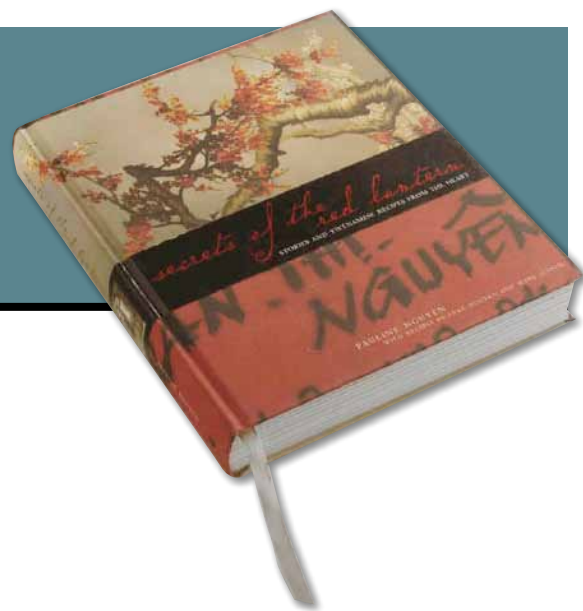


PRIMARY TEXT

A guest column featuring a book every wine-and-food lover should own.



Secrets revealed

Nikki Werner reminisces about meals alive with flavour at the Red Lantern.

During a year of working and travelling through Australia, I waitressed at the Red Lantern, a newly opened, modestly sized restaurant painted the colour of the postbox out front. I was looking to supplement sporadic food-styling jobs and had no inkling of just how formative my short time there might be. Years later, when back in South Africa, I found *Secrets of the Red Lantern: Stories and Vietnamese Recipes from the Heart* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2008) on a bookshop shelf.

Pauline Nguyen is front-of-house at the Red Lantern and in the kitchen are her brother, Luke Nguyen, and her partner, Mark Jensen. The recipes are those passed down from her father, Lap Nguyen, and mother, Cuc Phuong Nguyen, who came from Saigon. Never had I seen a cleaner back of house and never before had I seen such food.

I was permanently in awe of every new dish placed on the pass; each was so fresh, so alive with flavour. The pyramids of ethereal salt-and-pepper squid, clay pots of caramelised silver perch, beef cooked at the table over a butane cooker with a shiny red base, condiment bowls of lemon juice dusted with white pepper, and fragrant perilla and saw-leaf herbs. After service I would watch from the waiters' station, enchanted as Mark performed the ritual simmering of the master stock.

Pauline was someone I thoroughly

admired yet found simultaneously terrifying. Petite, with skin like porcelain, she wore a flash of lilac eyeshadow under each brow and on her shaven head a black be-ret. I remember her inspecting some wine glasses I'd polished, holding each one up to the light and twirling it back and forth in her fingers as she examined it – my heart pounding, I'd desperately hope that my work would meet with her approval.

Individual chopsticks were cleaned of any sticky rice residue and dishes were only

it needs to be rolled tight and the flavours should be well-balanced. Too much vermicelli will cause the rice paper to burst, too many herbs may overwhelm accompanying ingredients and too much lettuce may appear ungenerous...

On my first read, these *Gỏi Cuốn* were part of a furious bookmarking of every Red Lantern dish I'd ever longed to savour. Then, with that distraction out the way, I slipped into the heart-breaking storyline of escaping Vietnam, enduring

... the heartbreaking storyline of escaping Vietnam, enduring a Thai refugee camp and building a life from scratch...

referred to by their correct Vietnamese names. I blushed on delivering the words learnt by heart, acutely aware of how ghastly my pronunciation must sound: *Gỏi Múc, Cá Kho Tô, Bún Thịt Nướng*. The attention devoted to these seemingly insignificant tasks offers some indication of the dedication applied to their cooking.

Soft rice-paper rolls are only rolled to order and in these precisely formed, compact parcels, the pale coral of the prawns is muted by the opaque sides they press against. Mark's written introduction is a reminder of his team's high standards. "When ordering rice-paper rolls in a restaurant, it is customary to observe and appreciate (or not) the technique used –

a Thai refugee camp and building a life from scratch in 1970s Australia.

If I had to recommend one reference book on authentic Vietnamese cuisine this would be it. *Secrets of the Red Lantern* has won numerous awards but its true value is better expressed in Mr Nguyen's wise words: "If I give my children money, they just spend it. Gone. If I give them my recipes they last forever." ■

Nikki Werner is a food and travel writer who has produced the food pages for a number of magazines. She still dreams of the \$7 Chinatown lunches of Phở soup (a fragrant Vietnamese broth packed with greens and herbs) from her time in Australia.

Photograph by Denver Hendricks