectations, as I know first-hand the things that could cause friction in our group. If we hold strongly onto our values, however, and surround ourselves with people who genuinely hold the same values, I'm confident our risks will pay off.



**In 2016, you were ranked #4 on the BRW Fast Starters List of all business in Australia, and in 2017 were awarded Global Winner of the NextGen Award in Franchising. How do you sustain growth when the rate has been so rapid?**

Growing at such a rapid rate does have its challenges, particularly when there's no real business equivalent in the market, and we're refining the model in parallel to the expansion. The short answer is to keep a very keen eye on the cash flow and to ensure that every dollar is used with extreme efficiency. Over the years, we've also had to dilute our share to take on investors, who have been an immense help, not only from a financial perspective, but also experience in business, from which I've definitely benefited. Creating very strict processes, checks and balances, and accurate data collection and reporting are also hugely important to allow more meticulous decision making. One of my key strengths is prioritising, and this has been critical in overseeing such rapid growth. So much time can be wasted on unnecessary meetings or discussions on petty office politics, so it's really a matter of ensuring that everyone is in the right places, and doing things with purpose, that makes a positive impact on the business, not ticking boxes for the sake of occupying their eight hours. There's a big difference between business and busyness.

**What does business success mean to you?**

For me business success can be defined by a number of things. Firstly, my aim is to create a sustainable business model that can be replicated locally and internationally. I strive to build a brand that is loved and trusted across all cultures, and is respected as an example of integrity and authenticity. When people speak of our business, I want them to be able to confidently recommend us to their nearest and dearest. To me, a recommendation reflects so much confidence in your business, that you are willing to risk your own reputation for it. A successful business should also foster a great culture that accepts all people, celebrates uniqueness, challenges people to take risks and provides opportunities for people to become the best versions of themselves. I would love for people to come to work every day because they believe in what we're trying to achieve and want to contribute to the overall goal, not just to ensure that the pay cheque arrives. I'd also like to create a business that is present and active in the wider global community, not just one that spectates and hopes for change. Lastly, for me, success in business also means establishing balance. I don't wish to create a business that is all-consuming, that is so demanding that I am unable to spend time with family

or do other things that I love, such as playing golf or attending AFL games to watch my beloved Bombers! Success means that I've created a business that has so strong a framework that it can be self-sufficient in the day-to-day. It's like having successfully raised a child to adulthood and independence.

**What role does faith have in your life?**

Faith plays an enormous part in my life, particularly because I don't have a natural aversion to risk, and am driven by opportunity and innovation. People who know me quickly realise that I'm a very optimistic person, confident, but sometimes even mistakenly seen as arrogant. This is because I have faith that the world is ultimately good, and if I project positivity and do good things, then good things will happen to me. My family, especially my Mum, is very religious. My uncle is a priest, so we've grown up pretty heavily involved with the parish community. Faith has always been an important and regular part of my life, especially when business or life becomes particularly challenging and there are no clear logical answers. Often the answer is to just let it be, and have faith that it will all work out. That's not to say I throw my hands up and accept failure. I just accept that some things I cannot control, so I'll let faith deal with that, and I'll make the absolute best of the things that I can control.

**In partnership with the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation in September 2016, you officially launched a boarding house to accommodate 150 children in crisis in Vietnam, built solely with funds raised by the Rolld family. What drove you to undertake this altruistic project, and how did you achieve this?**

My mother was very heavily involved in the early developmental stages of Rolld, and she was very generous to have shared her recipes with us. We, the co-founders, decided that we should pay her for services. But of course, being my mother, she wouldn't accept payment. After some reflection, she came back to me later that day and said that if we

