

Praise the Red Lanterr

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You've read the book, now try the restaurant, writes Nick Dent.



The scarlet interior of Red Lantern is always alive with groups of chatty diners, but behind its good-times atmosphere is a sad story.

The restaurant's co-owner, Pauline Nguyen, has written a memoir about her family, *Secrets of the Red Lantern*. (The glossy book also contains recipes by her brother Luke and husband Mark Jensen, Red Lantern's chefs.) The Nguyens escaped from Vietnam in 1977, spent a year in a Thai refugee camp and ended up in Cabramatta.

The parents worked hard and built a culinary empire, but were tough on young Pauline and Luke, who went on to open Red Lantern five years ago. According to Pauline's book, however, the fractious family found a way to communicate their love for one another through cuisine.

If you haven't felt that love yourself, then it really is time that you did. Red Lantern's tastes are exciting, the staff are vigilant, and the prices good value.

We order a banh xeo (\$21) – a crispy rice flour crepe containing prawns, minced pork, mung beans and bean sprouts. The waiter tells us to wrap the crepe in a piece of lettuce and pour fish sauce on it. So we do. It's sublime.

On the subject of Vietnamese classics, the goi cuon (\$13.50) taste as great as fresh prawn rolls can. They look great too, because the prawn halves show through the rice paper, arranged symmetrically, side by side. These rolls couldn't look better if they were wrapped in Florence Broadhurst wallpaper.

Chilli salt squid (\$18) is pale, precious, and light as feathers. It's addictively

delicious even before you dip it in the lemon pepper sauce. I'm intrigued by thit heo mam ruoc (\$20); juicy bits of pork neck are braised with shrimp paste, which gives them a super-salty edge. I like it, but I'm glad of my Tiger beer (\$7).

Think of the phrase "melts in your mouth" and cow is not the first food that springs to mind. But there's a special on tonight of Wagyu beef brisket (\$24), slow braised in a complex melange of spices. The oleaginous chunks quickly dissipate in our mouths, like tears in rain.

Dr Love doesn't want dessert but I go ahead and order a ban gan, or coconut crème caramel (\$11), with two spoons. His eyes light up with the first spoonful, and we marvel at the smooth texture of the thing. It lacks the gelatinous quality of your average crème caramel, seemingly held aloft by nothing more than high hopes. "I hated that," the doc tells the waitress, a twinkle in his eye as he hands her the denuded platter.

There's a good wine list, by the way, and it's also one of the dwindling number of Sydney restaurants in its class that take reservations. Red Lantern's virtues are hardly a secret.