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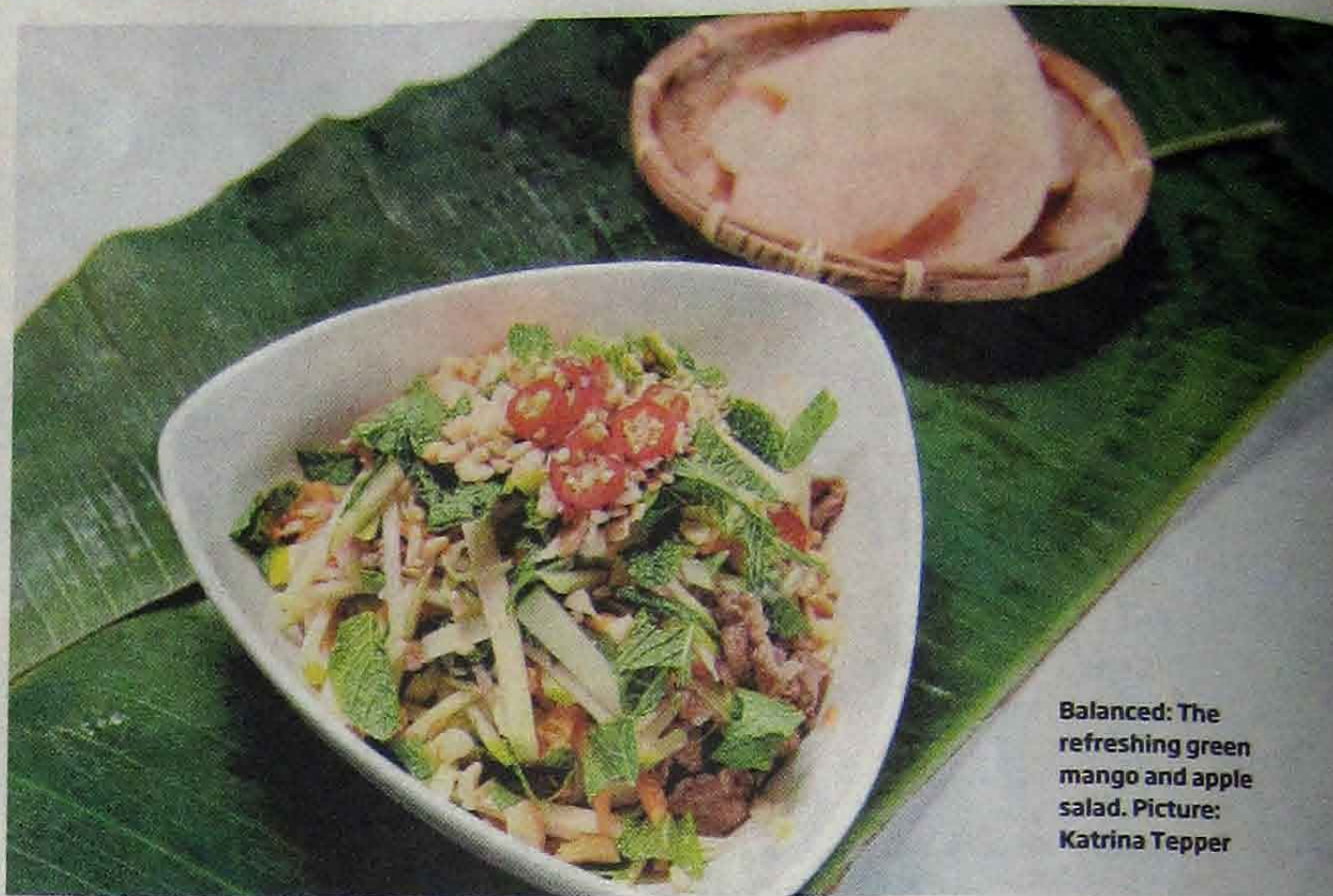
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Balanced: The refreshing green mango and apple salad. Picture: Katrina Tepper

Take a Bau

This stylish new Vietnamese is an ode to its owner's heritage and skill

IN AN industry dominated by blokes, Bac Cang Nghieu is a remarkable woman. Approaching 70, she's responsible for two of Sydney's finest Vietnamese restaurants, in Cabramatta and Canley Heights, both bearing the Bau Truong name. Now she's done it again with a stylish dinner-only Bau Truong in another of the city's many Vietnamese clusters, Marrickville.

