

DINING

Discover Vietnamese cuisine at peaceful Annam

BY RENÉE SKOGlund

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Open just two months, Annam Restaurant Vietnamese on Michigan Avenue in Dearborn already has loyal customers. It's not surprising.

This quaint 48-seat restaurant that serves tantalizing Vietnamese food is simply lovely. The bare wood floor, earth-colored walls, white linon tablecloths and rattan-backed chairs create an elegantly subdued atmosphere, a quiet Euro-Asian ambience. In fact, Annam literally means "peaceful self" in Vietnamese.

Ahh, then there's the food, a blend of many cultures, including Chinese, Japanese and French. The sampler appetizer platter arrived looking like the equivalent of edible art. And the "Tropical Delice with Shrimp," served in half a fresh pineapple, was almost too pretty to eat.

Infusion cooking

"It's very fresh, very light, a new Asian, or 'infusion' cooking," said proprietor Andrew Nguyen. "A lot of people say our cuisine resembles French. I guess it's a French-Asian cuisine."

Perhaps the delight of eating at Annam is that the food cannot be defined as typically Asian. It's less spicy than Szechwan, less oily than many Chinese dishes and less tangy than Japanese sushi. Simply put, it's both familiar

Annam Restaurant Vietnamese
Where: 22053 Michigan Ave., Dearborn (between Mason and Monroe), (313) 565-8744, Fax (313) 565-8798.
Hours: Lunch, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner, 5-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 5-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday.
Atmosphere: Quiet, subdued, sophisticated.
Menu: Uniquely Vietnamese, a blend of many cultures. Appetizers, salads, soups and noodles, vermicelli and rice, and main courses that include chicken, beef, pork and shrimp. Vegetarian friendly.
Prices: Appetizers \$5.50-\$6.50; salads and vegetables \$4-\$10; soups and noodles, \$7.50-\$10, main courses \$10.50-\$15.50.
Seating: 48, all non-smoking.
Reservations: Strongly recommended on weekends.
Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Edible art: "Goi Dua Tom Thit," tropical delicacy with shrimp, is a popular dish served in half a fresh pineapple.

and exotic tasting at the same time.

Chef Hoa Mach rolls his plump spring rolls in rice paper and fills them with rice noodles, shrimp, pork, lettuce and fresh mint. And his crispy rolls with tamarind dipping sauce take on a whole new flavor when the second bite is enveloped in a fresh mint leaf.

Several menu items — such as the "Com Tay Cam," rice cooked with perfumed mushrooms and chicken — are prepared in a clay pot, an essential tool in Vietnamese cooking. A clay pot focuses the heat and retains humidity. The result: No dry rice.

You may be surprised to find out that mint, basil and cilantro are the most commonly used herbs at Annam. Some dishes are flavored with curry, and many are accented with chopped peanuts or peanut-based sauce. However, the herbs and other spices never dominate the food.

"The spices are used to enhance the taste, not overwhelm it," said Phong Nguyen, Andrew's sister, who manages the restaurant along with her brother's wife, My Anh.

Cooking family

The Nguyens are a cooking family. After leaving Vietnam with their parents in 1978, Phong and Andrew lived in



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HARLEY

Paris, where Phong received a culinary pastry degree and worked in a number of restaurants. Their brother, Maurice, opened several traditional Vietnamese restaurants in Belgium. His "Gallery" restaurants have been recommended in Fodor's Benelux travel guides.

It's not surprising then that Andrew, who works as an engineer in Dearborn, eventually opened a restaurant after he and Phong immigrated to the United States. "My whole family enjoys good food and company," he said. "All my relatives kept asking, 'Why don't you start a restaurant? Your food is wonderful.'"

When he found a property for sale (the former Nick-N-E's) on Michigan Avenue a few years ago, Andrew contacted Maurice and asked him to come out. Both brothers were quickly convinced that the central location, large workforce and ethnic diversity of Dearborn and the surrounding areas would help ensure the restaurant's success.

So far, it has. Reservations are a must on weekends.

Michael Schultz of Livonia and Sally Mroznicki of Dearborn shared a dessert called "Chuu

Chien Me," fried bananas nestled in coconut milk and topped with a caramelized honey sauce, chopped peanuts and a sprinkling of sesame seeds.

"It's really good. The sesame seeds add to it," said Mroznicki.

Schultz had preceded dessert with "Ga Nuong Mat," a honey-roasted chicken dish. "Delicious," he said. "It wasn't as spicy as other Asian foods. Everything was delicious, especially the sauce."

Even if you've tried Vietnamese fare before, Annam requires multiple visits — enough to sample the tiger shrimp in tamarind soup, the crystal vermicelli sautéed with crab meat, the chicken sautéed in An Nam sauce with curry and lemon grass, and the fried bananas for dessert. And when you've gone through the menu once, it's time to start over.

In Vietnam, people eat out all

the time, said Phong: breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner, evening snack, and a before-bedtime snack. "And if you feel like a sweet thing, you can go out for a sweet," she added.

When asked what dish she would recommend to a first-

Lunch: Michael Schultz (left) of Livonia and Sally Mroznicki of Dearborn dined at Annam for the first time recently. Schultz enjoyed "Ga Nuong Mat," honey-roasted chicken An Nam style. Mroznicki tried "Bim Xiao Cua," crystal vermicelli sautéed with crab meat. They shared a dessert of fried bananas in honey and coconut milk.

timer, Phong said, "I wrote the menu. They're all my favorites. They're all coming from the heart."

Although they don't have a liquor license as yet, the Nguyens will gladly uncork and serve any wine that's brought in. They recommend the lighter whites and rosés rather than the sturdier reds, like Merlot.

Andrew, Phong and My Anh love Annam's smallness. It enables them to control the service and the quality. It also allows them to establish more personal relationships with their customers.

"Our customers are pleased with the service and the food, and that's why they keep coming back," said Andrew.

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