

New England Snowflake Bracelet



*Remember going to sleep on the night of a Nor'easter
and waking to a pure white world?*

New England Snowflake Bracelet

It snowed all night. Listening to the radio, waiting for your town. Breakfast and out the door. A free day. Sound of chains and spinning tires. Snowplows piling high. Sledding on snow-packed streets. Toboggans on the hills. Forts with tunnels. Snowballs. Snowmen. Icicles dripping in the afternoon sun. Pink cheeks, red nose, wet mittens, damp hair, hand-knitted wool hats drying on the radiator. The smell. The warmth of the kitchen. It was a good day.

Six real snowflakes copied here... one for each New England state and its snow city.
For everyone who loves a beautiful snow storm. More details on-line.

New England Snowflake Bracelet.....#X2871.....\$385.00
sterling silver shown actual size

also available

New England Snowflake Bracelet
14K yellow gold.....#X2937.....\$3,650.00

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ARGO (To) GO



FROM TOP: WARNER BROS. PICTURES/KEITH BERNSTEIN (2); COURTESY SRIWEAWNETR FAMILY

Talk about a kitchen nightmare, Tehran-style. The true story of **Chef Sam Sriweawnetr's** bravery during the 1979 hostage crisis may have been left 2013 **Academy Award Best Picture** winner *Argo*, but not out of the historical record.

BY COLIN S. SARGENT

Jammed between the lush, graphic-novel-style introduction to Iranian history that is Ben Affleck's Oscar-winning film *Argo* and the delicious irony of the CIA finding itself in need of Hollywood expertise, we see the fearful escape of six Americans from an embassy outbuilding in the midst of the takeover of the U.S. Embassy by Iranian student revolutionaries.

HELL'S KITCHEN

Amid the din of the chants of "Death

From the top: Ben Affleck on the set of *Argo*; a scene from *Argo* as the frantic Americans flee the besieged embassy; the streetwise chef Sam Sriweawnetr, who guided the real-life embassy staffers to safe refuge, almost certainly saving their lives, with President George H.W. Bush in better times after the hostage crisis.

HEROES

to America,” we see the uncertainty gripping those six as they step out onto a side street. One of them says, “We need to get off the street.” Cut to one of those dark, wood-paneled rooms where secret government meetings happen, and we hear, “They made it to the Canadian ambassador’s house.”

In the movie, the jump is understandable—Affleck wants to tell a story of CIA agents pretending to be filmmakers (played by actors, in Christopher Nolan levels of recursion). But how did the six who escaped manage to *get* to the Canadian Embassy? How did they avoid being apprehended by other students? It’s not exactly like they could have checked into the Tehran Hilton as ‘Ocean’s Six.’ And flagging a cab would have been dicey. It turns out, they were guided there by a streetwise and very brave chef with close ties to Maine, whose story was left out of the film.

Perhaps it wouldn’t have been if Ben Affleck could have played him. “Ahhh,” dismisses Somchai (Sam) Sriweawnetr, popular Maine restaurateur and hero of the first phase of the Canadian caper, when asked if he’s a little disappointed his story wasn’t part of the film. “They tell the story they want to tell. I know what happened, the people I helped know what happened, and my family knows. They were just six human beings in danger. How could I not help?”

Sam, born in Thailand, worked as a personal chef for a number of U.S. Embassy staffers in Tehran in the late 1970s. “I made many Thai dishes, but usually everyone wanted my pad thai.” According to *Our Man in Tehran*, by Robert Wright, and 2012’s *Argo: How the CIA and Hollywood Pulled Off the Most Audacious Rescue in History*, by Antonio Mendez and Matt Baglio, one of the six American diplomats holed up in the consulate while the embassy was being overrun had earlier been posted in Thailand. Knowing that Sam was in Tehran, he thought the Iranians wiretapping their phones might not have a Thai speaker handy, so he called Sam to ask about a place to escape to.

