CÁ CHIÊN DÒN (WHOLE CRISPY FLOUNDER), LITTLE VIET GARDEN

Perfect Harmony

From fiery broths scented with bright herbs to succulent roasted meat, Eden Center in Falls Church serves authentic Vietnamese cuisine.

by KIM O'CONNELL / *photography by* FRED+ELLIOTT

QUANG LE, GENERAL MANAGER of the Huong Binh bakery and deli in Falls Church, keeps filling my basket with items: thinly sliced pork in rice crêpes (along with fish sauce to dip them in); sweet buns with coconut filling and wrapped in banana leaves; spicy, stringy beef jerky. Before I check out, he hands me a heavy log of pork bologna too. "This is cha lua, one of our specialties," he says with a smile.

Le knows that I'm here to sample a broad selection of Vietnamese treats, so he offers me a little of everything. Even on a Wednesday afternoon, Huong Binh is crowded with shoppers, many waiting for made-to-order bánh mì sandwiches, Vietnam's famous meat and veggie sub (usually served on a crispy baguette) that blend Vietnam's French cultural influence with tangy Asian flavors.

"Will you eat it right away or later?" Le asks a customer. Timing matters, he explains. Huong Binh offers three kinds of bread—a traditional Vietnamese roll (which is similar to a baguette), a crispier true French baguette or a softer roll that is akin to an American sub roll. The first two are best for immediate eating, says Le, because crispier bread will dry out if not consumed within a day.

Huong Binh is located in Eden Center, the largest Vietnamese commercial center on the East Coast and a haven for authentic Vietnamese cuisine. Passing through its ornate red-and-yellow gate—the colors of the flag of former South Vietnam—you might feel as if you'd been momentarily transported to the streets of Hanoi or Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). Along with delis like Huong Binh, Vietnamese supermarkets crowd together with jewelry stores, bubble tea purveyors, gift emporiums, hair and nail salons, and of course restaurants. Weekends are when the throngs descend, and visitors may be treated to a musical group singing traditional Vietnamese songs or kids splashing in a corner fountain as spicy smells waft from doorways. All around I hear only Vietnamese being spoken, and I delight in the lilting and musical nature of the language that is so familiar to me as the daughter of a Vietnamese immigrant who married an American.

Comprising more than 120 stores and restaurants, Eden Center has served as a culinary and cultural meeting center for the Vietnamese community since the early 1980s. After the fall of Saigon in 1975 sent thousands of refugees to the U.S., with many settling in the Washington, D.C., area, enterprising Vietnamese merchants opened shops and restaurants in Arlington, whose downtown was known briefly as "Little Saigon." By the 1980s, rising rents were driving out Vietnamese shopkeepers, which led a group of entrepreneurs to start the Eden Center in an abandoned shopping mall only a few miles west.

Lately, Eden Center seems to be more popular than ever, with a recent expansion making way for a Good Fortune grocery store and several new shops and restaurants, including Chinese and Korean establishments.

One of the most popular new Vietnamese restaurants, Little Viet Garden, represents something of a full-circle moment for its owner, Lilly Benalja, who immigrated to the U.S. with her siblings and parents. The first incarnation of Little Viet Garden was one of the most popular restaurants in Arlington during its Little Saigon heyday, but it eventually closed, leaving Benalja to focus on her restaurant Miss Saigon (then located in downtown D.C.), which is still open in Georgetown. In late 2016, Benalja took advantage of a vacancy in Eden Center to re-open Little Viet Garden at the Eden Center, to the great delight of the faithful patrons who remembered the old place.

"Everybody was so happy to find us here," Benalja says in a rare moment of downtime one recent afternoon.

Against an elegant backdrop of framed black-and-white photos of Vietnam, Benalja treats me to lunch. It begins with an appetizer of crispy calamari sautéed in a garlicky butter, which is on the menu because Madeleine Albright liked it so much at Miss Saigon, Benalja explains. Next is an entrée of grilled lemongrass pork and spring roll served over thin rice vermicelli, the tang of the lemongrass perfectly balanced with the chewy noodles and the crispy vegetables (bean sprouts and cucumbers). Benalja says that other popular entrées include Hanoi grilled pork, caramel fish in a clay pot and whole crispy flounder. While other cuisines might have more international renown, visiting Eden Center and soaking up the sharp, bright, crisp flavors of Vietnam makes this feel like an oversight.

Benalja insists that I have a bowl of sweet Vietnamese mung bean soup for dessert, a mealy warm porridge that is laced with rich coconut milk. I begin to ask her another question between slurps, but Benalja stops me. "Don't talk," she says. "Just eat." At Eden Center, that's deliciously the point.

