



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

Vung Tau Wows

San Jose institution has a great story—and great food

By Stett Holbrook

Many restaurants have good stories to tell. San Jose's Vung Tau has one of the better ones. In 1976, single mother Chac Do left the coastal Vietnamese city of Vung Tau with her seven children in hopes of finding a better life. They spent a lean year living in an Indonesian refugee camp before immigrating to the United States with the help of a Catholic charity.

The family settled in Lodi, Calif., in 1977 and all but the youngest children went to work in the local cannery. Life was hard in America but Do's family meals evoked pleasant memories of scenery and flavors of Vietnam they left behind.

When one of Do's daughters left for college, the family relocated to Santa Clara in 1982. Three years later, Do's daughter Nhan and her husband, Anthony, opened Vung Tau on San Carlos Street in San Jose, using recipes and techniques Nhan learned from her mother. The restaurant was a hit with San Jose's burgeoning Vietnamese population, and two years later the 32-seat restaurant moved to a 120-seat space on East Santa Clara Street where it still is today. Last year, Vung Tau closed for five months to undergo an extensive remodel. The restaurant has been done up in warm earthy tones and wood and bamboo details. Opaque glass and marine colors are designed to evoke the seascapes of Vung Tau.

Now in its 20th year, Vung Tau remains an exemplar of traditional Vietnamese food. The restaurant has also birthed several others. There are Vung Tau restaurants in Milpitas and Newark, and Do's daughter Tammy Huynh and her niece Anne Le opened Tamarine in Palo Alto, a contemporary Vietnamese restaurant. Meanwhile, Do, who instilled in her family a passion for Vietnamese cooking, still works in Vung Tau's kitchen, preparing sauces and various dishes based on her extensive culinary knowledge.

Traditionalists might gripe that they can get authentic Vietnamese food for less money elsewhere in San Jose, but it would be hard to top Vung Tau for its fresh, quality ingredients and sleek yet comfortable décor. And because the menus are in English and Vietnamese, the restaurant opens Vietnamese food to those who might be put off by unintelligible descriptions of the food.

Vung Tau packs them in for lunch and dinner. Most of the crowd are affluent-looking Vietnamese—sporty-looking men and pretty women with well-manicured nails. There are also a few gringos and other non-Asians in the mix who know good food when they find it. And you'll definitely find good food at Vung Tau.

Excluding desserts, there are 120 items to choose from, so deciding what to order is a challenge. The menu makes that a little bit easier by breaking the food down into categories like noodle soups, noodle salads, rice plates, shrimp, beef, etc.

Shrimp and pork spring rolls (\$5.50) are a staple at most Vietnamese restaurants and Vung Tau offers a particularly fresh-tasting version. The green onion tops poking out of the ends of each roll lend an artistic flourish. Vung Tau's salads are large and work as a shared appetizer or lighter entree. Either way, the ones I tried were excellent. Green papaya salad is another standard at Vietnamese restaurants but Vung Tau's version (\$7.50) reaches the status of signature dish. Crisp, pale green shredded papaya is piled high and topped with slices of dried sesame beef and fresh basil. The beef adds an earthy, slightly sweet note to the fresh and tangy papaya and together they create a lively, refreshing salad that looks as good as it tastes. Just as good is the lotus root salad (\$10.95). Young, tubelike lotus root sections are combined with sweet, fresh shrimp, lean slices of pork and chopped mint in a brilliant, almost electric, tangy fish sauce-based dressing. Lotus root is usually served in its woodier, more mature state, but here the waterborne plant is crisp and delicate.

The grilled jumbo prawns and onion beef rolls (\$8.95) from the list of rice noodle salads is a good choice. Big, bursting, butterflied shrimp and thin rolls of sliced beef stuffed with onions and tied artfully with a scallion arrive in a deep bowl of rice. The technique here is to pour a little of the chile-spiked vinegar-fish sauce served alongside over the bowl or dip the shrimp and beef right in. It's a simple but exotic dish. My only complaint is that the beef had a gassy flavor probably imparted from the blue flames of the grill.

From the more than 25 rice plate choices, I chose the chicken caramelized in garlic, lemon grass and chile (\$7.95). For me, chicken is seldom an exciting dish on any menu, but this was not only the best thing I had at Vung Tau, but one of the best dishes I've had all month. The chile provides moderate heat, but the cooling lemon grass lightens the dish and gives it fresh, high notes of exotic flavor.

While not the firecracker of a dish that the caramelized chicken is, the shredded pork and grilled jumbo prawns over broken rice (\$8.95) works its charms in more subtle ways. The long, shoe-string-like strands of pork are rather bland on their own but when doused with more of that vinegar-fish sauce the dish wakes right up. The two plump, grilled shrimp served alongside help enliven things further. This is a perfect lunch dish, filling and flavorful but more understated than many of Vung Tau's showboat dishes.

Clay pot sea bass (\$12.95) caramelized with garlic and fish sauce is the one dish I wouldn't order again. The syrupy fish sauce had reduced too much and overpowered the fish with aggressive saltiness.

Service on my three visits was brisk and efficient, but on some occasions it was hard to get detailed descriptions of the food from waitstaff, many of whom speak English as a second language. Several times I was directed to safe choices I think the staff thought would be acceptable to a non-Vietnamese diner. With so many choices, and so many good choices, I'd appreciate more help. But with dozens of dishes I've yet to try, I'm happy to work my way through the menu in the meantime.

Vung Tau

Address: 535 E. Santa Clara St., San Jose.

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Hours: Open daily 10am-3pm and 5-9pm.

Price Range: \$7.50-\$24.