

Food for Thought: Emigre Freshens Taste of Vietnam

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Sometimes it takes a rare confluence of disasters and mishaps to create something truly special. It certainly seems that way for Charles Phan. The Berkeley-educated architect went back to his native Vietnam in 1992 to design a garment factory. After a long wait, Ho Chi Minh City bureaucrats denied permission for the project. He moved back to San Francisco to get in on the city's high-tech boom. The software company went bust. Thinking about a move into restaurants, he planned to open a crepe shop in the city's Tenderloin district. The owner of the building he was looking at refused to rent to a Vietnamese.

Mr. Phan's inspiration was his childhood in Dalat, a sleepy mountain town in Central Vietnam known for its temperate climate and fresh produce. Dalat, built by the French in the 1920s as a summer capital away from the heat of Saigon, produced small sweet lettuces and strawberries, asparagus and artichokes -- an array of French fruit and vegetables that infused Vietnamese cooking. His memories are of crisp fresh food and foragers from the ethnic minority groups who would come to sell mushrooms and game from the forest. Having lived in California from the age of 15, he was influenced by simpler, fresher cooking, and, like many Western chefs in recent years, by a mentor closer to home -- his mother. "The idea was to do classic Vietnamese dishes, home food, simple food. My inspiration was the way my mom cooked -- just dishes like sauteed ground pork with corn, but it would always be the freshest thing."

FULL TEXT

Sometimes it takes a rare confluence of disasters and mishaps to create something truly special. It certainly seems that way for Charles Phan. The Berkeley-educated architect went back to his native Vietnam in 1992 to design a garment factory. After a long wait, Ho Chi Minh City bureaucrats denied permission for the project. He moved back to San Francisco to get in on the city's high-tech boom. The software company went bust. Thinking about a move into restaurants, he planned to open a crepe shop in the city's Tenderloin district. The owner of the building he was looking at refused to rent to a Vietnamese.

Unbowed, he went back to the Mission District, a gritty neighborhood where he had grown up, and literally built a restaurant from the floor up, laying the wooden planks and building the benches himself. Family members were called on to max out their credit cards and bus tables at night.

Within a year of its opening in 1995, The Slanted Door had become one of the most talked-about restaurants in a city that talks of almost nothing but food. It spearheaded the economic revitalization of the neighborhood, drawing in other restaurants and businesses. It also changed the image of Vietnamese food, revealing depths to the cuisine that few people had experienced in the United States. Now, the 37-year-old Mr. Phan is winning best-new-chef awards and receiving visits from top officials of the James Beard Foundation, the culinary equivalent of a papal blessing. "People even recognize me in the street," he says with an embarrassed grimace.

It's a restaurant that owes its success to Mr. Phan's determination to defy conventions -- both American views of

Vietnamese food and Asian ideas about how to run a restaurant.

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Mr. Phan was also determined not to be overwhelmed by outside advice. "I was always being told: 'This is what the white man wants. You've got to have this, you've got to have that.'" One of his first hires nearly refused a cooking job because of his ban on MSG. She was worried that the restaurant was doomed to failure if it didn't lace its food with the additive.

Instead of a long menu of traditional dishes from Vietnam and China, he pared choices down to a single page with an emphasis on street food and peasant dishes. Just as French haute cuisine, caught in a self-defeating vortex of competitive opulence and excessive complexity, has had to seek out its roots again, Mr. Phan has turned back to simplicity.

At first there was resistance to Mr. Phan's ideas. Some Americans were unfamiliar with the powerfully sweet and salty dishes of pork or catfish cooked with cane sugar and fish sauce in clay pots. They are Vietnamese peasant dishes, to be eaten in small quantities with a lot of rice, but diners ordered one each and then complained about the overwhelming flavor. Waiters now head off complaints by explaining the dishes in some detail and diners are becoming more aware of the food. When he started, Mr. Phan couldn't sell the steamed fish with lily buds and mushrooms because of the anxieties many people feel about facing a whole fish across the dinner table. Now the kitchen sends out about 30 a night.

The emphasis on ingredients provides an immediacy and vitality to the food. Imperial rolls are ubiquitous in Vietnam and frequently they offer only the dismal experience of a chewing a limp prawn through a unappealing gelatinous wrapper. Here they seem almost dewy, each piece of lettuce and leaf of mint clear and resonant. His salads are Vietnamese in spirit but yet a world away from the circles of naked and flabby cucumber that are all too common in Vietnam. The jumble of grapefruit, jicama and candied pecans is a mix of American ingredients that exist in perfect balance with the Vietnamese dressing. Unusually for an Asian restaurant, it has a well-constructed wine list, heavy with German and Austrian wines like Gewurztraminers that can cope with the strong flavors. It also serves a range of local and Belgian beers but not 333, the Vietnamese brand people expect. "They complain about us not having 333 even though it tastes like Bud Lite."

Mr. Phan even paid attention to details such as getting the best tea. "People yell and scream about paying for tea but it costs me \$120 a pound," says Mr. Phan. "Of course it's free in Chinatown -- they only pay \$10 a pound for their tea."

Fusion restaurants, with their self-conscious inventiveness, abound in California. But The Slanted Door stands out -- not for mixing up cuisines, but for going back to the basics. Charles Phan has done this without any preconceptions of what a Vietnamese restaurant should be like and by fusing the discipline and rigor of the best service and the best

kitchens with the freshness and clarity of the food Vietnamese eat every day.

The Slanted Door is at 584 Valencia Street (near 17th Street) in the Mission District of San Francisco (tel. 415-861-8032). You need to make a reservation about three weeks in advance for a peak-time dinner sitting, but call in case of cancellations. It is always easier to get in for lunch, when the restaurant does not take reservations. Appetizers are priced below \$10 and most main dishes are below \$15.

Mr. Templer is a writer based in Berkeley, California.

Steamed Sea Bass
Recipe from The Slanted Door: Steamed Sea Bass with Lily Buds and
Mushrooms (Serves four)
-- 20 dried lily buds
-- 1/2 cup (120 ml) wood ears
-- 1 oz (28 grams) glass noodles
-- 6 medium dry shiitake mushrooms
(four-centimeter diameter)
-- 1/2 shallot
-- 2 tablespoons (30 ml) vegetable oil
-- 2 tablespoons (30 ml) light soy sauce
-- 1/2 cup (120 ml) water
-- 1/2 tablespoon (8 ml) sugar
-- 1/8 oz (4 grams) ginger, sliced into a thin
-- julienne

-- 10 oz (280 grams) seabass
-- Soak lily buds, wood ears, glass noodles and shiitake mushrooms in
hot water for 1/2 hour. Rinse well and squeeze dry. Trim hard knobs
from wood ears, then cut into small pieces. Discard stems from
shiitake mushrooms, then slice them to 1/4-inch thick. Heat oil in a
small saucepan, then add shallot. Fry until golden brown and set aside.
In a small bowl, combine soy sauce, water and sugar. Mix well and set
aside.
Arrange lily buds, wood ears, glass noodles and shiitake mushrooms
onto a deep serving dish (making sure beforehand that it will fit
inside your steamer). Place fish on top of the bed of noodles. Pour
oil, shallot and the soy mixture over the fish, then sprinkle with
salt and pepper. Place the ginger on top of fish.
In a steamer, add at least 2 inches (5 cm) hot water. Bring to a
boil, then put fish into the steamer. Steam fish over high heat for
about 25 minutes, until just cooked through. Do not open steamer to
check the fish, but watch out that the water in the wok doesn't boil
dry. Serve with rice

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