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Feed

Lovely and Amazing

That's how it is at Vietnam Restaurant.

By Robin Rinaldi

They say that beauty, truth and love are the three ideals you can count on in this life, but I beg to differ. Truth can be a dark and slippery animal (try asking two witnesses to recount the same event). And love, while undeniably essential, is anything but dependable.

But I'll put my money on beauty, on the painting that holds you captive, on the pink glow of dusk reflecting off skyscrapers. Its restorative powers are equaled only by food, whose sheer range--junk to comfort to haute --rescues us from any number of maladies three times a day. And when you combine the two into a delicious, beautiful meal, well, there isn't much to match it.

These were my thoughts as I sat at a corner table of Vietnam Restaurant in Chinatown, scarfing down a barbecue sampler platter.

As it turns out, it was the first night Vietnam was open after its annual late-August vacation, and the place was packed with couples, families, students and professionals digging their chopsticks into glistening squid and crispy duck.

The ambience feels far from Chinatown, and it begins the moment you come upon Vietnam's charming stucco facade, its balcony and awnings resembling those of a European cafe. Inside, the mood turns part Japanese tea room, part Bombay Company, relaxing but not austere, with rich wood paneling, banana yellow ceilings, diminutive lamps and touches of palm and bamboo.

The full house, or possibly our long perusal of the menu's hundred-and-some items, could have accounted for the sometimes slow service. But when the food is this good and the prices this low, you won't see me complaining about having to flag a busy waiter, who rushes to the table smiling.

Which leads us back to that barbecue platter, a hefty rotating and apportioned wooden bowl offering up one tantalizing snack after another: perfectly grilled chicken strips, golden spring rolls studded with slivers of meat and mushroom, grilled pork "meatballs" (more like a ground pork kebab) and grape leaves encasing an addictive mixture of beef and roasted sesame seeds. To finish: thin rice vermicelli, exceptionally fresh lettuce and mint leaves, thick slices of cucumber and pickled carrots, everything you need to roll up any of the appetizers into the accompanying rice- paper crepes.

Then there's the dipping. Take your pick of nuoc nam, a vinegary-sweet fish sauce, or hoisin, a plummy bean-based dip sprinkled with ground peanuts.

I linger on this platter because I dare say it's Vietnam's signature dish. You will see patrons greedily dipping into it at most tables. You can view a photo of it on the website (www.eatatvietnam.com). And unless you've just come off a hunger strike, you and a friend can share it and call it dinner for \$16.95.

Naturally, I didn't have that option, so we moved on to the soup. First, a huge steaming bowl of basic wonton broth in which floated del-

icate dump-ings, strips of pork and a mound of endless noodles. Second, a spicy bowl of chicken lemon grass touched with star anise, which chef/owner Benny Lai says he created for Inquirer reporter Rick Nichols back in the day. (Thanks Rick!) Toss in a few fingerfuls of shredded lettuce and bean sprouts, spritz on a dose of lime and, if you dare, throw in a slice of intensely hot green pepper.

A platter of "broken rice," a fluffy short-grain, was topped with pork that had been charbroiled to a meaty sizzle. The lightly battered lime chicken boasted those irresistible Asian layers--sweet glaze, crispy coating, succulent meat--and a pile of steamed broccoli florets. Finally, a plate of pan-fried egg noodles--shaped like linguine but much lighter-tossed with shrimp, chicken, sprouts, greens and cucumber--proved once again that greasy lo mein is okay for a quick lunch, but only mi xao que huong will do when you really need to feel what a trio of meat, veggies and noodles can do for your soul.

Identifying each ingredient and seasoning was a challenge. There was the essence of garlic, the bite of citrus, the faint waft of fish. There was an overall taste of just-cooked freshness and traces of nut: soy,



The man behind the platter: Head chef Sam Tran (right) runs a tight ship at Vietnam.

sesame, black bean. There were primary colors everywhere. But it all marched across the tongue in rowdy parade that tended to lull the senses into a what-the-hell, bring-it-on kind of laxity.

Can you leave a place a little drunk on its food? Even if you didn't partake of any of the "Polynesian drinks" served in ornate tiki glasses, such as "Bachelor's Downfall: a wonderful blend of rum, brandy and fruit juice. Management not responsible!?" Even if you only sipped an icy syrup loaded with dates, longans, gelatin noodles and lotus seeds?

I think you can. And I think the management is indeed responsible.

VIETNAM RESTAURANT

221 N. 11th St.
215.592.1163

CUISINE: Vietnamese
PRICES: \$6.50-\$16.95
HOURS: 11 am-9:30pm
Sun-Thurs; 11am-10:30pm
Fri-Sat.