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The Lais' new milestone

They brought their Vietnamese fare to Philly 30 years ago. A glowing cafe is their latest venture.

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Benny Lai's journey has led him here, to the sparkling new Vietnam Cafe at 47th and Baltimore, around the corner from where the Lai family, fleeing Saigon, staked its first claim in West Philadelphia - a modest Asian grocery called Fu Wah - 30 years ago as of October.

Sparkling doesn't quite capture the cafe (nor does cafe), though a fairyland of lanterns glows above its 100 seats like a haze of hot-air ballons, and the hardwood floor is as



unscuffed as a shoe just out of the box.

What it is is "evocative," with understated touches of old Vietnam (a Rivera-esque print of women hulling rice, a carved duck standing by to snap up spillage); and "impressive," a testament to an immigrant family's passage: The family Lai - 10 strong, tempered by escape across the South China Sea, stuffed in bunk beds in a two-bedroom apartment on 45th Street - did not land lightly in the city.

Fu Wah, still family-run and still making the toasted Vietnamese tofu hoagie that remains a staple of West Philly vegans, begat (in 1984) a 28-seat Chinatown eatery called Vietnam Restaurant at 11th and Vine, which begat the intimate Bar Saigon, the third-floor nook grafted on as the restaurant grew and tripled in size.

I am reprising this with Benny (who with his sister, Tina, manages the restaurants) over one of my all-time favorite Philadelphia meals - a barbecue sampler heaped with grill-charred cartridges of grape leaves stuffed with ground pork; skewers of savory meatballs; crisp, airy (not too dense) spring rolls, fried and chopped to bite-size pieces; and glistening slivers of marinated chicken.



But that's not all. At its center is a springy tangle of white vermicelli rice noodles, a crunchy collar of iceberg lettuce turned up next to it and set off with sprigs of licorice-y Asian basil or, alternatively, fuzzy mint leaves.

But wait. Order now, and there's more. Accompanying the platter is a plate of translucent rice-paper wrappers. Spread one out, chopstick on a dollop of noodles, a sliver of chicken, a leaf of mint. Roll. Now dip in one of two homemade sauces - a dark, peanut-hoisin-chile sauce and an addictive sweet-vinegar-fish-sauce dip called nuoc cham.

Benny has joined me, as he would on occasion close to 20 years ago when my pal, the war correspondent David Zucchino, and I first discovered Vietnam Restaurant, and for that matter, Vietnamese flavors - lemongrass and beef-brothy, lime-spritzed pho; Frenchified Vietnamese "hoagies" crunchy with cucumber, daikon and cilantro, and of course, delicate spring rolls as they were poised to displace the heftier Chinese egg roll in the affections of the city's cutting-edge chowhounds.

He is, at 42, the almost-patriarch now, his father, Nhu Lai, whose sandal factory was confiscated after the fall of South Vietnam, retired; his mother, Thuyen Luu, no longer

cooking long hours (though spring roll output has leapt from 500 to a staggering 5,000 a week!).

Try something new, Benny suggests now and then, knowing my order by heart - the barbecue platter that I've been getting since it was \$13.95 more than 15 years ago (it's almost double that now), a special, gently tangy "red soup" of lemongrass, chicken, and rice noodles, and a "33" beer, a crisp golden lager of French-Vietnamese parentage.



During the war in Vietnam it was all but impossible to find that - or any - beer chilled outside the boites of Saigon. But the conflict had another unintended consequence - it launched the Vietnamese diaspora (and the Lai family) in the 1970s, one more example of how culinary trends are not born solely from the imagination of chefs.

So, yes, I tell Benny, I'll try the basil shrimp, and the thin-sliced pork chop over crunchy Asian greens. But just once. I know what I like at the Vietnams (Restaurant, and new sibling Cafe), a home plate in an uncertain sea, the lemongrass and mint familiar now, an old shoe that is sparkling still.