really wanted to show gratitude, to do it by helping the less fortunate back in Vietnam. This really struck a chord with me, and I spent the next month sending out letters to various charities to see if anyone was interested in partnering on a project. I was approached by a young lady who was the Melbourne representative of a small, relatively unknown charity called *Blue Dragon Children's Foundation*, and an already loyal customer of Rolld. She immediately thought our Vietnamese inspired brand would be perfect. Initially they'd suggested we support a charity walk or trivia night. However, I had bigger ambitions, and wanted something that we could really sink our teeth into. My wife and I ended up travelling to Vietnam to meet with the Founder, Michael Brosowski, and after a long dinner, and hearing stories of the crisis of child trafficking, we were compelled to really make a difference. As the saying goes, prevention is the best medicine, so Michael and I decided that a boarding house would make the most difference, as child trafficking occurs mostly when children drop out of school because of distance, lack of transport, and poor roads. Once decided, we gathered a team of Rolld staff and a few of the Blue Dragon volunteers and began planning our events. We hosted a cocktail evening and two sit-down dinners – one in Melbourne, one in Sydney – to raise the required funds. We're so thankful to be surrounded by such generous suppliers and friends who donated products, venues and services to make it all happen. The official launch last September was definitely a highlight of my career so far, and something that really made my parents proud.

**Today as Founder and Managing Director of a global company, you still acknowledge the people who ground you; your wife Angela, your three children and your immediate family. How has your education and life experience moulded your appreciation of your family?**

Family is everything to me. My education has taught me about the importance of

kinship and community. As humans, I think we all want to belong and be part of something, and Salesian College definitely fosters a sense of belonging and brotherhood that I will always be grateful for. In my career as a physiotherapist, I've crossed paths with people from many walks of life. I've seen how varied the definition of 'family' can be, and am saddened by the ones whose definitions are negative, even hateful, or just strained by the pressures of life. These are the times when I come home and squeeze my family as hard as I can because I know how lucky I am to belong, to be surrounded by people who love me for everything I am, the good, the bad, and crazy ambitious. Now with the Rolld business, and working very closely with family, and seeing the unconditional support for both myself and the overall business, it really brings home how blessed I am to be surrounded by such a strong fortress of love and trust.

**How do you balance the demands of business, while keeping a focus on family?**

As a family we often talk about our goals. To the kids, it's more about what we want to do, where we want to go, what we want to see. This then opens up the conversation to how we're going to achieve all those things, and we start to talk about what my wife and I and the kids need to do to get us there. This really helps to set expectations with them in terms of my workload and when I will be home and when I might need to be away travelling. I'm fortunate that my wife can have a pretty flexible schedule, so when my workload jumps up, she's able to balance it by being at home with the kids more. For me, I have to keep a very organised diary, and schedule in everything from meetings to phone calls, down to travel time. My wife and I set some boundaries, and if we're crossing these then we know we're getting overly busy and causing stress for the family, so we pull it back in. For example, we try to make sure we're at all the major events such as piano recitals, golf tournaments, ballet

concerts and special school functions, and once or twice a week I do the school drop-off. We try to eat most dinners together at the dining table and without distractions of technology. Sometimes when I'm really busy, my wife will drive the family in to work, we share a meal and stories of the day, and then she drives them home so that I can keep working. We also make sure that we have one family break planned and booked in the near future so that we all have something to work towards and be excited about. I believe that, like in most things, open communication and managing expectations will generally keep you out of trouble.

**What advice do you have for today's students, keen to succeed in business?**

My advice would be to read, research, network, work hard, and just DO! Growing up and until now, I've read so many business books, and out of each one I take at least one great learning that I've been able to use, perhaps not always in a life changing way, but I believe that even the littlest of things can change the course of your life. Do your research about your specific business aspirations, don't just leave it to chance or assumption. Be proactive in seeking out people who might be able to help you. You'd be surprised how willing people are if you just ask. Sometimes that person can't help you, but they'll often redirect you to someone who will. Be prepared to work hard, and that's an understatement. There will be days and nights of absolute torture, but you tend to always come out the other side stronger and smarter, but please still be mindful to look after your health. You're no good to anyone dead. The hardest thing to do in business is just to get it started. So, you know what I'm going to say already – just do it! Stop procrastinating or making excuses, or waiting for the ideal scenario. One other important lesson I've learnt is to not to assume that everyone in your business will be as dedicated as you. If they were, they'd probably have their own business.

