Restaurants

# Dining Review: Quest for Vietnamese Noodle Soup That's Pho-nomenal!

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By Elizabeth Downer, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Asian food lovers have had a long and ongoing debate over which Pittsburgh restaurant serves the finest pho, a noodle soup considered to be the national dish of Vietnam.

Pho is a deceptively simple dish. The base is a clear broth packed with aroma. There are many variations, but they all begin with beef and chicken bones, herbs and spices and long hours of simmering. The herbs added to the stock differ according to geographic regions, but in all cases it's the long hours on the stove (eight to 24 hours) that give the stock its concentrated bouquet and depth of flavor.

Alyssa Cwanger, Post-Gazette

**Bach-Cuc Truong, left, and her husband, Thao Le, hold curry chicken, vegetarian mixed veggies with tofu and white rice at Tram's Kitchen in Lawrenceville.**

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Pho is served in giant bowls with rice noodles, diced spring onion and slices of beef or chicken. In the southern area, it is garnished with bean sprouts, fresh jalapeno, lime wedges and fresh basil leaves, which are served separately.

Phuong Ngan Do is a Vietnamese journalist on a six-month fellowship in the United States. She is senior editor of a foreign affairs weekly published in Hanoi and is currently writing for the Post-Gazette and living in Pittsburgh. Her pho-loving colleagues in the newsroom have profited from Phuong's presence to revisit the area's Vietnamese restaurants with her and get a native's perspective on who is making the most authentic pho in Pittsburgh.

Here is what we found:

**Pho Minh** at 4917 Penn Ave., Garfield (412-661-7443), was our first stop. Pho Minh opened in 2001 but was sold in 2004. The new owner is Linn Mai. There are 19 soups on this menu. Thank goodness we had our resident Vietnam food expert who could direct us to what she considered to be the best choices.

There are two major distinctions in the soups: One is in beef broth and the other in chicken broth. Phuong explained that in strict terms, only beef broth with beef or chicken meat is pho. If it is chicken broth it is called "hu tieu." Hu tieu can have pork or beef or chicken.

We had to try one of each. She chose pho tai chin ($6.25), beef broth with slices of both rare and well done beef in addition to the requisite rice noodles and onion. Our chicken broth soup was hu tieu mi ($6.25) with chicken broth and rice and egg noodles and slices of pork. We also ordered a third soup called Mien ga ($5.99), which was chicken broth with shredded chicken and bean thread (noodles made from mung bean starch as opposed to rice starch or wheat used in the other noodles).

Each table in a pho restaurant contains an assortment of seasonings that can be added to the broth. They include nuac mam or fish sauce, soy and chili paste. Nuac mam is made from

fermented dried fish. In Vietnamese and Thai cuisine, it is the equivalent of salt for a Western cook or soy sauce for the Chinese. With these three seasonings plus a plate of fresh bean sprouts, basil, coriander, jalapeno peppers and lime slices, pho fans can alter the contents of the bowl to suit their individual taste.

I noticed that Phuong didn't add bean sprouts or herbs to her soup. Instead, she reached for the fish sauce and chili pepper. She explained that bean sprouts and basil are a southern tradition not embraced by northerners. She told us that in Vietnam, this soup is eaten only at breakfast and in much smaller quantities than those giant bowls served in American restaurants.

We fleshed out our meal with fresh spring roll appetizers and Vietnamese rice pancakes. The rolls of soft, thin rice paper wrappers contain chopped lettuce, slivers of carrots or cucumber, rice vermicelli, bean sprouts, fresh mint, cilantro or thai basil and shrimp, pork or fried tofu. Our spring rolls contained basil and shrimp ($2.50 for 2). They came with a tiny bowl of fish sauce with minced green onion for dipping. "Just like home," exclaimed Phuong.

The rice pancake ($5.99) is a cross between a pancake and an omelet. The outside is made from a batter of rice flour and coconut cream. It is crisped on a griddle and wrapped around stuffing made of shrimp, pork mushrooms, onions and bean sprouts. Coconut cream in the batter imparts a subtle but delicious taste of the tropics to this dish. According to Phuong, the coconut is another hallmark of southern Vietnamese cooking. A refreshing and unusual salad is shredded green papaya with dried beef ($4). Unfortunately, it was not available the day we dined there.