WHERE TO EAT

First-time diners at Eden Center may be overwhelmed with its mile-long list of eateries, so here we offer a list of some favorites to get you started. Ăn ngon nhé (bon appetit)!

CHA KIM PHUNG BAKERY
This large bakery and deli has a wide array of delicious Vietnamese baked goods and snacks, such as savory and doughy roasted pork buns.

GOOD FORTUNE SUPERMARKET
Features a large selection of pan-Asian goods, including a prepared food bar with Vietnamese and Chinese dishes ranging from traditional beef stir-fry to less-common options such as tripe.

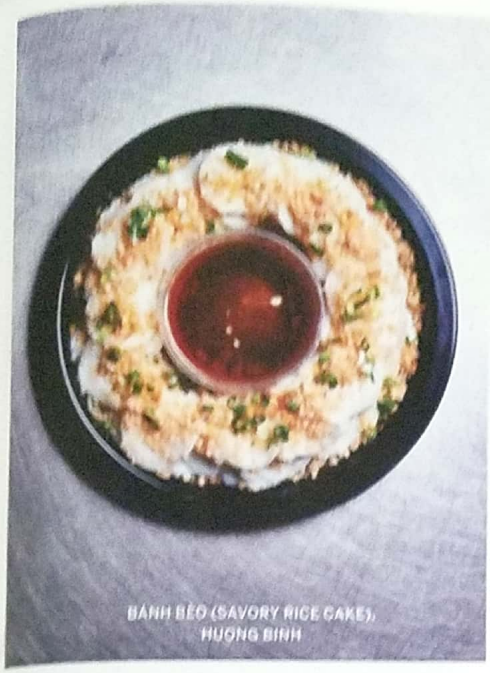
HUONG VIET
This casual, cash-only restaurant has a large menu of soups; try a hot pot soup with seafood or pork, cooked right at the table.

PHO VA
Many restaurants offer variations on Vietnam's famous noodle soup; at Pho VA, try the pho sate for a spicier-than-average broth. (Note: "pho" is pronounced with an upward lilt, as in "fa?")

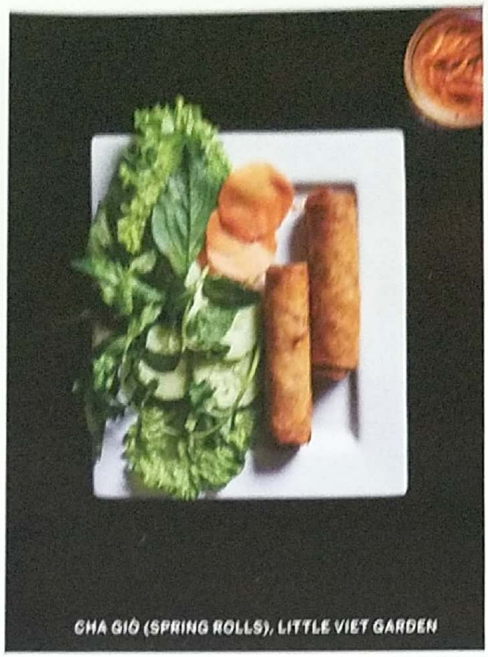
RICE PAPER
With an elegant foodie vibe, this restaurant features less-common dishes such as cóm tôm—grilled pork served over broken rice, a fractured grain that is starchier and more textured than traditional white rice.

SAIGON BAKERY
This bakery has many traditional deli offerings, including sweet sesame balls—a deep-fried glutinous rice ball filled with sweet mung bean paste and rolled in toasty sesame seeds.

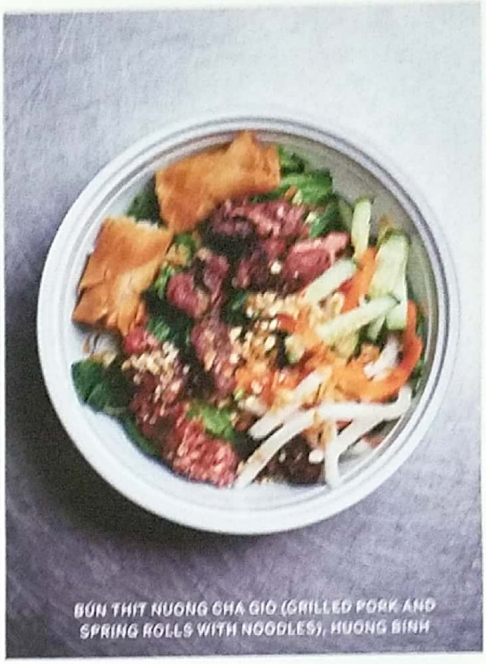
VIVI BUBBLE TEA
This chain tea purveyor is one of several options at Eden. The lychee tea is a standout, made from the distinctive Asian pinkish-red fruit known for its perfume-like taste.



