

Vietnam flavours

There's more to Vietnamese cuisine than beef noodles and spring rolls, writes TAN BEE HONG

EIGHT outlets in the Klang Valley in seven years is nothing to sneeze at as the management of Vietnam Kitchen will attest. And according to Rating Delight Holding director Wong Chee Chung, they have just opened one in Singapore.

Sandwiched between the hot spicy land of Thailand and China, Vietnam has found its own balance that includes a legacy left behind by French colonialists.

Its newest outlet in Petaling Jaya is on the ground level of Jaya 33, the new shopping mall at Jalan Semangat. From the road, one is immediately attracted to clumps of bamboo in front of a glass door shaded by a curtain of red strings.

It's modern chic, with upholstered chairs and dark-tinted wooden tables.

An enclave to one side offers some semblance of privacy to large groups. With annoying frequency, the whirring sound of a juicer cuts the soothing ambience. With a sheepish grin, Wong says this is unavoidable if they want to produce the thick, fruity shakes (RM6.90) that the outlet is famous for. "We use 100 per cent fruit like ciku, mango, sour sop and avocado," he says.

Lighter drinks are the fizzy Soda With Sour Plum and my favourite, Basil Passion Soda (both RM6.50), scented with crushed basil leaves and a squeeze of lime.

The mysterious-sounding Six Treasures Drink (RM5.90) is a refreshing brew filled with golden sultanas, red dates, white fungus, lotus root, lychee and strips of agar-agar.

The range of appetisers is impressive and one can be happy just nibbling on these snacks. Fresh Prawn Roll (RM6.90) is a typical Vietnamese offering with prawns, herbs and blanched noodles wrapped in rice paper and eaten with a sweet nutty sauce while for something crispy, try the deepfried Net Spring Roll (RM6.50) with its stuffing of carrot, noodles, cucumber, prawn, lettuce and mint or rings of Spring Onion Cakes (RM6.50) topped with fish floss and an aromatic filling of chives. Golden Mango Roll (RM6.90) combines the sweetness of ripe mango with prawn in a pastry shell sprinkled with sesame seeds. Of course there's the ubiquitous minced Prawn On Sugar Cane too.

Salads are a big deal in Vietnam. The house specialty is a Combination Platter (RM25.90) of the various snacks and salad that you can roll up with rice paper. But a must-have is the Vietnamese Seafood Salad (RM12.90). "The



Colourful sliced chicken and spring roll vermicelli



Vietnamese fresh prawn rolls served with a sweet, nutty sauce

prawn crackers are imported from Vietnam," says Wong. "We couldn't find any here that can give the same result."

The bowl-shaped cracker is filled with a mix of sliced green mango, carrot, prawns, squid, basil, chili, sesame seeds and strands of raw agar-agar tossed with vinegar and sugar. Just the right tangy feel to awaken your senses. Crush the cracker and eat with the salad.

The nice thing about Vietnam Kitchen is that you can have a



Vietnamese seafood salad served in a prawn cracker 'bowl'



Diners at Vietnam Kitchen

decent meal whether you're alone or in a big group as there are individual servings of noodles and rice as well as dishes to share Asian-style.

Pho is always a good choice and the beef noodle soup comes with an assortment of salad leaves and beansprouts. I like the dry type, especially Sliced Chicken And Spring Roll Vermicelli (RM10.90). Just pour the sauce offered in a separate bowl over the blanched vermicelli (bihun) topped with beansprouts, herbs, mint, chicken and deepfried spring rolls. Toss it all up for a hearty meal.

For the really hungry, have fried rice or rice meals (RM9.90) come with beef brisket, curry chicken, chicken chop and pork chop. The Lemongrass Chicken Chop Rice has a cone of rice with a fried egg, salad and a tender, deboned chicken leg so juicy and well marinated you don't need to add the fish sauce it's served with.

Wong says families who come in on evenings and weekends like to take their time over a full meal of rice and dishes which include fish, meat and vegetables. "Some of the dishes sound Chinese but we must remember that Vietnamese cuisine (especially that in the north) is largely influenced by Chinese cooking."

Start with a soup (RM6.90). There's the mild, sweet Peanut And Papaya or Vietnamese Sour Soup, a toned-down version of Thailand's fiery tomyam.

Prawns With Butter Sauce (RM22) wasn't what I expected. Unlike the dried butter prawns

from Chinese kitchens, this comes in an aromatic, golden butter sauce with a pandan flavour, ladled over the prawns and cubes of crullers (yiu tiau).

Braised Pork In Coconut Juice (RM19) served with hard-boiled eggs is an unusual dish with the unique flavour of coconut water. I find the belly pork a little too fatty for my liking but the sauce goes nicely with rice. Stewed Pork Ribs (RM16.50) has a leaner cut as does the Saigon Steamed Pork (RM12), a tasty dish of minced pork steamed with egg on top.

I am surprised there are not many leafy greens to pick from the vegetable section except for Stirfried Yau Mak (lettuce). So we settled on Stirfried Lotus Root (RM11) and Eggplant With Vietnamese Fish Sauce (RM11). The lotus root, with sweetpeas and celery, has a slightly sweet, orange-coloured sauce that falls into the "acquired taste" category but the eggplant is scrumptious. The thin slices of eggplant are fried and topped with a combination of minced pork, brown onions, coriander and mint with a crunchiness in the chopped black fungus.

Vietnam Kitchen at Jaya 33 is open all day long from 11am to 10pm.

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Complete meal in lemongrass chicken chop rice



Eggplant with fish sauce



Prawns in butter sauce with crullers