SAM’S TAKEOUT

This was where Sam took control of the situation. He suggested the residence of a British diplomat where his wife worked. This made it possible for the American dip-



lomats to hide somewhere they wouldn’t have to leave to shop for food. Guiding the escapees to the house, Sam also noticed their prospective new hosts were showing some jitters. Just as the film *Argo* recounts, a list of embassy staff had been seized and was sizzling in the hands of revolutionary committees, the *komiteh*, who intended deadly retribution, searching house by house. Based on his rapidly evolving street gossip network, Sam knew, too, that other embassy personnel were about to have im-

promptu visits from the newly formed revolutionary police units. The connections Sam had made as a chef—“I made sure to go shopping for the best ingredients and the best prices, and for that you have to know people”—proved invaluable. A week before the embassy takeover, Sam had heard “maybe tomorrow the embassy will come under attack.” Though this earlier warning had fallen on deaf ears, fortunately the six fugitives listened to Sam’s fears that *komiteh* might be coming.



A tale of two cities: It's a long way from Tehran to Rangeley, and chef Sam Sriweawnetr has had a fascinating journey between them. Clockwise, from top left: Sam is welcomed to the U.S. by Senator Paul Tsongas in 1982; Tehran after the revolution; the chef at work in his Thai Blossom kitchen; an enchanted autumn day in Rangeley.

FREE DELIVERY

So he arranged to have the six Americans stashed in still another location a block away while he surveyed a route for the escapees, who would need to make a survival dash from there to the Canadian embassy.

History from this lens reveals a lot of Sam Sriweawnetr and not so much Affleck.

Fearful that his participation had been observed, Sam was forced to spend the next year in hiding. After resolution of the hostage crisis in 1981, he was welcomed to the

United States with the aid of Senator Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts, who was there to greet him on his landing. "We did not get to bypass the process; we had to fill out all the forms, have all the documents," remembers Sam, who is now a U.S. citizen, "but Paul Tsongas had heard of our story, and he was a great help when we needed him." Certainly it can help when the office of a United States senator is willing to pick up the phone.

Sam remains warmly remembered by those he helped rescue as crucial to their escape. "It was a good move to go to Graves' house," Robert Anders tells Robert Wright in *Our Man In Tehran*. It was "a good place to stay, and at this point certainly no one felt that the demonstrators down at the American Embassy compound were able to make a detailed check for the location of the residences of embassy officers." Sriweawnetr could also get supplies and news for the escapees, Cora Lijek remembers. "It would allow us to stay in the house and stay hidden all the time, which was the main thing we needed."

SERVING RANGELEY, BOSTON, AND TEHRAN

In the U.S., Sam turned his zest for Thai cooking into a successful career...where else but here, where he was gratefully appreciated by those insiders who knew about his heroism. Indeed, in Massachusetts and Maine, he served President George H. W. Bush, opened his first restaurant in Boston,

and was signed as Asian Food Consultant for Grand Casinos, Inc. "He's always looking out for the next opportunity," says his daughter Sarah, who'd been in Thailand during Sam's Iranian adventure and moved with the rest of his family in the years following. "He helped me start Equator in 2004. He knew this area would get better [Equator is at 1721 Washington Street, less than a block from Massachusetts Avenue in the South End of Boston], and he was right."

Falling in love with Rangeley (mountainous like Tehran but minus the gunfire) when visiting a friend, Sam spied a fantastic business opportunity with ski resort customers in the sleepy town. It may be dawning on Maine readers by now it is Sam who established Thai Blossom, the first Asian restaurant in Rangeley, which, a Yelp diner says, "brought a much-needed dab of Asian flavor," as options around Sugarloaf in the '90s were mostly cheeseburgers of the *après-ski* variety. But it wasn't just opportunity. "I really like the friendly environment. Everybody can say hi to each other, all the people who live there know each other."

Sam has always been happy to share his story when asked but does not trumpet it, limiting his advertisement of the past to a cut-out from an article in the *Boston Globe* on his wall and a private file of other clippings. "People who were alive during the crisis, they know about it, but nobody young does now." Thai Blossom is temporarily closed while Sam travels to the country of his birth. "He should be coming back soon," says Sarah. "I'm trying to convince him to retire, to become a consultant, but cooking is what he loves to do, what he wants." Sam, though in his seventies, plays his cards close to the chest. "I don't want anyone else in my kitchen."

If you can't wait for him to come back to us for a taste of what he served in Tehran, Sam's daughter Sarah operates his restaurant Equator in Boston, where you can order takeout while you watch the Oscar presentations. If you're going to make a theme night of it, order the pad thai. "My father gave us his recipe—it is very special!" The very one that launched his career among the diplomatic households of Tehran.

It sure brings a new meaning to "six, to go." ■

➤ For more, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/12/argo-extras.