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KEEPIN' IT REAL

Skip Chinatown and head west

By Danyal Kothari



Although the walk from campus to West Philadelphia's Vietnam Café (47th & Baltimore) may be a nice stroll on a spring evening, the nine-block trek was anything but pleasant on a frigid February afternoon. But, Vietnam Café was well worth it, delivering much needed warmth and comfort with its atmosphere, service and remarkable food.

The Lai Family opened its first restaurant (Vietnam) in Chinatown 25 years ago. Vietnam Café offers a condensed version of the flagship restaurant. The Lai's pride themselves on delivering authentic Vietnamese flavors. This is not your typical Asian fusion restaurant.

Bamboo paneled walls and an elegant black and red theme give this BYOB a modern elegance that is aesthetically appealing and inviting. While the proximity of the tables may tease the eavesdropper in you, the restaurant is small without feeling cramped (look for Vietnam Café to expand later this year).

With nearly 70 items offered on the menu (and about 90 at the Chinatown joint), ordering can seem like an arduous task. Don't hesitate to ask for help. Service is both friendly and informative. Waiters are attentive to your needs and eager to make recommendations. And, if you're still feeling overwhelmed (or lazy), opt for the B.B.Q. platter (\$24.95), which serves two and includes a sampling of various appetizers.

Highlights of the extensive appetizer menu are the Cha Gio (crispy pork spring rolls, \$6.50) and the Bo Nuong La (beef wrapped in

Vietnam Café 814 S. 47th St. (215) 729-0260

Don't Miss: Vietnamese coffee

Skip: The fish claypot

Bottom Line: Authentic Vietnamese cuisine in an elegant setting

grape leaves, \$9.95). The spring rolls are crispy without leaving an oily aftertaste. Stuffed with pork and rice noodles, the seasoning is subtle, a usually tricky balance when dealing with pork. While ground beef wrapped in grape leaves might remind you of Greek dolmas, this classic Vietnamese dish pairs well with its sweet dipping sauce and rice noodles.

Entrees are divided into four main categories: rice, noodles, meat and seafood. Most rice and vermicelli noodle dishes are served with the house sauce and offered in chicken, pork, beef and shrimp, and any of these are safe choices. For the more adventurous, try the Ca Kho To (fish claypot, \$12.95). Bubbling in a garlic-based fish sauce, the morsels of fish are flaky and savory. The fish can be overwhelming salty without rice, so make sure to scoop a forkful of jasmine rice with each bite.

End your meal on a high note by ordering Ca Phe Sua Nong (Vietnamese Coffee, \$3.50). Served with sweetened condensed milk, the coffee manages the perfect blend of strong flavor and sweetness, without compromising either.

Vietnam Café gives you the rare combination of authentic, homemade flavors and a classy environment. So give Center City a break and show West Philly some love, you'll be pleasantly surprised.