

FEAST FROM THE EAST

Springfield's Little Vietnam

BY KATHERINE JAMIESON

It's peak lunch hour on a weekday in Springfield's Forest Park, and inside Pho Saigon, a man strides toward the kitchen carrying a basket piled high with bok choy. A small woman hurries by him, capably balancing multiple simmering platters, and leaving a steamy scent of lemongrass, garlic, and pepper in her wake. The lunch rush at Springfield's most popular Vietnamese restaurant is underway, and Vegetarian Happy Pancakes, plates of Five-Spice Chicken and bowls of hot soups are laid out on tables, accompanied by generous servings of fresh vegetables and garnishes, heaping plates of lime slices, bean sprouts and basil and a range of condiments, including hot sauce, fish sauce, and hoisin sauce.

Pho Saigon is one of four Vietnamese restaurants clustered in this small neighborhood on the city's south side, near an area commonly known as the "X," the convergence of Belmont Avenue, Dickinson Street and Sumner Avenue. Along with Vinh Chau, Bamboo House, and Que Huong, it serves the city's office workers, police force and fire department, not to mention Valley *pho* enthusiasts and Asian food aficionados who travel down 91 to get their fix of Vietnam's cherished meat and noodle soup.

No landmarks identify the area as an ethnic enclave, but the vintage Vespa in Pho Saigon's window is one giveaway. From the dirt roads of tiny rural villages to Hanoi's hectic avenues, the motorbike is as much a part of Vietnam's landscape as conical hats and lush rice paddies.

Pho Saigon has occupied its space on Dickinson Street for more than 16 years, and part-time manager April Duong has been answering phones, waiting tables and working as cashier there since 2007. According to Duong, the restaurant started humbly in 1993, when the previous owner, Hai Van Nguyen, a then-recent immigrant from North Vietnam, was laid off from his job. One of his friends told Nguyen, who was living in South Hadley at the time, that Springfield had a great demand for Vietnamese food.

Uncertain how much business he would have, Nguyen held off on hiring staff: "He took the orders and then went back and cooked the food himself," explained Duong. His wife kept her job but helped on weekends, waiting tables and handling the cash register. "It was a 'momma-poppa' store," Duong says.

Building on its reputation for high-quality, traditional food, the restaurant was able to expand, remodel and move into its current space in 2005, while keeping the original 25-person dining room next door. After Nguyen retired in 2007, Tom Vuong took over the restaurant and, though South Vietnamese, he's stayed true to Mr.

Nguyen's roots and kept the focus on the food of the North.

A nation of geographic contrasts, the diversity of Vietnamese food reflects the history and culture of the country's distinct regions. With harsher weather and less developed agriculture than the South, the North Vietnamese tend to use less fish and vegetables in their dishes and more noodles and rice. Instead of fresh chilis, black pepper is the primary spice. When meat is used in Northern Vietnamese cuisine, it tends to be beef, perhaps owing to the region's shared border with China, where cattle have been used in agriculture for nearly three



thousand years, and to the fact that in the 13th century, Northern Mongolian invaders brought their meat-heavy diets to the region. Beef is a staple in sixteen of the listed dishes at Pho Saigon, including "Shaking Beef," a house specialty with squares of wok-seared beef served over watercress.

Though it's the heart of Pho Saigon's menu, North Vietnamese cuisine is a relative rarity in the United States. Most immigrants are from the South, and the menus at their restaurants reflect the bounty of the South's fertile Mekong Delta, its proximity to Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, and 100 years of French colonization. A wide range of fruits, vegetables and seafood are combined with mint, coriander, lemon grass, fish sauce, ginger, garlic, sugar and onions, which create the flavors most identified with Vietnamese food.

Photographs by Ben Gunderson/Emmer