

The Philadelphia Inquirer

SUNDAY, AUGUST 31, 2003

SCENE | JEFF GAMMAGE

Two Vietnams, divided by 11th St.

In culinary combat for two decades.

Nearly 20 years ago, as a small Chinatown eatery called Vietnam Restaurant was struggling to get started, the business partners found themselves in disagreement.

One of them, a cook named Ha Nguyen, walked across the street and opened her own restaurant.

She called it Vietnam Palace.

Her place was bigger, and in that first year she nearly drove her former partners out of business. Sales at Vietnam Restaurant dropped 80 percent before slowly starting to rebound.

Since that time, the two restaurants have squared off in daily culinary combat, matching each other noodle for noodle and spring roll for spring roll across the cracked pavement of North 11th Street, near Vine.

Vietnam Palace dominates the west side of the street, its painted brick exterior topped by a giant neon silhouette of a Vietnamese woman carrying a parasol. Vietnam owns the east side, its striped awnings and pastel-colored walls lending an understated colonial charm.

This summer, it looked as if their two-decade battle had finally produced a victor.

Vietnam Palace closed.

Passersby noticed that its windows were missing, the openings covered in plywood. The giant neon-lit lady had gone dark.

It appeared Vietnam Restaurant would rule 11th Street alone.

But, of course, appearances can be deceiving.

Inside Vietnam Palace, construction workers shout orders over the whine of electric saws. A stylish tile-faced bar is rising from the dust and debris on the first floor. Upstairs, a wood floor the color of French roast coffee is spreading across the banquet room.

What looked like defeat was merely a pause, a time to regroup, renovate and come back stronger than ever.

Call it an escalation in the Vietnam war.

"It's going to be a little bit French, a little bit Asian," Nguyen said recently, as she surveyed the progress. French doors will lead to the sidewalk, and the family-run restaurant may add outdoor seating and a late-night menu.

From his front door across the street, Vietnam Restaurant proprietor Benny Lai can see the sweaty, dirt-streaked construction workers moving in and out, the vans and pickup trucks coming and going.

He was a teenager when Vietnam Restaurant split in two in the mid-1980s. So it's not as though he carries a grudge. Just the opposite. He'll often eat at a competing restaurant, just to be friendly, though he hasn't had occasion to dine at Vietnam Palace.

"They'd be uncomfortable," he says.

Twenty years ago his family's restaurant was, as Lai delicately describes it, "kind of a hole in the wall."

But that was then. In 1990 Lai expanded onto the second floor, then into the building next door. About three years ago, Vietnam Restaurant underwent a major renovation, transforming from Formica tables and fluorescent lights to the elegance of hardwood floors, French-style windows and luminous, black-and-white photographs on the walls.

Lai says he's not concerned about the improvements going on across 11th street, and he's not planning any tit-for-tat response.

However.

It just so happens, Lai mentions, that he's now obtaining permits for a new project. He's going to turn his third floor into a cozy lounge, a quiet, comfortable area where people can relax after dinner with a cup of coffee, a dessert or a drink.

He's just finished the demolition. Construction could start anytime.