

Alameda's Viet Mom

Dragon Rouge offers comfort food with Vietnamese family character — and linen napkins.

By **John Birdsall**

Published: April 11, 2007

Touch one of the napkins to your lips, and you feel what Dragon Rouge is all about. It's made of soft, white cotton, with hems you suspect were run up on somebody's auntie's Singer. Friendly and hanky-like, it's the anti-napkin, the antithesis of the lip-chafing, synthetic, flame-retardant version that passes for a face wipe at restaurant linen-service companies. Is that a hint of dryer-sheet aroma in the Dragon Rouge anti-napkin? Could they be washing and tumble-drying in the back?



Chris Duffey

Steeped in flavor: Chicken fried rice clay pot.

Details:

Prices

Beef carpaccio, &8.00

Long Xuyen watercress salad, \$8.00

Classic imperial rolls, \$7.00

Phantastic rolls, \$8.00

Yellow Moon crêpe, \$9.00

Garlic noodles with jumbo prawns, \$12.00

Dragon noodle soup, \$8.00

Chicken fried rice clay pot, \$9.00

Alameda's new Vietnamese place exudes the spring-fresh charm of a first-time family venture with the DIY approach of restaurant novices. Half a block from the fertile small-business canyon of Park Street, it grafts the easygoing vibe of a younger generation onto the Hawaiian-print

gemütlichkeit of old-school Alameda.

From his station behind the bar, 26-year-old Jimmy Luu keeps an eye on the room like a dome security cam, with his fresh face and a steady line of chitchat. He used to wait tables at Nan Yang in Rockridge, but the Dragon Rouge co-owner seems a natural as general manager. His partners, brother Scott Luu and cousin Dan Nguyen, oversee the kitchen. On a recent evening the Luus' mom, Mai Cao, moved about the open kitchen wearing an oversize powder-blue hairnet that looked stiff, as if freshly plucked from the box. "We grew up around Le Cheval as kids," Jimmy Luu says. The family is related to the owners of the watershed Oakland restaurant. But besides that connection, this is all as new to them as Mai Cao's hair restraint.

It's precisely that newbie quality that gives the tastiest dishes their charm. Check out the beef carpaccio, a snack that traditionally fuels drinking sessions. Tasted between sips from a pint of Kirin draft, the raw beef dish was simple enough to seem perfect. The pale pink slices were a tad thick, which gave them an air of homeyness. They were substantial enough to stand up to the beer, and the fibers released the right amount of juice. Apart from a spritz of lime, the meat slices didn't need their aromatic garnishes — mint and cilantro sprigs, and a scattering of raw ginger, fried peanuts, and crispy shallots — to be tasty. Dragon Rouge's carpaccio ate like a dish that didn't know it had to be complicated to show up on a restaurant menu. It totally worked.

Mavericks
Athletic Club, Emeryville
Pilates, Yoga, Massage Therapy,
Personal Training, Group Classes
Try us!
10 days free
or \$0 enrollment
Emeryville
6005 Shellmound St. 510.597.8200
Concord
5294 Clayton Rd. 925.602.5600

So did Long Xuyen watercress salad, despite grilled beef that, unlike the raw slices in the carpaccio, fell a few degrees short of perfection. At the heart of the salad was the interplay between the fiercely peppery cress — a tonic dose of bitter, sensed partly in the sinuses — and a simple dressing with the glow of lemongrass. With its base of cider vinegar and restrained whiff of *nuoc mam* (fish sauce), it was a dressing that, flavor-wise, offered a clear view through to the cress. Thin slices of grilled beef were brushed with a sweet glaze. Some slices were nicer to chew than others; all were stiff and a bit dry.

The kitchen's light hand with *nuoc mam* revealed itself in other dishes, too — even in the standard dipping sauce (*nuoc cham*) that came with pork-stuffed classic imperial rolls. Those same imperial rolls are rolled into rice-paper wrappers to make Phantastic rolls, which also contain quarters of hard-cooked egg. The name is an homage to Phan Thiet, the town at the southern tip of Vietnam where Mai Cao was born. The powdery yolks gave them a surprising and slightly loopy personality.

Such glimpses of character help give the food here a broad appeal. That may be the right strategy for Alameda. On both of two visits the dining room revealed a predominance of non-Asian diners. Families. Couples dressed in what looked like office outfits. Most Asian customers seemed about the same age as Jimmy Luu: guys with laptops, shorts, and calf tattoos drifting in from the Tapioca Express bubble tea shop a couple of storefronts down Encinal.

Consciously or not, the food is thoroughly accessible, even to Vietnamese-food first-timers — a distinct trend for the East Bay's new generation of cloth-napkin Viet eateries. It starts with the language: Just as at Xyclo, a Piedmont Avenue restaurant with wide appeal, menu names here give boilerplate dishes fresh names. "Shaking Beef" becomes "Bouncing Beef" at Dragon Rouge. And *bánh xèo*, the rice-flour crêpe whose Vietnamese name embraces the onomatopoeia of sizzle, here becomes Yellow Moon crêpe.

The dish proved as accessible as its English handle. Instead of a crispy pancake served apart from its lettuce wraps, the Dragon Rouge version came wedge-cut like a pizza, laid out on its lettuce leaves and all ready for rolling up into fat cigars. But what was designed to assist *bánh xèo* virgins resulted in harm to the pancake. In the lag between kitchen and table, the lettuce turned the presumably crisp-skinned crêpe into a soft one. At least it tasted delicious. Still-juicy shreds of chicken and halved shrimp were embedded in its bright, turmeric-stained face, and mung bean sprouts that had softened in its warmth were delicate and sweet.

The ultimate accessible Vietnamese dish, garlic noodles (here with pan-fried prawns) was a disappointment. The egg noodles were cooked as soft as college co-op spaghetti, and there was scant garlic clinging to the turgid strands. The kitchen had sautéed the prawns to a nice pink and an even nicer crisp-soft texture. Still, it was a dish that seemed content with blandness. Likewise, Dragon noodle soup, the kitchen's take on the classic central Viet dish *bún bò Huế*, suffered from a weak broth. Its welter of chile flakes added an outer layer of heat, but the beef-and-pork broth underneath either hadn't cooked long enough or was simply too dilute to offer much of a foundation of flavor.

The kitchen was on much more solid ground with a chicken fried rice clay pot, a dish literally steeped in flavor. Seasoned with sugar, soy, and what tasted like oyster sauce, seared pieces of boneless chicken mingled with hunks of red pepper and bits of egg in a matrix of soft, pilaf-like rice. Even if you didn't grow up with a Vietnamese mom to cook for you, you couldn't mistake it as anything but homestyle comfort food. One-dish, crispy-bottomed casseroles are the lingua franca of comfort, and this one is at the very heart of what's good about this essentially sweet Alameda newcomer. Let the just-out-of-the-dryer quality of those napkins be your guide: This is a restaurant where mom rules.