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Bui? Mais Oui!

Latest opening in high-end Vietnamese fusion scores on most counts.
By John Birdsall

What is it about a fresh take on shaking beef and *cha goi* that expresses the where-we're-at of East Bay food?

Maybe it's something about the Vietnamese, whose tilt toward freshness and bright aromas make their cuisine feel a little contemporary already, even without reinvention by chefs with culinary school training and stacks of cookbooks. Maybe it's the reflected glow of Slanted Door and Bong Su from San Francisco, like a sunset flashing orange in the windows of the Oakland Hills. Whatever. Riffing on Vietnamese is the new fusion, and chefs at the East Bay's newest batch of contemporary Vietnamese places are serving up shiny helpings of zeitgeist along with their East-meets-West carpaccio.

There's plenty of zeitgeist to go around. It's been a busy few months for openings in this genre, from Xyclo on Piedmont Avenue to Vanessa's Bistro on Solano. And although the Walnut Creek branch of Three Seasons went dark in June, things west of the Tunnel are in mid-blaze. Alameda promises to host the next flare-up, when Dragon Rouge opens.

At 47, Patrick Bui is something of the movement's daddy. Last summer's opening of Bui, his new restaurant in the old Bendeau space on Solano Avenue, oozed with serendipity. Seven years ago, he launched South Berkeley's Saigon City, a place that filtered the legacy of his mom's cooking through the sensibilities of a talented professional chef. At six-week-old Bui he's doing the same thing, cooking dishes born of his South Vietnamese family's having fled to France in 1971. In 1980, the family arrived in a San Francisco poised on the first wave of fusion cooking, but becoming a chef seemed as impossible to Patrick as drifting back to postwar Vietnam. "My parents told me it's only maids back home who want to cook," Bui says. He became a mechanical engineer instead, and when he couldn't stand it any longer he enrolled at California Culinary Academy.

At Bui, as at Saigon City, the cooking showcases a lush heritage reconfigured with an engineer's precision. The menu is a pared-down version of Saigon City's, with two-thirds of the entrées and only one soup. Saigon City is now open for dinner only, and the chef is shuttling back and forth. His mom, Lucie, cooks lunch at Bui.

But if Patrick Bui is stretched thin, it doesn't show. The pan-seared sea bass, for instance, glowed with the unexpected, quietly showing off Bui's rigorous but very un-showy skills. The fish cooked rusty brown in the pan, with a surface that was delicately crisp, not from any breading or dredging with flour, but purely from sauté-station chops. Not only were the outer surfaces of the bass perfect, but its flesh inside was soft as if it had been poached very slowly. Any cook can sear a hunk of protein so it stiffens, blackens, and cooks through, with flesh that falls apart like the layers of a boiled onion. But it takes a sensitive cook to work such precisely controlled changes on a small piece of fragile flesh.

The fish came with a wilted mat of pea shoots that had an appealingly chalky, split-pea taste. Also included was a bed of rice, and a dipping sauce with a from-out-of-nowhere subtlety. The phrase "tamarind coconut sauce" sets you up for something viscous, sticky, and tart-sweet. But this was thin and clear, the traditional Vietnamese dipping sauce of lime, salt, and pepper turned complex with hints of tamarind, roasted garlic, and coconut water. The balance was so poised you barely noticed the pepper, even though it flecked the bowl.

Chris Duffey



Pan-seared sea bass showcases Chef Bui's understated talents.

Details

Who / What:

Bui

Cuisines:

Vietnamese

Details:

1647 Solano Ave. (near Ventura), Berkeley. 510-528-8878

11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. and 5:00-9:30 p.m. daily

Cash, Visa, MasterCard

Reservations for six or more

PRICES

Pan-seared sea bass \$18.95

Banana flower salad \$9.50

Claypot sea bass \$18.95

Spring rolls \$7.00

Saigon wings \$8.50

Asian duck confit \$8.50

Red curry duck \$15.95

Imperial rolls \$7.00

Crispy potato rolls \$7.00

"Poised" describes Bui's banana flower salad, too. It came mounded in the petal of a banana leaf as curved and rounded as a big burgundy shoehorn. And it flaunted a nice bit of cleaver work: Firm pear, banana blossom, grilled chicken, and Asian basil mingled together as wisps the size of paper matches. The dressing waded through tangy and sugary without bogging down in either.

Claypot sea bass brought chunks of fish cooked silken with soft, brown shallots in a Vietnamese caramel sauce — rich and dark without making you think of dessert. A similar sauce opened up a new window on shaken beef, which gave the nicely tender but notoriously one-dimensional fillet a suggestion of depth. The suggestion was mutual, since the caramel sauce, used as deglazing liquid, had picked up the flavor and the brown flecks of seared beef from the pan. It was a good version of a dish that's almost never as interesting as its name.

Tightly wrapped, prawn-filled spring rolls were fresh and aromatic enough to qualify for perfect, and a peanut dipping sauce was rich and toasty without the slightest hint of thinned-down Jif. Finger-coating Saigon wings were fiery and sweet, plastered with chopped garlic and wisps of deep-fried basil. And Asian duck confit was more a heap of flaked meat than an unctuous mass of long-cooked fibers. But it was tasty, smelled like cinnamon, and came with buttered, garlic-smearred toasts.

Red curry duck, an entrée, was even better. Braised duck legs were bathed in a thin broth with hunks of potato, Chinese eggplant, and crisp, green okra. The taste of the curry was blended with the duck's braising liquid in such an understated way that it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began, a good example of Bui's feel for balance. I liked the thin slick of fat on the broth's surface — it kept things on the right side of precious, and gave the dish a plausible footing in home cooking.

On a busy night the service can be slow and chaotic, as sweaty, inexperienced Bui family members help out on the floor with an air of panic. You sense an uneasy transition from the mellow, student-heavy clientele at Saigon City to the savvier, more demanding diners on upper Solano. And there are dishes that disappoint with boredom, like bland Imperial rolls, or the crispy potato rolls Patrick Bui developed with suggestions from regulars at the pot club near Saigon City. The latter, lumpia skins filled with vegetable-studded mashed potatoes and deep-fried seemed pointless — maybe it'd help to smoke a few bowls first.

Bui took over the Solano space when Lance Dean Velazquez folded up Bendeau last May. If you loved the sleek deconstructed vibe at Bendeau, Bui might feel as unsatisfying as a mid-century modern sofa gone all Holly Hobbie with flower-print slipcovers. The interior galvanized metal siding has a coat of marigold-yellow paint, and there are fake-floral arrangements. Paintings from the pastel school of over-the-mantel-style art adorn the back wall. Much as I miss the look of Bendeau, the new room probably reflects North Berkeley better — Solano skews more family-cozy than urban-edgy. Besides, Bui's cooking has plenty of clean lines, regardless of the surroundings.