

The Sydney Morning Herald special report

Taste of Asia

Best of both worlds

A blending of cultures creates innovative food still true to its heritage, writes **Carli Ratcliff**.

Fusion is a highly misused term," Vietnamese-born restaurateur Michael Thai says. "That is why we are very conscious of remaining true to our heritage."

With his mother, chef Bac Cang Nghieu, Thai oversees a triumvirate of Vietnamese restaurants: the original Bau Truong in Cabramatta, another in Canley Vale and their newest outpost in Marrickville.

"The original restaurant and Canley Vale are home-style Vietnamese cooking," he says.

Bac Cang Nghieu is a veteran of Vietnamese dining in Sydney. Taking a job in the kitchen at Bau Truong, Cabramatta, in 1992, she bought the business in 1995. Her home-style cooking is popular with Vietnamese locals and with day-trippers to Cabramatta.

When the family decided to open in Marrickville, Thai was keen to present a new Vietnamese dining experience. "The local council were incredibly slow at approving everything," he says.



New take ... (from left) caramelised pork spare ribs; snails in coconut sauce.

"It gave us the opportunity to do a couple of trips to Vietnam, which gave me inspiration."

Vietnam was colonised by the Chinese for 1000 years, he says. "Chinese people love their food. Then we were colonised by the French, who also love their food. There is a lot more to Vietnamese food than what we see in Sydney."

The research trips inspired Thai to offer a different style of Vietnamese food at the Marrickville restaurant. "I wanted it to be very different to usual home-style Vietnamese," he says. "That proved to be quite a challenge because mum is old school."

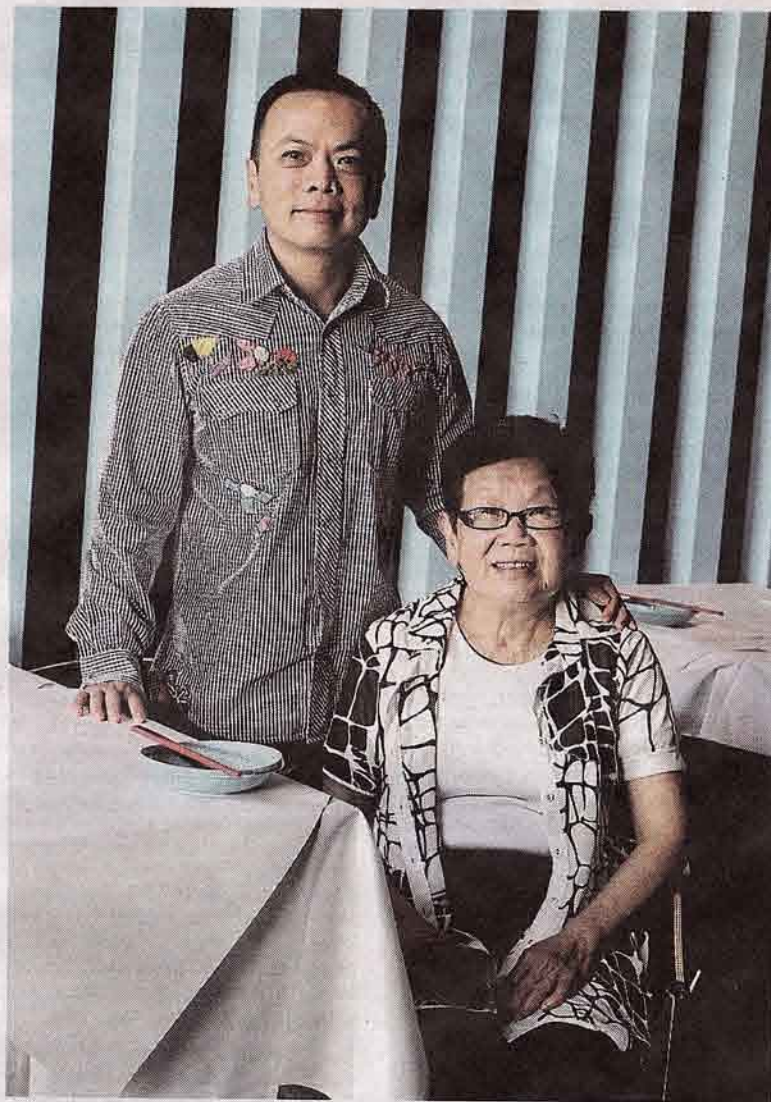
Thai gives the example of caramelised pork belly: "People are very used to eating it. They've had it

in Japanese restaurants, but the traditional Vietnamese version that we serve in Cabramatta arrives with a thick layer of fat. I felt we should tweak it and make it using pork spare ribs. That idea to slightly change an ingredient initiated a heated three-hour discussion."

