



Food

Home fires keep burning

Luke Nguyen is making a meal of his father's hard-won legacy.

STORY **HELEN O'NEILL** PHOTOGRAPHY **NICK CUBBIN**

Everybody was against it. Why open a Vietnamese restaurant in Cabramatta, the Vietnamese heartland of Sydney? And if you really must go ahead and do it, why serve only seven dishes? But late last year, 24-year-old Luke Nguyen did just that. His father, Lap (pictured, left), had retired, closing the family restaurant in the suburb; and of the 40 or so dishes his parents cooked up, there were a handful of family specials that Luke and his sister Pauline could not do without. "We would go home every second week and ask for the *Ba Kho* [stewed beef brisket] or the *Ca Ri De* [goat curry]," says Nguyen. "So we followed our cravings."

It worked. Cafe Cay Du, tucked away behind Cabramatta's main shopping sprawl, was a local hit. But none of Luke's mates would visit. "All they think about Cabramatta is the bad things," he explains, referring to its reputation for drugs and gangs.

So in June he opened Red Lantern, with a broader menu and a chic-er atmosphere, in the inner city suburb of Surry Hills. He spent nothing on advertising but had 50 guests on opening night, he says. Within 12 weeks, he had won his first award.

As Luke sits next to his father at Cafe Cay Du, he describes a childhood dominated by the family business. Like his brothers and sister, he was expected to help out before and after school, often starting at 7am and finishing only to do his homework and house chores before going to bed. "Still had to get top grades," he adds, rolling his eyes. His father nods sternly.

"I was very young," says Luke of his introduction to the trade. His father chips in: "Only four. Clean the ashtrays. Take the coffee to the customers; take the bread rolls to the customers. They love it."

"The regulars stay the same," adds Luke. "I recognise them from 15 years ago [and] I still remember what coffee they drink. I told

them I'm opening a restaurant soon. They tried it and told me, 'Everything's still the same.' I always say, 'Yes. I have learnt well.'"

Luke's supposedly retired parents buzz about the cafe ("They just can't stop," he laughs), and most of those who come in clearly know them. At one point his aunt appears and berates him for having lost so much weight. It's the long hours – 8am to 2am – he explains. Asked what has suffered most, he replies: "My youth. I'm working so hard on two places, I haven't had time to do what a 24-year-old should be doing. But that's fine. In a few years' time I can start."

Like his father, Luke refuses to give away any of the cafe's recipes (the broth recipe printed opposite is a family favourite that only just missed being on the list). Lap amplifies his son's statement by proclaiming those family recipes as priceless. "If I give [my children] money, they just spend it. Gone. If I give them my recipes, they last forever."