

REVIEW

Vieternans Day

For decades, Vietnam Restaurant has been one of the most reliable destinations in Chinatown, defying logic with its swiftly served, inexpensive and consistently tasty food. Over the years, success has come in the form of crowds swelling out the door, a growing number of seats, a décor update and the addition of an upstairs lounge for enhanced Suffering Bastard enjoyment. On any given night, you may still have to wait for a table.

Now, owner Benny Lai has staked a claim in West Philly with a sibling café just off Lancaster Avenue, next to the Lai family's Fu-Wah Mini Market.

This new restaurant is sleek, with alternate walls of exposed brick, pressed bamboo, lemongrass and papaya-hued paint. Offering only 30 seats and a BYO policy, it's a smaller, more intimate experience than on 11th Street. And the original menu, which contains nearly 100 items, has been pared down to a more manageable list of greatest hits.

And among the greatest of Vietnam's greatest hits is the pork chop served over broken rice. The meat, redolent with lemongrass and the

smoke of the grill, is juicy and tender, while the couscous-like grains sop up its drippings along with the vinegar of pickled carrots. See also the charred grape-leaf-wrapped beef rolls, the addictive salt-and-pepper squid and the creamy crêpe with ground pork and shrimp.

Banh cuon, or Vietnamese ravioli, is currently served only as a special. Milky-white rice paper rolls are loosely folded over ground pork, mushrooms and finely chopped onion, the little packages steamed and sprinkled with bits of golden fried onion. This is a dish that absolutely depends on nuoc cham — the pungent, orange brew of fish sauce and lime juice floating with bits of hot pepper and julienned carrot —

which transforms it into a delicate wonder.

Of all of Vietnam's offerings, its pho has never been the strongest. There are a few kinds on the menu here, including the pho sate, a version of the noodle soup thickened with a murky peanut sauce that overwhelms thin slices of brisket and shimmering cellophane noodles, positively smothering customary fixins like lime wedges, chili pepper slices, bean sprouts and basil leaves. If it's beef you're after, you might be better off ordering a plate of vermicelli tangled up with flakes of meat, crisp rounds of spring roll and crunchy peanut bits.

The menu will be expanded somewhat in the coming weeks, which can only be good news. And if Vietnam Café has half the longevity and integrity of its sibling, we'll have plenty of time to work our way through it.

VIETNAM CAFÉ

814 S. 47th St.

215-729-0260

Hours: Tue.-Sun.,

11:30 a.m.-9 p.m.;

closed Monday

Appetizers, \$4.75-

\$9.95; Entrées,

\$8.95-\$11.95

BYOB

Wheelchair accessible

—Elisa Ludwig