

# Philadelphia

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## Chinatown Revolution

With Bar Saigon, Benny Lai is changing the Chinatown restaurant scene

For years, Vietnam Restaurant ably filled its role as one half of 11th Street turf war with neighboring Vietnam Palace, a sort of Pat's-vs.-Geno's waged by people who know from border skirmishes. Now, owner Benny Lai, 37, has opened Bar Saigon, a third-floor lounge named for his hometown, with low, boxy seats and a list of wacky cocktails—both raising the stakes against

Vietnam Palace and challenging the standing business model for ethnic restaurants.

Vietnam was opened by Lai's parents 20 years ago as a linoleum-coated 28-seat noodle shop—"a hole in the wall, he calls it—just five years after they and nine children arrived in Philadelphia following a postwar turn in a Malaysian refugee camp. In 1989, Benny coaxed control of the business from his parents; he has since been on an entrepreneurial tear reminiscent of a Walnut Street restaurateur: adding a second floor, buying a next-door travel agency for expansion, and then, in 1999—inspired by a renovation at

Susanna Foo—beginning a vast overhaul of the interior and facade. Directed by artist Jesse Gardner who also designed Cube Libre, the restaurant's new look features colonial touches such as wrought iron and dark wood paneling. The moves scared Lai's parents, who had fulfilled their dream of opening a profitable and steady family business. "At the beginning they said it's a little risky. If it doesn't work out, we'll be in debt," Lai says. "I told them business is like gambling. You're taking a chance." It paid off: Eight months after reopening in 1999, Vietnam's business had doubled. (Vietnam Palace has since tuned up its décor as well.)

Lai boasts about all he offers that's unique to Chinatown: La Colombe espresso, desserts from a Miel pastry chef, a collection of cognacs and single-malt scotches, plasma TV screen for karaoke and business meetings. He has put in an upstairs kitchen and is working out a lounge menu of Vietnamese small plates: spring rolls, stuffed grape leaves. "Maybe tofu hoagies for the vegetarians," he suggests. Lai's parents—who are in their 60s and own a grocery store in West Philadelphia—stopped in recently for their first cocktails. Their favorite: the lemongrass martini, with Absolut Kurant and Cointreau, freshly squeezed lemon juice, and a stalk of lemongrass garnishing the glass.

—Sasha Issenberg