PHO VU Vietnamese Restaurant

It’s All About the Broth

By: Deborah Liv Johnson

Pho Vu, with its spare, modern décor, is as simple as it is complex. The restaurant’s most popular dish, Pho, has a unique history, and the restaurant’s owner — energetic and welcoming — embodies the American success story of beating the odds, surviving and succeeding.

The saga of Huy Vu begins in 1981. As a 15-year old boy, he fled Vietnam, six years after the Fall of Saigon. Crammed into a small boat packed with other South Vietnamese people, he survived two weeks on the ocean before reaching Malaysia. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese died attempting a similar escape. Sponsored by an uncle living in Oklahoma City, young Huy Vu came to the United States, attended school and worked as a dishwasher. From there he worked as a busboy at Benihana before becoming a cook and finally a Teppanyaki (Japanese-style iron plate cooking) chef.

Eventually, Vu transitioned to the Marriott for an 18-year stint as a chef and a restaurant manager, moving from Kansas City to New Jersey until he and his wife (prior to having three boys) settled in Palm Desert. For eight years, Vu managed the Mikado restaurant before opening Hibachi Steakhouse & Sushi Bar in Rancho Mirage. And then one day, a customer asked him if he would consider opening a Vietnamese restaurant because the customer loved a soup called Pho (pronounced “fuh”).

Vu ate Vietnamese food almost every day, but trained as a Japanese chef, he did not know how to prepare it. He thought about his aunt Thùy Luong who had been cooking in Vietnamese restaurants in Orange County for more than 20 years and he gave her a call. Happily, Luong accepted Vu’s offer to be the executive chef at a restaurant that was only in the planning stages.

The history of Pho harkens back more than 100 years during the colonization of Vietnam under French rule in the late 1800s. Although there is no record documenting the birth of a noodle soup known as Pho, there is reason to believe that the broth was influenced by pot au feu — pot on the fire — or French beef stew. First cooked in Hanoi, the beloved Pho traveled to South Vietnam, later appearing in the countries where fleeing Vietnamese had settled.

For anyone who has fallen in love with an exquisitely slow-cooked French beef broth — the foundation of French onion soup or classic French dishes like beef bourguignon — Pho broth will register a familiar appreciation for the art of slow cooking. According to Vu, their beef broth typically cooks and simmers for 18 to 20 hours, infused with Vietnamese spices like ginger root, star of anise, cinnamon and cloves. The result is a delicious, soothing, clean broth that welcomes a cornucopia of vegetables, noodles, meats and fresh herbs — whatever the diner chooses.

According to Vu, all of the restaurant’s ingredients are fresh. “I think people come here, not only for their love of Pho, but because they appreciate the healthy food and fresh vegetables,” says Vu. “A short time after we opened, an older couple came in asking about Pho. They didn’t know what it was but their doctor had sent them here to eat our soup.”

In addition to the traditional style Pho noodle soup made with beef broth and a variety of beef cuts, chicken or shrimp, plus vegetables and fresh herbs, diners may request a vegetarian broth with rice noodles, fresh vegetables and tofu. Appetizers include spring rolls, egg rolls and fresh salads. Vermicelli bowls, rice plate combinations and vegetarian dishes are also available. Several traditional Vietnamese drinks, fruit shakes and beer round out the menu and dessert includes a fried banana sundae.

Pho Vu is located at 79630 Highway 111, Suite 103 in La Quinta, across the street from Costco. Hours are Monday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. For more information, call 760-775-2417.

Chef Thuy Luong shares a new menu item for our readers.

Shrimp Apple Salad
Serves 2 - 4 (makes two large or four smaller salads)

Salad
4 cups mixed greens: any combination of romaine, spinach, green or red leaf lettuce
½ cup fresh bean sprouts
½ cup tart apple, julienned (½ medium size apple)
¼ cup onion, thinly sliced (white or yellow)
1 medium size carrot, shredded
¼ cup fresh cilantro, leaves pulled from stems
¼ cup fresh spearmint, leaves torn in medium size pieces
½ fresh jalapeño, seeded, sliced rings (optional, may add as garnish on side)
1 cup medium size shrimp, boiled, steamed or grilled (be careful not to overcook)
Optional: 1 cup chicken, grilled or pan-seared (sliced or shredded), may be used instead of shrimp

Dressing
(season to taste, using more or less salt and pepper)

2 tablespoons white vinegar
1 ½ tablespoons sugar (or substitute 2 teaspoons agave nectar)
1 teaspoon garlic, minced
¼ teaspoon pepper, finely ground
¼ teaspoon sea salt (may use salt substitute)
1 ½ teaspoons sesame seed oil
¼ cup water, room temperature

Garnish
½ medium cucumber, sliced
1 tablespoon chopped peanuts, per salad

Combine all salad ingredients in a large bowl and set aside. For dressing, add each ingredient, one at a time, and mix well before adding the next ingredient. Toss salad with dressing and plate individually. Garnish plates with sliced cucumbers and top with chopped peanuts.

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