His mother did come around. "She called me after she'd tested the recipe with ribs," Thai says. "'OK, we'll refine it,' she said. From then on, she was more open to suggestions, so we designed a menu that is contemporary but that doesn't move away from our heritage."

Brothers Yen and Le Nguyen, of Yen for Viet in Marrickville, have drawn on their childhood dishes.

"Our non-Vietnamese customers



Family traditions ... Michael Thai and Bac Cang Nghieu. Photo: Steven Siewert



Local influences ... (clockwise from above) Mr Wong chefs Dan Hong, Eric Koh and Jowett Yu; their Peking ducks; the owner of Claude's, chef Chui Lee Luk, is inspired by Malaysian cuisine. Photos: James Brickwood, Marco Del Grande, Sahlan Hayes

want to eat home-style Vietnamese food," Yen says. "So we put together a menu of the food that we liked to eat when we were kids."

Caramelised fish, pork belly cooked in a clay pot with young coconut juice, and whole golden squid stuffed with pork mince and black fungus are popular with the customers.

"Vietnamese cuisine is a funny thing – it is either Chinese- or French-influenced," Yen says.

His mother attended a French school as a child and came away with distinctly French recipes that became part of her repertoire and are now treasured family meals.

"We ate custard flan with caramel sauce twice a week as kids," Yen says. "Creme caramel, essentially."

Chef Luke Nguyen, of Red Lantern and Red Lantern on Riley, is also fond of dishes brought to Vietnam by the French. "I started researching recipes from the late 1800s and found there were so many dishes that had French influence that I'd never realised," he says. "I became obsessed with colonial Vietnam and the French influence on food and architecture on my last research trip to Vietnam. It is the reason that I was so keen to open an Indochine-style restaurant like Red Lantern on Riley."

For instance, he says, Vietnamese roast duck is close to the classic French duck *à l'orange* but is served with an orange sauce spiced with cassia bark and star anise. Nguyen serves it at his restaurant.

Even pho, the archetypal Vietnamese soup, has French origins, he says.

"It is basically a pot-au-feu. The stock is consomme with aromatics added."

Street-food sandwiches *Banh mi* are also thanks to the French. "The French brought that bread," Nguyen says. But like Thai, he rejects the fusion label. "It is not fusion," he says. "It is a part of

Vietnamese culture and history that influenced and changed our cuisine forever."

Transplanted to Australia, it has changed again. "It is important to us to be authentic, but our food is influenced by what is around us," Nguyen says. "We use local, seasonal ingredients. That is why there is a watercress and fennel salad with the roast duck."

Chef Jowett Yu, of the Merivale group's new Chinese restaurant, Mr Wong, is also influenced by what is around him. "We have a Sichuan steak tartare on the menu," he says. "It is not a Chinese dish. You'd never eat raw beef in China, but we can here because the beef is incredible, so why not use it."

Yu says he and fellow Mr Wong chefs Dan Hong and Eric Koh have embraced local ingredients in the development of their menu and called on their training to improve certain areas of the menu.

"Dessert is the weakest course in a Cantonese meal," Yu says. "We asked ourselves, 'Do we need to follow the repertoire and serve red-bean soup or a plate of cookies?' We figured why not use our training in Western patisserie and come up with good desserts."

Yu and Hong ate at more than 100 Cantonese restaurants

across Singapore, Hong Kong and Sydney, in the name of research, and decided to develop their own Cantonese dishes, Sydney-style.

"We want to cook Cantonese food that we really like, but bring it into modernity so that it suits the Australian palate," Yu says. "It is Cantonese in presentation and flavours, but it is our take."

Likewise, the chef and owner of Claude's in Woollahra, Chui Lee Luk, says the new restaurant and bar menus are influenced by the travels she and her team have done, but the flavours are their own. "Each of us in the kitchen has had a preoccupation with a different Asian cuisine at one time or another," she says.

Lee Luk is interested in Malaysian cuisine, head chef Ben Sears in Japanese and Korean, and sous chef Sebastian Myers draws inspiration from having lived in Thailand.

Examples of dishes influenced by each of these cuisines appear across the menu. "The lemon curd dessert on the menu includes a Jersey milk ice, a shaved ice which is something Ben came across in Korea," Lee Luk says. "Shaved ice is prevalent right across south-east Asian cuisines; there are certain culinary parallels across Asia."

A mussel dish, on the other hand, "is quite Thai in its outlook", she says, while the hapuka main course is inspired by her travels to Malaysia. "The fish sits in a pork bun tea, which is a specific reference to a Malaysian-Chinese broth, *bak kut teh*." Inspiration is one thing, fusion another, she says. "Ingredients and technique should be seamlessly incorporated."

