



Savour the traditional Vietnamese dishes but don't expect to unlock the secrets of this family's recipes, writes **Guy Griffin**.

They were having a lot of fun at the next table. She was what the French call *une femme d'un age certain* – European, tall, pale and elegant, mid-50s; he was a smiling, good-looking Vietnamese boy in his late 20s. I thought they were just friends until she gave him a lingering, sensual kiss. Several times. *Phew*, someone had just got the scripts to *Indochine* and *The Quiet American* confused. I think it was me. No one on the other tables in the tiny Vietnamese restaurant – fashion divas, muscle men, fag hags, groovy kids wearing Tsubi, glossy lawyer types and their spaghetti-strapped female companions – batted a world-weary eyelid.

Red Lantern is a quirky, evocative place where the aromas and humidity of Saigon don't seem very far away. Polished floors, imperial red walls, antique Vietnamese cabinets and counter fans create atmosphere. And the exotic crowd gives off a bit of that exiled, romantic fatalism you find in Graham Greene. But that's just because they live in the inner city. These aren't jaded expatriates searching for redemption in the mysterious Far East. Just your average eastern suburbs hipsters looking for the vegetarian dishes on Red Lantern's long menu.

Luke Nguyen, 24, is the son of Lap and Phuong, who arrived in Australia as boat people in 1975 after fleeing Saigon. Luke opened his first restaurant, Cay Bu, under street umbrellas in Cabramatta a little more than a year ago, serving five dishes from his family's repertoire, including his mother's excellent pho.

At Red Lantern – with his sister Pauline as floor manager and her partner, chef Mark Jensen (ex-Olympic Hotel), in the kitchen – he's realised a modest dream.

"I wanted to move Cabramatta closer to Surry Hills, where I live," says Luke. "No fusion, no corrupting of traditional recipes. So now inner-city people can share the secrets of my family's food." Well, not all of them. Even Mark Jensen, who learned Vietnamese cooking from scratch for this job, has no idea what goes into the master stocks or marinades for dishes such as *bun thit nuong* (char-grilled pork tenderloin marinated in honey, topped

hot

with peanuts and shallots) and the very popular goat curry. "All our food is kept within the family," says Luke. "Mark respects that." In turn, he relies on his chef to cook and present the dishes professionally.

If you're interested, ask Pauline or Luke how to structure your meal. You'll kick off, as most customers do, with *goi cuon* (soft rice-paper rolls with tiger prawns, pork, vermicelli, perilla leaves and garlic chives) then perhaps *muc rang muoi* (lightly battered chilli-salted squid) or *goi muc* (squid with pickled vegetables) followed by a vegetarian dish, *banh xeo ray* (rice-flour crepes filled with enoki and shiitake mushrooms and fresh herbs).

Bo nuong vi is an "at the table" dish where you grill slices of beef on a hotplate and rehydrate sheets of rice paper in supplied hot water, then wrap them around the beef, vermicelli, perilla leaf, green mint and bean sprouts.

A vegetarian main course such as *bat buu tay cam* (bean curd braised in a clay pot with water chestnuts) is recommended, or try a whole steamed fish. Then strong Vietnamese coffee.

Without advertising, word of mouth has worked well for Red Lantern. "I've had quite a few of the big Sydney chefs visit," says Luke. "Janni Kyritsis, Steve Manfredi, Luke Mangan – but not the great Tetsuya yet."

It seems everyone thinks the southern end of Crown Street is ready to rock.



Red Lantern
545 Crown Street,
Surry Hills.
Ph: 9698 4355

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Open for lunch: Tues-Fri 12.30-3pm; Sat, Sun 1-3pm;
Dinner: Tues-Sun 6.30-10.30pm
Entrees \$7.50-\$12.50
Mains \$15-\$19.50

Above
Squid with pickled vegetables
Photography **Quentin Jones**