While her restaurants have always had a distinctive aesthetic style, this incarnation lifts Vietnamese dining out of the cheap-and-cheerful ethnic ghetto it so often dwells in. This is an upmarket place with prices to match.

The menu begins with more than 30 mon khai vi (appetisers), which her son Michael Thai fashionably dubs as tapas, mostly priced a short distance either side of the \$10 mark. They're followed by a further 70 dishes that draw from signature hits of Bau Truong's forebears, from the barbecue chicken with sticky rice, \$22, to mutton curry, \$22.

It's pared back considerably from the menu size at its predecessors, introducing more Chinese influences and most importantly, the sweeter, southern flavours of Bac Cang's childhood in what was then known as Saigon.

It's evocatively fragrant food, with layers of complex flavouring built from spices and fresh herbs such as lemongrass, cinnamon, ginger, star anise, basil and coriander.

Michael is responsible for the decor, using splashes of electric blue, yellow and red in striking highlights against the moody black setting. He also oversees the service with a keen eye and cheerful pride for his mother's talents.

Pretty Japanese pottery is used for appetisers such as steamed pacific oysters (hao

hap la tia to), \$8 for two, the meaty, briny bivalves softened by lime and a chiffonnade of lightly minty perilla leaves.

Sea snails in a spicy coconut sauce (oc xao dura), \$15, isn't as French as implied, the earthenware pot filled with periwinkles in a creamy, sweet, lemongrass-scented coconut curry I'd happily drink on its own. The periwinkles require some skill to extract - you need to dig the fork into the flesh behind the mollusc's shell foot and pull, and out comes a long curl of meat that's interesting, but only in a "well-I-can-cross-that-off-the-list" kind of way.

A coarse Vietnamese beef and coconut pate (cha dum), \$10, provoked a similar response, just bland compared with the ox tongue braised in red wine, \$15, a delightfully French-influenced dish where gelatinous offal drifts in the warmly spiced braise.

While an appealing sweetness comes to the fore in most dishes, it's never out of balance or cloying, so the apple in a green mango and mint salad with beef, \$15, is a wonderful contrast to the salty fish sauce dressing.

Our savoury courses climax with a braised duck (vit ham sa ot), \$28, which Michael endorses as from his mother's childhood. The meat falls from the bone in a preserved bean curd sauce with lemongrass and chilli. It's matched only by the splendour of the goat hotpot (lau de), \$38, a big, bubbling, star anise-scented cauldron of on-the-bone meat chunks with lotus root, water chestnuts and bean curd.

Desserts don't reach similar heights. A slice of baked egg custard with sticky rice ice cream, \$12, offers some lovely textures but I'd be happier exploring more of Bac Cang's heritage.

- thomsens@dailytelegraph.com.au

HOW IT RATED

BAU TRUONG

- Food.... 15/20
- Staff..... 7/10
- Drink 3/5
- X-factor ... 4/5
- Value 7/10

The score out of 50

36

Address
185 Marrickville Rd,
Marrickville;
ph 9569 4938

Food
Vietnamese
Drink
Licensed & BYO,
corkage \$2.50 pp
Small but interesting
wine and beer list

Hours
Dinner Mon-Sat
5.30-10.30pm,
Price guide
Entrees \$8-\$20
Mains \$22-\$38
Desserts \$12

Snapshot
The Bau Truong name has been synonymous with fragrant food and smart restaurant design. Now they raise the bar with an elegant restaurant and sweet, aromatic flavours of southern Vietnam.