

The Not So Secret Ingredient

As we walk into Pho Viet, located at 1326 NE 3rd Street, my son and I are greeted first by an aroma of spices cooking and fresh herbs, then by an older Vietnamese gentleman with a big smile. He asks if it's just the two of us, table or booth? The booths by the window are occupied, so we get seated towards the back and are given two menus. When I try to ask a couple of questions, our friendly server communicates that his English is limited and tell us that he arrived here from Vietnam two weeks ago. He sends over another server who speaks good English. It's 5:35. The owners, Tan and Tammy, don't get there until 6 o'clock, so we take our time looking at the food offerings, bypassing the drinks and alcohol menu. Everything looks delicious: it will be difficult to choose just a couple of things.

The ambiance is casual and family friendly; we can hear some lively talking in a foreign language coming from the kitchen and a woman laughing, but it's early, so the place is fairly quiet. As is typically found in Asian restaurants, pictures of various dishes decorate the walls, and hot, soy, and hoisin sauces are on the table. Appetizers on the menu range from six to seven dollars and are what diners would expect in an Asian restaurant: fresh rolls, crispy rolls, and dumplings. However, the menu also offers Vietnamese-style chicken wings, maybe to complement the selection of local, domestic, and imported beers. Entrees cost between eleven and nineteen dollars, while salads and *bánh mi* sandwiches are seven to eight dollars. *Pho*, the soup dish that Vietnam is probably most famous for, ranges from eight dollars for a small bowl of the simple version of the soup, to fourteen dollars for a large bowl of seafood pho. Nearly every dish offered has a choice of meats or tofu, making Pho Viet a truly vegetarian-friendly restaurant. For desert, we have the option of sweet rice with fruits and coconut cream or a banana coconut cake (*bánh chuối*). We decide to wait for the owner while sharing a Vietnamese steamed pork bun (*bánh bao*) and a mango lemonade. The *bánh bao* is made of a puffy, chewy, somewhat sweet dough that is filled with layers of thinly sliced pork, Chinese sausage, finely chopped mushrooms, and hard-boiled egg. While the meat filling is flavorful, the bun is a bit dry and leaves us wishing we had something to dip it in. The fresh-squeezed mango lemonade has a perfect balance of sweet and tart. Our meal is off to a good start.

Right at 6 o'clock Tan comes in and goes around checking on patrons, asking if everything is good. We introduce ourselves and start chatting, asking him about house specialties. He recommends two dishes that have sentimental value to him: the Vietnamese beef stew and the Pad Thai. Tan grew up in Ho Chi Minh City—then Saigon—during the Vietnam war. His mother owned a small restaurant, Dung Kim Chi. After school, while many of his classmates played soccer outside or relaxed at home, Tan helped his mother in the restaurant's kitchen. In the summer, his brother and he went to their grandmother's mango farm to help. During harvest they brought tons of mango to the city to sell. A river ran across

their path, and to cross it they used a mirror to signal the old man who worked as a river-crosser. He got them across in exchange for some help getting his own produce to market. Tan and the old man developed a friendship, and eventually the old man taught him how to make his special stew, which he then made at his mother's restaurant. A few years later, at the age of 19, Tan escaped Vietnam. Before arriving in the United States, he spent a couple of years living in a refugee camp near Bangkok, Thailand. Permitted to work at the local marketplace, he found employment with a Thai and Vietnamese husband and wife. The husband had worked as a chef for the Imperial Guard and taught him how to make one of Thailand's most famous dishes: Pad Thai. A few years after arriving to the United States in the mid 1980s, he opened a restaurant in Portland, followed by one in Bend in 2011.

After hearing such a great story, we order the beef stew along with a shrimp Pad Thai, and pork and shrimp salad rolls with peanut sauce. About three minutes later, our friendly server brings us the rolls. The portion is generous—there will be plenty for the two of us. The rolls are, as expected, crisp and fresh, but what sets them apart is how fragrant they are. Fresh mint and crunchy bean sprouts perfectly balance the tender vermicelli, and the lean, savory pork and the shrimp. The peanut sauce reminds me of why cooking is an art form.

The stew comes with an option of noodles, rice, or Vietnamese baguette, and we left it to Tan to choose one of them for us. Before we are done with the fresh rolls our host brings us the beef stew in a tureen with a side of fresh herbs, lime wedges, jalapeno slices, and bean sprouts, as is customary. He serves us himself, with care, putting pieces of brisket, tendons, and vegetables over white rice in each of our bowls. With the first bite I discover an earthy flavor with a faint sweetness to it. There are undertones of lemongrass, and I detect a hint of heat that I guess comes from fresh ginger. The fragrant broth has a nice, thick feel in the mouth; it would have been perfect to dip the *bánh bao* in. A few large pieces of savoury potato shows how this Asian dish has been adapted to the vegetables found in America. Decoratively sliced carrots add a bright touch of color to the otherwise brown and beige dish. The brisket, one of my favorite cuts of beef, has a robust flavor and is as tender as it gets. I am a bit apprehensive about the tendons as I had never had eaten them before. Tendons serve to anchor muscles to bones in the body and therefore have to be tough, fibrous, heavy-duty masses of connective tissue. It is a pleasant surprise to find out that, with the proper cooking methods, they can become soft and toothsome. Crunchy slices of yellow and green onion contrast the texture of the tender meat.

The Pad Thai follows almost immediately, also accompanied by the fresh garnishes. The noodles are cooked to perfection, but I am a bit disappointed that they are served with no vegetables aside from the green onions topping them and the bean sprouts; my vegetable-ambivalent son rejoices. While I don't enjoy the Pad Thai as much as the beef stew, my son loves it. The sauce has a tangy flavor with a hint of chilis but isn't hot enough to bother

the palate of an 11 year-old or mine. The shrimp offers just enough resistance to the teeth before yielding to a gentle bite. Their flavor is mild and has this *je ne sais quoi*, in the best possible way. I do not like shrimp, but I almost liked those. To make me almost like shrimp is not only a challenging feat, it's nearly a miracle.

By the time we left around seven o'clock, the place had remarkably filled up for a Sunday night. People were talking and eating, the atmosphere was lively but not loud. For a restaurant to be busy on a Sunday night it, it needs to have regular customers, which is impossible without a quality product. What Pho Viet offers is exactly that. Customers here do not pay for a fancy interior or expensive napkins; they pay for quality food made with a not-so-secret ingredient: care and evident love. That's why we will be regular customers of Tan and Tammy's and the wonderful Pho Viet family.