

TABLES

A RED-HOT TICKET

Sydney's finest Vietnamese restaurant is still a family affair, writes **Alexandra James**

LIKE its close cousin Thai, Vietnamese cuisine in Australia generally is considered a cheap and cheerful option. Often served at small, family-run restaurants, it's popular as student fare, with shared dishes, no-frills decor, clattering atmosphere and the nourishing smell of shrimp paste.

Then there is Sydney's Red Lantern, an establishment that serves such refined and inventive Vietnamese cuisine that it must be compared with David Thompson's pioneering Darley Street Thai at Newtown (and later in more glamorous surroundings at Rushcutters Bay) and his Sailors Thai at The Rocks.

The scholarly Thompson, one of the world's most respected Thai food experts, is now in London with a Michelin accolade to his credit. One can imagine Red Lantern making such a breakthrough, too. To eat here is to discover Vietnamese food of revelatory standard.

Red Lantern opened in 2002 in a scarlet terrace in inner-east Surry Hills, with a decor that looks freshly lifted from back-street Hanoi.

Owners Luke (chef) and his sister (recent cookbook author) Pauline Nguyen, with the latter's partner, chef Mark Jensen, have enjoyed instant and sustained success. Pauline's just-released *Secrets of the Red Lantern* is as much family album as sumptuous recipe book.

Escaping Vietnam "not long after the fruitless war", the Nguyen family settled in Sydney's Vietnamese enclave of Cabramatta, where Luke and Pauline's "strict, food-obsessed parents" ran a busy restaurant. Food informed and infiltrated everything to do with the Nguyen children's early lives, so it seems a natural progression that Luke and Pauline should continue the family tradition.

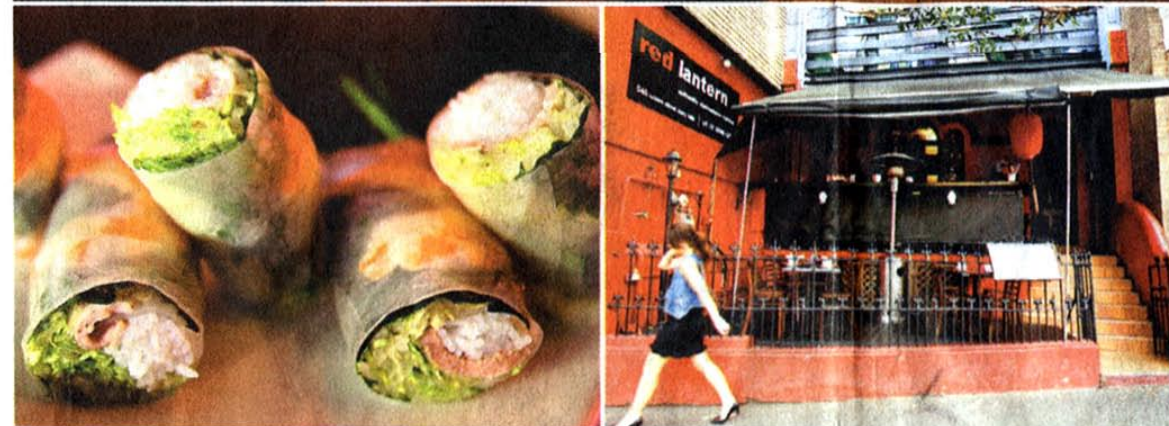
"What distinguishes Vietnamese food is its emphasis on freshness," Pauline writes. She explains that fresh herbs are never used sparingly; there can be as many as a dozen sprinkled through one meal.

To best savour Red Lantern's food, a group visit is ideal, with lots of sharing across the table.

We are three: my husband and son are hearty eaters and this is a good thing. Too few dishes and you can't really appreciate the full complexity and taste juxtapositions of Vietnamese food.

But given that most diners follow this group approach, it is squashy in this converted terrace (fireplaces, high ceilings, the typical layout of a row house's front rooms). Bare-topped tables are close together and the chairs are devilishly hard; it's not an arrangement that invites serious lingering, and table turnover is high.

