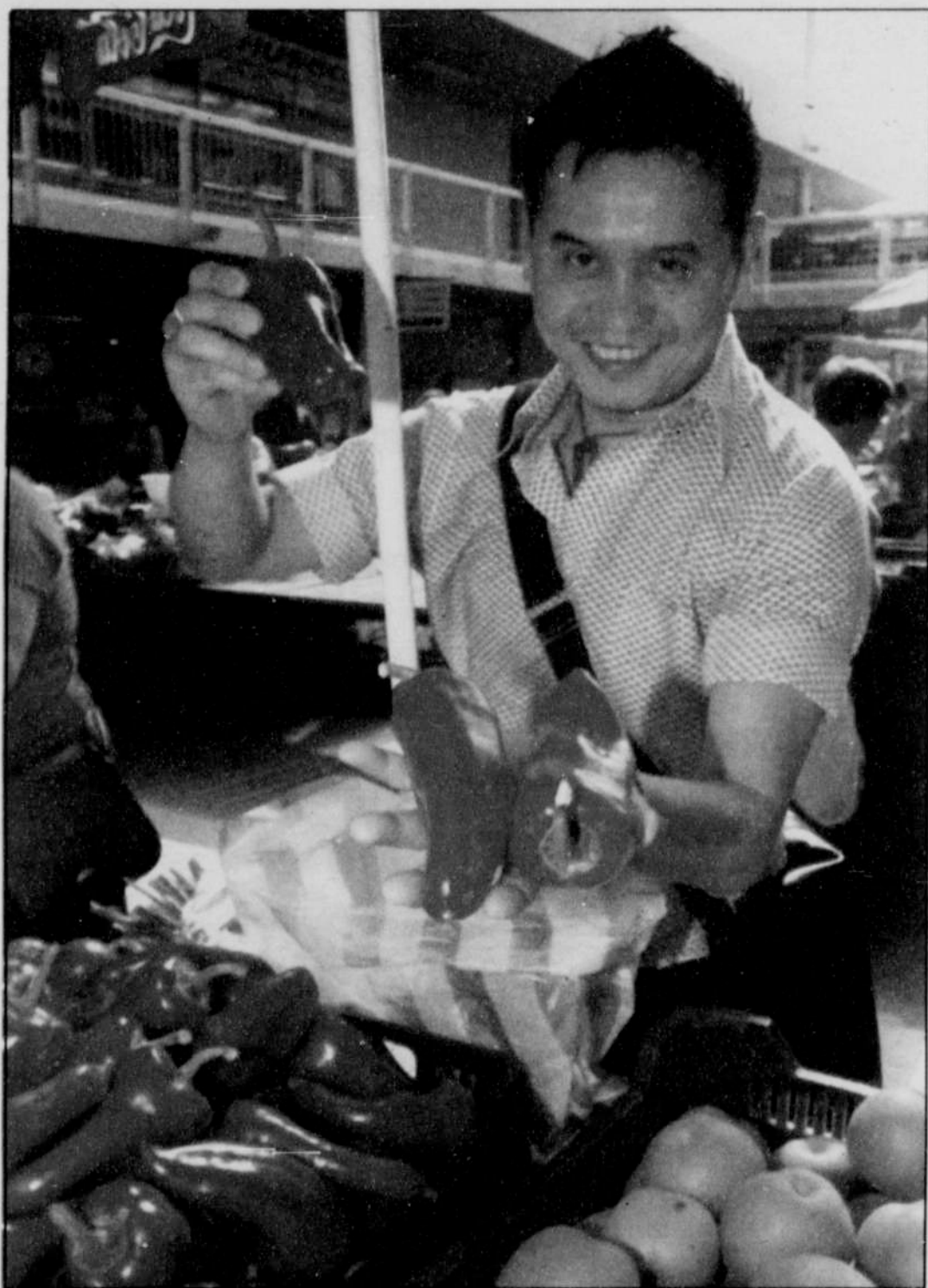




Pat Jeung shops at a farmer's market in September 2006 in Budapest, Hungary.



A Man of Many Colors

As Chameleon Restaurant and Bar prepares to celebrate its 10th birthday, meet the wizard behind the curtain

by Tony le Tigre

Pat Jeung, who came to the United States in 1980 as a Laotian refugee, and whose days in high school were followed by nights working at McDonald's, is now the chef of his own restaurant: the low-key, somewhat-well-kept secret Chameleon in the Hollywood district. With that flair for both irony and metaphor that life often shows, there's a McDonald's across the street. In fact, the building that Chameleon now occupies was itself once a fast food fish 'n' chips restaurant, though you wouldn't guess it now.

The chef has come a long way, been many places, experienced many cultures.

"Jeung means ocean in Chinese," he says. "Both my parents were from China. I lived back and forth between Laos and Thailand in my early childhood, but I was brought up in the Chinese communities there. My parents owned a cargo ship and a small department store; most businesses in Laos and Thailand were owned by Chinese people."

When Laos became a communist state and closed its borders, Jeung came to the United States in 1980 as a refugee, at the age of 16. "I came to live in Portland with two of my sisters and a brother," he remembers. "I come from a really big family—I was number nine of eleven."

In the midst of such a large family, he sometimes got lost in the shuffle. "If there was a forgotten child, it was me," he says now. But with the insuperable optimism that has kept him afloat through the harder phases of his adventurous life, he spins the straw of his childhood into gold. Whenever he says something that could be construed as negative, in speaking of his past, he takes pains to represent it as a learning experience, turning it from bad to good.

"Looking back, I see it as a good thing," he says of being largely left to his own devices as a youth. "It teaches you to be self-reliant."

Still, he admits it wasn't a cakewalk being an immigrant high school student in the United States of the early '80s. "It wasn't always easy. You get treated like a foreigner, teased in school. But I felt like I fit in in America more than anywhere. It was really tough at first, though. I didn't speak English. I could have stayed within the immigrant community, but if you only speak with people who speak your language, you're never going to learn."



Jeung with friends in Prague, Czech Republic.



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