

# Perfection in a broth

Restaurant 88 serves Vietnamese food with a touch of class, finds David Burton

While a decent pho beef soup is to be slurped at four or so Vietnamese eateries in Wellington these days, most of these establishments are at the level of a workers' cafe, where none but Ebenezer Scrooge would seriously consider taking his first date. So aren't we lucky then, to have Restaurant 88? An auspicious number in Chinese culture, 88 is indeed double happiness for Scrooge, for here he can impress his would-be squeeze with the elegant surroundings and professional service, without flinching at the expense.

Open six years now, the restaurant has had the interior tweaked and subtle props such as a bird cage and parasol added, but nothing's been done to clutter the line of the big green lanterns that hang in a curve from the high ceiling, posing the one dramatic counterpoint to the stripped-back modernism.

A big statue of Buddha benignly oversees the service.

The olive-green concrete floor is well-polished, just like the presentation of the desserts, which are simply spiffing.

Not content to rest on their laurels, owner Luke Duong and wife Linh have taken themselves off to Sydney to see what's hot in the Vietnamese restaurants there now.

Naturally, the menu has changed and they've taken off my favourite dish – the Saigon, wok-tossed, caramelised tamarind prawns.

But never mind, they now mince the prawns with garlic and wrap them around lengths of cut sugar cane, steam briefly, brown lightly on a grill and, voila, chao tom, a famous



Good pho, attentive service and great desserts set Restaurant 88 apart. Photos: CRAIG SIMCOX

Saigon street dish I also noticed everywhere in Hanoi.

Confusingly, the menu introduces banh xeo as "Hanoi" crispy rice crepe, when it is rightfully attributed to Hue and the south. But regardless of where it is from, this crispy pancake is a beggar of a thing to get right, which was the very reason I ordered it.

And I'm so glad I did, because it came laid out in all its perfection, folded over like a giant taco, the coconutty rice-flour crust crisp around the perimeter but merging into the softness of a tortilla in the centre.

Accompanying it were kerupuk shrimp chips – ever so slightly leathery – and a pungent dipping sauce. Inside, the crepe was studded with the traditional pork and prawns, with lashings of mung bean sprouts but only sparse offerings of coriander and mint.

The pho was similarly lacking the side plate of fresh herbs and condiments you'd get from any self-respecting pho stall in Vietnam, but then, fresh herbs are expensive in

New Zealand, and the lack thereof is a criticism I'd level at almost every pho in town, barring the Fisherman's Plate in Bond St.

The broth, however, was perfect. Luke tells me he has settled on five hours exactly as a simmering time for the combination of beef marrow bones, beef brisket and oxtail – the meat from the latter made into deliciously tender beef balls served with the finished soup.

The rice noodles are a challenge to transfer from the tureen to your individual serving bowl, but Linh came to the rescue and showed us how, using chopsticks and an oversized flat spoon.

Her waiting staff are rigorously disciplined: when not occupied, they stand in a line beside the counter, their hands behind their backs, scanning the room.

Compare that with the many cafes where a bored, teenaged waitron slouches behind the till, chewing gum and reading magazines.

The olive green concrete floor is well polished, just like the presentation of the desserts, which are simply spiffing.



## ONE THING YOU SHOULD TRY

The Vietnamese dripped coffee is not the only French colonial influence on the menu here. If you thought you disliked Asian desserts, you might make an exception for Restaurant 88's Vietnamese Creme Caramel (Banh Flan). Rich and silky smooth, it's made exactly to the classical French recipe, only substituting coconut cream for the milk and cream, and is served with a cap of palm sugar syrup and a ball of ice cream.

### RESTAURANT 88

88 Tory St  
Ph 385 9088  
Fully licenced  
Open for lunch Thurs-Sun 11.30am to 2.30pm; dinner Tues-Sun 5.30pm till late  
**Price range of mains:** \$19.50 to \$28  
**Food:** ○○○○  
**Service:** ○○○○  
**Ambience:** ○○○○  
**Wine list:** ○○○/○  
**Cost:** \$115 for two (excluding drinks)



On the face of it, Saigon lemongrass beef salad (cha gio bun) might seem a virtuous option, until you receive the dish and see the lengths of crispy pork and crab spring roll scattered over the top among the roasted peanuts. The richness is balanced with fresh herbs and a refreshing lime dressing.

After dinner, I indulged in Vietnam's French-influenced coffee ritual, where a mixture of coffee and sweetened condensed milk drips into the cup from a little tin filter.