BÁNH BÈO (SAVORY RICE CAKE), HUONG BINH



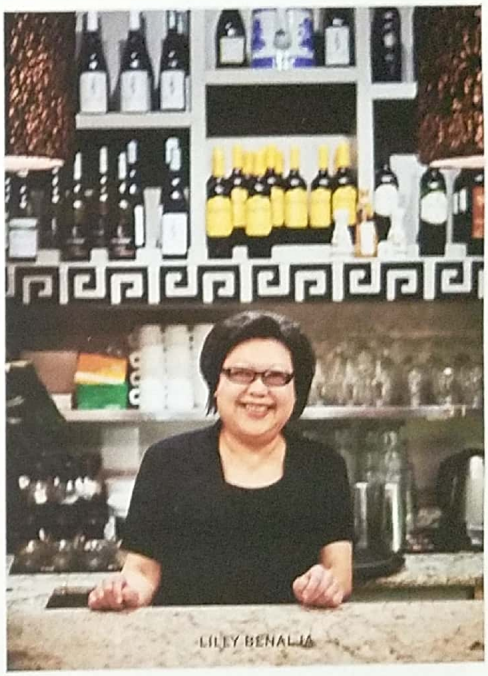
CHA GIÒ (SPRING ROLLS), LITTLE VIET GARDEN



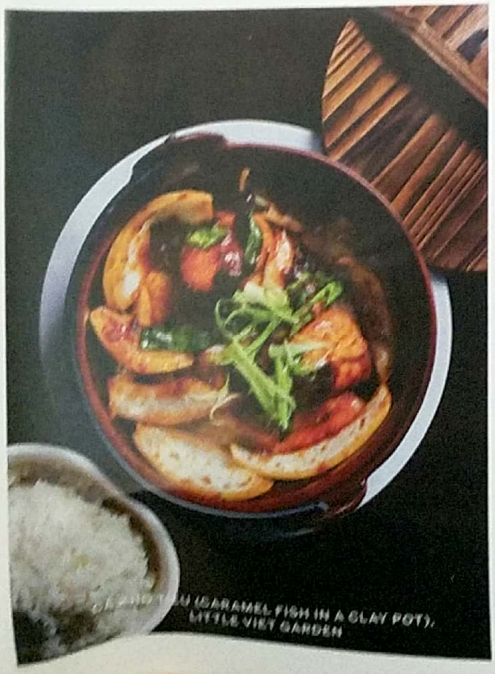
BÚN THIT NUONG CHA GIÒ (GRILLED PORK AND SPRING ROLLS WITH NOODLES), HUONG BINH

QUANG LE

GRILLED MEAT ON A STICK AND SPRING ROLL PARTY PLATTER, HUONG BINH

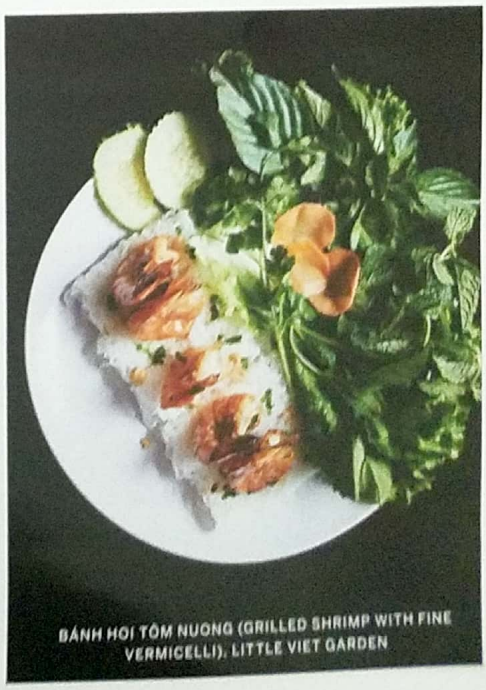


LILLY BENALIA



CÁ KHO TÔ (CARAMEL FISH IN A CLAY POT), LITTLE VIET GARDEN

CHA LUA (PORK BOLOGNA) AND BÁNH CHUNG (STICKY PORK AND RICE CAKE), HUONG BINH



BÁNH HOI TÔM NUONG (GRILLED SHRIMP WITH FINE VERMICELLI), LITTLE VIET GARDEN