Pho Minh has a long list of beverages including fresh coconut juice ($2.50) and iced lychee juice ($2). Vietnamese tea is offered free. For dessert, there is jellied coconut and red bean in coconut milk ($2.50) but we were already behind schedule and had to skip that.

Our next Vietnamese luncheon was at **Saigon-Tokyo**, 320 Atwood St., Oakland (412-687-6700). This new restaurant is owned by Hoa Nguyen, a Saigon native who immigrated to Pittsburgh in 1975 and graduated from Mt. Lebanon High School. Most people call her Alice.

Saigon-Tokyo, as the name indicates, serves both Vietnamese and Japanese cuisine. Alice's husband, Cheng Gao Li makes sushi while Alice cooks up broth for pho. Their four daughters help out when needed.

Her menu lists eight pho combinations with such typical ingredients as tripe, beef tendons, meatballs and fish balls. There was no hu tieu here. In fact, chicken was nowhere on the menu. Pho with rare steak is $6.50. There is another pho that contains a bit of everything: steak, brisket, tendon, tripe and beef meatballs ($7). Phuong and her newsroom colleagues found the pho broth here less rich and aromatic than at the other restaurants.

Saigon-Tokyo's menu has a section of dishes made with broken rice. The term was somewhat puzzling. Phuong told us that in her country these small pieces of rice grains cost much less than long grain rice and that broken rice is indeed the most common rice served in Vietnam. Alice tells me that in Pittsburgh, this kind of rice sells at a premium.

One of our gang ordered broken rice with julienne pork, Vietnamese omelet and grilled pork chop ($7). The omelet is a casserole of eggs, noodles, mushrooms, onions, pork and julienned carrots, oven baked and cut into squares. We deemed it a poor second choice to the pancake with many of the same ingredients. Broken rice tastes much like any other rice, but we enjoyed knowing we were eating just what Phuong's family at home might have. Alice serves Bubble Tea ($2.95), the popular fruit flavored tea, that is shaken with ice until the top is covered in bubbles.

**Tram's Kitchen** at 4050 Penn Ave., Lawrenceville (412-682-2688), was our final stop. Thao Le and his wife, Bach-Cuc Truong, who have lived in Pittsburgh since 1993, opened the restaurant in 1997. Although they, like most Vietnamese immigrants to this country, are from South Vietnam, Tram's menu serves food with both northern and southern influence.

Tram's fresh spring rolls were the best of the bunch thanks to the addition of fresh mint and coriander leaves. The dipping sauce for the rolls was topped with chopped roasted peanuts, which added a tasty crunch to the cool veggies and shrimp.

Phoung voted Tram's pho broth also the best. You can taste just a hint of star anise and cinnamon stick that has been boiled with the stock. The chicken in the Pho Hanoi Soup ($6.95) tasted exceptionally fresh. It came with a heap of fresh Thai basil on the side that gave the broth a heavenly bouquet.

The Pho Saigon was the same broth and noodle but with shrimp. Tram's menu calls these soups "pho" but Phuong insists that both of them are really "hu tieu." Hey, in Pittsburgh, the only word we know for Vietnamese soup is "pho."

The big attraction, however, was Tram's Vietnamese Pancake ($6.95). Although similar to the pancake at Pho Minh, Tram's is served with iceberg lettuce leaves and mint wrapped around a portion of the pancake. The pancake is folded into a sort of Vietnamese burrito and then dipped into fish sauce. I am already dreaming of my next Tram pancake.

The pancake, along with a few other specials, must be ordered ahead. Bach Cuc prefers to make them between 3 and 5 p.m. when business is slow. It's a time-consuming task that is difficult to do at peak periods, but you wouldn't want to miss it. Just be sure to call and order it a day ahead.

All of the restaurants are small and casual and not unlike what you would find in Hanoi, Phuong said. Bare tables or oil cloth covers and paper napkins are the norm both here and there. (Saigon-Tokyo has cloth napkins.) Each is decorated with colorful treasures from the homeland. They are all clean and service is competent. Prices are extremely reasonable and differed little from one place to another. Saigon-Tokyo is weak on vegetarian dishes, but both of the others had ample vegetarian selections.

When we asked Phuong to choose the winner of the Pho Derby, she awarded the top honor to Tram's. The rest of us were thrilled to do the research with her. Vietnamese food is healthful and delicious. We should all eat it more often.

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