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Taste of the Town

Electric Vietnamese

Get a Taste at Dragon Rouge



It's not apparent when you first enter Dragon Rouge, the fine new restaurant on Encinal Avenue, that the three proprietors are young. (Well, at least to me they are.) The upscale bistro's menu reflects the Vietnam of the owners' parents, who emigrated during the fall of Saigon, circa 1975, but the two brothers and their cousin who operate the eatery are homegrown Alamedans of recent vintage. Jimmy Luu and cousin Dan Nguyen are Alameda High School graduates (class of 1999 and 1994, respectively), while Jimmy's older brother Scott Luu is a St. Joseph Notre Dame alumnus (class of 1997).

Though these Alameda natives came up through the local schools, like many first generation émigrés they straddle a fence between their parents' culture and that found in their new homeland. But not at Dragon Rouge, where the three work hard to establish an authentic Vietnamese menu, serving up many dishes that came directly from their mothers' hometown.

"We always dreamed of opening a restaurant for our moms," says Nguyen. "Because it's part of our culture to cook and eat together, they have been cooking for years. But they were never able to realize their own dream." The mothers act as "executive chefs"—directing the cooks in the open kitchen and collaborating with their sons to design a menu with several unique items.

For example, a specialty at Dragon Rouge, which Nguyen claims is not available anywhere else in the United States, is the Phan Thiet (or Phantastic) roll, named for their parents' hometown, famous in Vietnam for this delectable appetizer. It's a crunchy imperial roll, with pork-and-vegetable stuffing and hard-boiled egg, bundled inside a soft, fresh rice-vermicelli wrap with crispy greens: lettuce, cilantro and mint. Dip the roll into peanut sauce to enjoy a mouth party of incredible taste and texture.

The three owners—who spent a considerable amount of time as kids in the kitchen of LeCheval, the acclaimed Vietnamese restaurant in Oakland (owned and operated by their great aunt)—filled the eclectic menu with favorite dishes from their youth. Think of it as Vietnamese comfort food, the equivalent of such American staples as mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese.



"We wanted our menu to be authentic Vietnamese, more so than a fusion style of food," Nguyen explains, even though Vietnam's cultural history brings a mix of tastes into the cuisine. The foundation for most Vietnamese food is fish sauce; lemongrass is a staple ingredient, too, as a seasoning on the grill and in the wok. But the real magic comes from the blending of the ingredients and styles derived from the different European and Asian peoples, including the French and Chinese, who occupied the Southeast Asian nation.

A delightfully surprising mix of tastes and textures characterizes all the food at Dragon Rouge. It can be



startling for someone relatively unfamiliar with Vietnamese cuisine. For neophytes, Nguyen advises starting with the Vietnamese version of carpaccio, made tangy by a special lemon-lime vinaigrette with peanuts, mint and cilantro. The wasabi crab cones also offer a unique hors d'oeuvre experience: a creamy, wasabi-seasoned crab salad in little crispy cones of deep-fried rice-vermicelli. The cones are presented in a long-stemmed glass on a bed of lettuce. It was the richest and most decadent dish I tasted.

Another wonderful revelation for novices is phò, the traditional bowl of noodles-in-broth that comes with tantalizing fixings such as hot sauce, hoisin, mint, cilantro and bean sprouts. Rumored to be an excellent remedy for a hangover, phò can be enjoyed as a light meal or side dish.

Try Dragon Rouge's light and airy Vietnamese crêpes: pan-fried rice crêpes, kind of like tacos, served with prawns, pork and vegetables on lettuce with classic nuoc-nam sauce. Other extraordinary dishes include bouncing beef (filet mignon stir-fried with cilantro, onions and julienne carrots), dim-sum-inspired items with a Vietnamese twist and clay-pot meals.



The owners designed Dragon Rouge to create an atmosphere appropriate for the different aspects of the business—a bar, lounge and a restaurant. The rich, red painted walls give the space a decided high-end look, but the lighting—a bit bright for an intimate, fine-dining experience—still needs a bit of work. A small counter with a few bar stools invites patrons to come in and enjoy tasty appetizers with a cold, local draft beer or fruit-infused sake. “We are encouraging our customers to come in and have a good time,” Nguyen says. It’s enough to make their mothers proud.

—By Mary Lee Shalvoy

—Photography by Bob Kuzmeski

The Details

Dragon Rouge. Vietnamese. Open for lunch and dinner daily, 11a.m.–2:30 p.m. and 5 p.m.–10 p.m. 2304 Encinal Ave., (510) 521-1800. www.dragonrougerestaurant.com