

Farewell to old Saigon fare

A great-value Vietnamese restaurant with a menu that surprises the taste buds.

WEEKEND DINING
HELEN GREENWOOD

Bau Truong
70 John Street, Cabramatta,
9727 4492
Sat-Thu, 9am-9pm; Fri, 9am-10pm

CENTRAL Cabramatta is shuttered by 8pm on a Saturday and the quiet streets catch us by surprise. I thought it would be a late-night spot but I find out later that the local happy hour is kiddy dinner time, about 6pm. Then John Street is alive with people, the shops are open and families throng through restaurant doors.

So, by the time we wander into Bau Truong, with its green sign and big glass windows, the high chairs have been stacked away and the atmosphere is sedate.

Couples, both young and old, and a few groups of friends are eating leisurely, watched over by silver bream swimming vigorously in a tank at the back of the very long room.

Though the space is long, it's a generous size with banquettes and tables on either side of an incline. It reminds me of the famous ramp at Rockpool except the waiters here trot down the runway bearing steaming, sizzling dishes.

Bau Truong's decor, though not quite Rockpool, is very modish, clearly put together by someone trying to get away from the usual



Chic and cheerful ... modish decor and knockout dishes keep the customers coming.

Photos: Fiona Morris

DIGEST

- ▶ **Food**
Enticing Vietnamese food that moves away from the usual. Try the grills and the goat.
- ▶ **Service**
Solicitous, friendly and chatty. Great for first-timers, helpful for old-hands.
- ▶ **Atmosphere**
Modish, bright decor and a runway in the middle jettisons the old Saigon cliches.
- ▶ **Value**
Immensely satisfying. Less than \$30 a head bought us a banquet.
- ▶ **Noise**
Varies from medium to high.
- ▶ **Recommended dishes**
Pork and taro spring rolls, grilled meat ball rice rolls, caramelised fish in a clay pot, goat curry.



A must ... goat curry.

old Saigon cliches. The colour scheme is pale avocado green and chocolate brown. There's handsome wallpaper with a pale-blue palm-tree motif, crockery with a dark-brown matt glaze and bright-green plastic chopsticks. Though it has groovy pendant lights, the room is still brightly lit with spotlights.

Bau Truong used to be in a nearby arcade along with another well-known Cabramatta eatery, Thanh Binh. As they both became successful, they migrated to the main street and blossomed into major food destinations.

Bau Truong is famous for its barbecue grill and its goat curry. The former isn't fired up tonight, though we can see it, screened by glass atop a pile of slate bricks next to the orange alcove where the ritual Buddhist offerings are laid out.

The goat curry, on the other

hand, is available (a steal at only \$9) and we're determined to try it. That's the easy part. The hard part is there are so many other things we would like to try on the long list of 179 items. There are at least seven variations on the ricepaper fresh rolls, more than a dozen salads and myriad dishes featuring oysters, crabs, squid and pipis.

Two intriguing pages in the menu have "7 Cuisines of Fish" and "7 Cuisines of Beef", each priced at \$38 a head. They offer seven different variations on a theme, like a musical composition. Then there are the fondue offerings: crocodile, kangaroo, venison and beef.

In the end, we settle for pork-and-taro spring rolls; "grilled meat ball fresh rolls"; a green pawpaw salad with pork and prawn; fish caramelised in a clay pot with pepper; and the goat curry.

The spring rolls are thinly wrapped and gently fried, mellow with the mild smooth filling. They are different enough to be interesting but I'm much more enamoured with the fresh rolls. I'd anticipated, understandably from the description, grilled meat balls. Instead, the rolls turn up with sweet slices of lap cheung sausage under the white skins of the rice wrappers, a bit like the French poulet en demi-deuil where truffles are pushed between the chicken skin and the flesh.

Mint, basil and a sapling of spring onion explode in the mouth with the crystal clean vermicelli noodles and rice wrapper.

The green pawpaw salad is piled high and underdressed. Something sharp, pungent or fishy is missing from the shredded pale fruit dotted with some morsels of pork.

But the next two dishes more than make up for this understated

interlude. The caramelised fish in its dark clay pot is a wicked wonder of technique and flavour. Deep but not rich, intense but not cloying, savoury peppery and toffee-ed at the same time. There's a bit of cloves and a lick of bacon.

Then the curry, oh my. Delicate, fragrant with holy basil and bay leaves, lemon grass and the secret ingredient, evaporated milk; this knockout dish is like a laksa of melting meat without the noodles. Full as we are, we keep picking and nibbling, pulling out rice, properly cooked, from its insulated bucket.

Perhaps impressed with our intestinal fortitude, our waiter becomes expansive and chatty. He tells us that Bau Truong has another restaurant at Canley Vale. That's the late-night hot-spot, he reckons. We wonder why.

There's only one answer: we'll just have to go there and find out.