



Red Lantern raised high

RED LANTERN

545 Crown St, Surry Hills

Phone: 9698 4355

Food: Vietnamese fine dining

Value: Moderate

Why go: For a glam take on Cabramatta's best fare

★★★★☆

Two scenes stood out in a television documentary made a few years ago about this stylish Surry Hills restaurant, which a recent menu revamp has taken from strength to strength.

The first was co-owner and chef Luke Nguyen's lack of interest in anything a critic had to say about his venture.

The second was him standing protectively over a giant pot of master stock, tending it in the early hours to guard its secret ingredients.

Back then, the recipes Nguyen's parents had passed on from their lauded restaurant at Cabramatta were so closely guarded that family member and co-chef Mark Jensen wasn't allowed to know what went into them.

But thanks to her father agreeing upon his retirement to share the family's recipes, co-owner Pauline Nguyen's book, *Secrets Of The Red Lantern* (Murdoch Books), has laid them out to emulate.

So, I can tell you it's the inclusion of egg white and potato starch in the batter that makes Red Lantern's chilli-salt squid among the best in Sydney.

These tiny slivers of crisp squid, dipped in lemon juice and white pepper sauce, are a world away from their ubiquitous, pale imitators.



Setting the standard: Red Lantern has gone from strength to strength

Picture: Sam Mooy

Although in the past I have detected a touch of high-food snootiness in the service, this seems to have lessened.

But there are a couple of niggling issues, such as still water costing \$7 despite a request for tap water, and a very noisy dining room.

A steamy bowl of Bun Bo Hue (\$13, hot-and-sour beef and pork noodle soup) is the best of many I have tasted.

Shards of beef shin melt into a rich, dark broth redolent with lemongrass and gin-

ger. At its centre are slippery rice noodles, and the top is slicked with chilli oil.

Half a crispy-skin chicken (\$24), poached in the famous master stock, is a crunchy, chewy sensation, but its traditional red-rice accompaniment is a little insipid.

The same rice is served with charred Angus rump steak with the gentle Asian flavours of garlic, sesame, soy and pepper (Bo Luc Lac, \$20), which sounds simple but tastes delicious.

Prawns top a green papaya salad (\$19) threaded with tender pork loin and enlivened with herbs. Like many versions of this dish served in Anglicised restaurants, it does need some serious chilli.

Thanks to second-generation restaurateurs such as the Nguyens, there has been a recent spread of Vietnamese eateries from south-western Sydney, but Red Lantern remains the benchmark.

All meals are paid for and visits are unannounced.