Be warned that you do need to book,



Warm glow: Group dining is best for sampling dishes such as rice-paper rolls, above left, at the popular Red Lantern Pictures: Sam Mooy

even for the casual patio tables out front and the sit-up street-facing bar.

Pauline writes of crunch and contrast, and in no dish is this more apparent than rice-paper rolls (\$13.50). An entree of three arrives — long and stuffed with prawns, vermicelli, finely sliced pork neck, shredded iceberg lettuce and mint, end pieces of garlic chives sticking out like little handles — with a dipping dish of hoisin sauce spiked with bird's-eye chilli and crushed roasted peanuts.

We eat with our hands and, yes, there is plenty of crunch and the happy opposition

of cooked and cold, soft and crisp. Our second entree is also a Red Lantern signature item: salt-and-pepper squid (\$18) with a lemony dipping sauce. Chilli, spring onion and garlic have been tossed through the bite-sized pieces of flour-coated curly squid. Again, this is one for delectable finger eating.

Red Lantern has a good-sized vegetarian list (the trademark rice-paper rolls can be ordered with non-meat fillings), from which we select a lemongrass vegetarian curry (\$18) studded with chunks of tofu, mushroom, eggplant and pumpkin. The

coconut cream-enriched sauce soaks up plain steamed rice. This dish doesn't seem far removed from a Thai curry, but there's an undercurrent of tamarind that lends a slightly salty sharpness and the chilli factor is low. Vietnamese food doesn't have the heat of many of its neighbouring cuisines. Pauline writes that the spiciness is in the marinades and there should not be too much fire. This is food "that knows how to lower its voice".

Two meat choices follow: braised pork neck slow-cooked with shrimp paste and lemongrass (\$20), and the evening's star,

MENU SAMPLER

- Crispy spiced quail with cucumber and watercress salad (\$16)
- Green papaya, king prawn, pork and fresh herb salad (\$19)
- Salmon braised in a clay pot with caramel syrup and fish sauce (\$22)
- Roast duck with wok-seared Asian greens and plum sauce (\$24)
- Tapioca pudding with banana and cassava (\$11)

black Angus beef wok-tossed with soy and sesame (\$22), served with little bowls of tomato-flavoured red rice and a crunchy salad of shredded veg. The wok-charred meat is melt-in-the-mouth tender; flavours of oyster sauce, garlic and black pepper can be identified amid the smooth soy and sesame. Like Thai cuisine, there is a clarity of taste here, an identification of the gamut of flavours.

The perfect accompaniment to this feast is Lucky beer (\$7) in plump green bottles shaped like a jolly Buddha; these are the sort of containers that would have been recycled with candles in student households of the 1970s (I recall chianti bottles). Maybe they still are: my son is much taken with the idea, and our waiter says the Australian-brewed lager has been developed as an accompaniment for Asian food.

This handsome waiter in groovy black glasses "knows a lot about the food", my son observes. It is only after he discusses with us the intricate merits of our shared orders of sticky black rice with taro and sweetened coconut cream (\$11) v ice cream (\$12; a medley of taro, sesame, ginger and cinnamon flavours) that we realise we have been waited on tonight by Luke. "I like to get out on the floor," he says, simply.

Red Lantern is selling copies of Pauline's book, which contains Nguyen heirloom recipes as well as the story of their 1978 escape from Vietnam, but there's no hustle to proceedings.

When we tell Luke we have one at home, he says we should bring it in and Pauline will sign it. But we would like his signature, too. As the best Vietnamese restaurants have always been, the Red Lantern is a harmonious family affair.

All *Tables* visits are unannounced and meals paid for.

Checklist

Red Lantern
545 Crown St, Surry Hills, NSW 2010;
(02) 9698 4355;
www.redlantern.com.au.
Open: Lunch, Tuesday to Friday; dinner, Tuesday to Sunday.
Cost: About \$100 for two, with beer.
(Many wines by the glass, from \$7.50.)
Reason to go back: To get *Secrets of the Red Lantern* (Murdoch Books, \$59.95) signed by the Nguyens and Mark Jensen.