

# ***Huynh Authentic Vietnamese Cuisine***

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Chargrilled pork wrapped in soft rice paper costs a modest \$2.75 on the appetizer menu at Huynh, a new Vietnamese spot tucked among the half-forgotten storefronts of Old Chinatown. The dish arrives in the form of two snow-white rolls, neatly sectioned, with a little dark meat and greenery peeking out. It doesn't look eventful.

But one cool, collected bite into this banh uot thit nuong, as the rolls are called in Vietnamese, and I allowed an unaccustomed thought to form: Maybe Huynh was the Houston Vietnamese restaurant I had been waiting for all these years.

A few more bites and I was sure of it.

The delicate satin of the noodle wrapper, the subtle crustiness of the savory-sweet grilled pork, the crunch and spring of frilled leaf lettuce, the zing of fresh mint and cilantro all conspired to astonish. "This is one of the best things I've eaten in ages," I murmured to my lunch companion. "It's perfect."

I kept marveling over the texture of the encircling pasta sheet, its smooth chill held in tension with slight, attractive stickiness. Later, I was not surprised to find this wrapper, along with many of the noodles here, was house-made. So pristine and immediate were the fillings, it was obvious the dish had been rolled to order rather than pre-made and left to deflate.

A dish of peanut sauce sat on our table, alive with currents of fish sauce and red chile. "My mother makes all our sauces and dips from scratch," Annie Huynh had told us as she took our orders, but I couldn't stop chopsticking my pork roll long enough to appreciate the sauce's fine qualities. I wanted to experience the dish unadorned, in all of its considerable purity. Sauces and dips would have to come later.

And so they did. Lime, pepper, sugar, ginger and fish sauce made a garlicky dressing to splash over a shredded duck salad, goi vit, that was laced with cilantro and rau, the distinctive Vietnamese herb that has an appealingly soapy tinge. Carefully composed nuoc cham, the clear fish sauce dip, had a balanced sweetness and a hot edge that picked up the flavors of long, slender imperial rolls filled with juicy pork, then fried to a crackle.

Over a series of visits to this family-run venture, I encountered one impressive dish after another. I grew to love the chic-on-a-shoestring look of the pretty dining

room, done up by the Huynh siblings in soft green and warm persimmon hues, with sleekly curved contemporary chairs and restrained lighting. Dishes marked with a smiley face on the menu — to indicate house specialties — actually made me smile. Imagine that.

I also came to appreciate the tight focus of this exacting, mom-run kitchen. Rather than listing endless permutations of Chinese-style dishes, Huynh confines itself to home-style soups, noodles and rice plates, along with a few stir-fries and a small slate of vegetarian dishes. It's not trying to be all things to all diners. But the quality and attention to detail make it remarkable, and the prices (most dishes are in the \$6-\$7 range; none hit double digits) make it even more so.

Among the rice plates, I was particularly taken with the Phoenix Chicken, flash-fried to bronze with just a film of rice flour and served with a timbale-shaped mound of brown-tinted rice, a frizzly fried egg and a nest of freshly marinated, red-peppery cabbage that functioned as a lighter version of kim chee, the fermented Korean relish. The pickled cabbage and the fried egg, with its runny yolk, brought these disparate elements to attention.

Rice plates featuring a thin-cut slab of Korean-style beef rib, painted with a sauce that danced between sweet and salt, and another with a chargrilled, bone-in pork chop were just as good. I especially appreciated the fact that the sweetness of the marinades was balanced with a savory edge.

Just because it's fun, I asked for the \$1 fried-egg option with these plates, and I would consider begging for a side dish of that pickled, red-peppery cabbage, which could electrify virtually anything, including breakfast cereal.

Bo Luc Lac, the stir-fried beef dish that is such a classic on local menus, came with a swagger of stir-fried jalapeño wheels and soft, roasty garlic cloves, along with another of those expansive, glossy sauces poised between sweet and savory. Alongside it came a sharp little dip of lemon, salt and black pepper in which to dunk the beef chunks — a lively trick picked up by one of the Huynh siblings on a trip back to Vietnam.

Big squares of tofu, stir-fried in a garlicky sauce that jumped with red chile and a hint of coconut, left a lingering burst of lemon grass on the tongue. So often, lemon-grass dishes disappoint in Vietnamese restaurants; this one dazzled.

Instead of the numerous variations on pho, the rice-noodle soup garnished with greens and various cuts of beef, I sampled a seductive vermicelli soup with shredded duck and springy lengths of lightly fermented bamboo shoots. The surprise: The duck was served on a separate plate, with a lime-and-pepper dip, and we were instructed to alternate spoonfuls of soup with dunked hanks of duck. That's another refreshing feature of this restaurant — the Huynh siblings are eager to translate their menu for non-Asians, and supply all the necessary introductions.

Even so, some dishes you just have to try to appreciate. Under the listings for the soft rice paper dishes called banh cuon, I tried the steamed rice paper wrapped around chargrilled pork, which was altogether different from the soft rice paper rolls I had liked so much. In this instance, the translucent sheets of house-made rice noodle clasped the meat in thin, interlocked layers, like some exotic, free-form lasagna (or maybe loosely constructed enchiladas?) on a bed of crisp herbs and greens, with a shower of freshly fried shallot on top. I would go to Huynh just to eat that dish for supper, and I would return home feeling happy and virtuous. My sense is that you can't go wrong here. My only quibbles concern drip coffee makers that function with agonizing slowness and tea-making equipment that does not yield tea of sufficient strength and hotness. (By the time my weak jasmine tea had brewed, it was tepid.)

But in all the ways that matter, Huynh is a splendid addition to the local scene. It could even start a little renaissance in a corner of downtown that has been down on its luck of late.