



TERRY DURACK RESTAURANT REVIEW

Giving it a red haute go

Playing it safe always ends in disaster, according to guerilla philosopher and graffiti activist Banksy. Full marks, then, to Bac Cang Nghieu and her family for the risky move of taking Vietnamese food upmarket at their latest venture, following on from their Canley Heights and Cabramatta restaurants.

This Marrickville newcomer is a world away from Sydney's identikit Vietnamese restaurants with their wipe-clean tables, vinyl chairs and tissue-box serviettes. Instead, it's like stepping inside a funky, dark cocktail bar; the two levels filled with white-clothed tables, drum-shaped wooden chairs and repeated graphics of Chinese opera masks.

The first-floor dining room glows with scarlet pendant lights, bright-mustard tiles and a razzle-dazzle electric-blue wall. On the tables, bright-red chopsticks clash beautifully with the brilliant turquoise ceramic plates, sourced from a Japanese pottery factory now lost, sadly, to the tsunami.

But this would be just a flash

interior-design job if the ambitions of the kitchen weren't ramped up as well, and the 108-dish menu lists a few more adventurous – read, risk-taking – choices. If your Vietnamese eating is limited to George Street's pho noodle soup, Miss Chu's summer rolls and Red Lantern's chilli salt squid, then you can have a bit of fun with Bau Truong's sea snails (oc luoc) in spicy coconut sauce, fried soft-shell crab or goat hotpot.

There's an army of appetisers and pages of shareable main courses, with a focus on the family's southern Vietnamese heritage. There's also the odd French influence (ox tongue braised in red wine) and old favourites such as banh xeo (savoury pancake), goi cuon (fresh spring roll) and caramelised pork ribs for the risk-averse.

The kitchen, it becomes clear, is more into evolution than revolution, with a gentle tweak here and there rather than full-blooded reinvention. Take the nem nuong cuon (\$8). We're accustomed to wrapping the grilled pork meatballs



New Vietnamese ... Bau Truong takes the menu in an upmarket direction. Photo: Domino Postiglione

at the table with noodles and herbs in rice paper but these baby meatballs perch on top of vertical mini rolls, pre-wrapped and ready to be dipped in the gloopy, sweet/salty sauce. It's a bit try-hard but I'm not going to be the one who stops people from trying hard and there are enough vestiges of the hands-on original to make it enjoyable.

Here's a little risky business worth a try – a chicken liver dipping sauce with the cuon diep (\$12). Prawn, pork and rice noodles are all neatly rolled up in what the perky staff calls "not bitter mustard leaves", possibly not their correct botanical name. The rolls are fresh, the leaves are indeed not bitter and, if there is no discernible chicken liver flavour in the chicken liver sauce, then that could well be seen as a good thing, too.

Most locals tend to BYO but they would do well to check out the short and sweet wine list, pegged at \$45. The best possible aperitif is a well-chilled 333 beer from Saigon (\$7) and there's a spicy, plummy, perfectly decent Peninsula Panorama Pinot Noir from the Mornington Peninsula, well-priced at \$28 (it retails about \$18).

Bau Truong

Address 185 Marrickville Road, Marrickville. Phone 9569 4938.
Open Dinner daily from 5pm.
Licensed Yes and BYO, corkage \$3.50pp.
Cost About \$85 for two, plus wine.

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The restaurant's "famous" barbecue chicken with sticky rice (\$22) comes from the charcoal grill but is, tonight, a scrappy dish of fairly dry chicken pieces (off the bone, sadly) served with fingers of crisp-fried sticky rice and a pile of crinkle-cut pickled carrot lengths. It's a dish that could do with a bit more tweaking, I think.

There's real snap in a salad of green mango, apple and star fruit tossed with fish sauce and a shreddy mangle of well-cooked beef (\$15), the idea being to pile it all onto prawn crackers and eat in the hand.

Stir-fried pumpkin with shrimp paste and sweet basil (\$15) is quite shyly flavoured.

A dessert described as a baked egg and coconut custard (\$12) is like a dense, very sweet flan, served with

granular black sticky rice ice-cream that's a glorious ball of purple cool.

So, not a game-changer but certainly no disaster, either.

I miss the lush freshness and lilingly sweet lightness of the street food of Ho Chi Minh City but revel in the added comfort and class (airconditioning, good lighting, responsive service) and the efforts made to make Vietnamese cuisine more relevant.

Back in the mists of time, I once suggested haute Vietnamese would be the next big thing, a natural follow-up to the sophisticated Thai cooking espoused by David Thompson, Martin Boetz and friends. It hasn't made it yet but each step of the journey gets us a bit closer.

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THE LOWDOWN

Best bit Aircon! Cold beer! Ice!

Worst bit Closed at lunch.

Go-to dish Cuon diep: fresh green mustard-leaf rolls with prawn, pork and rice noodles, and chicken liver dipping sauce, \$12.



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