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Cay Tre Soho

Description:

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44 Dean Street, W1D 4QD

Phone: 020 7317 9118

Opening hours: Daily noon-11pm (11.30pm Fri & Sat, 10pm Sun)

Nearest tube: Tottenham Court Road 

Cuisine: Other

Average price: A copious meal for two with wine, about £80 inc.12.5 per cent service



By **Fay Maschler**

19 May 2011

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Plato's appealing theory of Twin Souls is to some extent supported by Mark Hix and Hieu Trung Bui.

While not exactly spending his life searching for the other half who will complete him, the English chef, when he lived and worked in Hackney, gravitated towards the Cay Tre and Viet Grill restaurants owned by the Vietnamese entrepreneur.

And the latter found in Mark someone to give him the confidence to pursue culinary authenticity.

In personal presentation they also seem kind of similar - though obviously different to look at - having the same staccato conversational delivery.

And for conclusive proof of theoretical consanguinity, Mark's business partner Ratnesh Bagdai is supporting Hieu in his new Cay Tre Soho next to The Groucho (not so far from where Mark has the restaurant Hix).

Any number of people will tell you that outside Vietnam the indigenous food is better in Paris, Sydney, San Francisco or New York than here. In London a refugee population, some of whom spent time en route in Hong Kong, have mainly served Vietnamese street food, notably the soup pho, as a first course, but looked to Chinese assemblies to fill out the menus. A few of the restaurants in Kingsland Road, E2 - sometimes called Little Hanoi - bear this out.

Hieu Trung Bui, whose interest in restaurants grew while he was earning spare cash working in them during his studies, is keen to explore the more sophisticated side of the cooking, from both North and South Vietnam, and also to utilise prime ingredients. This "departure" is not only geographical - from East End to West End - and gastronomical but also environmental. The architect is David Archer, who was responsible for the beautiful, short-lived Aaya (now Hix), some of the Busaba chain, Isarn in Islington, and Trung Bui's recently opened Old Street banh mi shop Kêu!.



Ph: Danny Elwes

Movers and shakers: cocktails and fine wines are all part of the experience at Cay Tre Soho

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Deep premises that open out beyond the bar have been rendered light - with pale paint-rubbed tongue-and-groove panelling - plain and elegantly functional. White melamine tables of different heights and shapes offer the possibility of squashing you next to your neighbours, as happened on our second full-price (as opposed to soft opening) visit. If you book as a group of five or six, try for a round table.

Over two meals we covered a lot of ground, although the placemat menu - a source of vibrant pattern and colour - is relatively restrained in the number of dishes. We decided to leave the various meal-in-a-bowl pho (soups) for a future lunchtime and started with asparagus and crab soup - aromatic kid (baby goat) spicy soup with Vietnamese herbs not being available. It was excellent, as were betel leaf-wrapped parcels of ground pork known as cha la lot with a grown-up, faintly medicinal flavour from the leaves. Red Sea prawn summer rolls were tightly packed with vermicelli, fresh salad leaves, and herbs - such a welcome aspect of Vietnamese food - in delicate rice paper skins, but the shellfish flavour was fugitive. I liked the floppy peeled grilled aubergine topped with ground pork and nuoc cham (sour-sweet-salty-spicy dipping sauce).

From the salads I preferred the green mango mixed with sundried squid, peanuts and knotweed, but my friend Keith waxed lyrical about the fillet of mackerel mix. Beef and green papaya is another with a delectable dressing.

There are three main courses that cry out for dining in a group in order to try them all. (There may be more; I didn't eat the entire list.) Slow-cooked Mekong catfish caramelised in fish sauce served in a pretty pottery bowl is exquisite and I ordered it both times. Mercifully, the habit of scattering dill like grass clippings that obtains at Cay Tre and Viet Grill seems to have been abandoned. Dill is such a bully of a herb.

Spatchcocked baby chicken marinated in honey, five-spice and dried Vietnamese herbs - Roast Baby Chicken Royale - takes 20 minutes to cook from ordering but is absolutely worth the wait. The time is anyway agreeably taken up by first courses.

I saw a picture on the web of Lang Son Spinning Roast Tamworth Pork Belly tied up with twine resembling a brown patent leather handbag. Stuffed with sweet curry leaves, the skin glazed with honey and lemon, the meat is served sliced and no longer so dramatic but tasting wonderful. Four-mushroom hotpot topped with crisp tofu and wok-fried string beans proved ace accompaniments.

Not everything was faultless. Duck egg omelette was dull; salt and pepper eel a martyr to batter; ox cheek au vin lacking in character. But that is many more hits than near misses. Malcolm Gluck has chosen interesting, often New World, wines that laugh along with chilli and spices. I would particularly recommend the Californian DeLoach Heritage Reserve Pinot Noir 2007 (£33.52). Six on the list are available by the glass. Service was chaotic but don't let that stop you hurrying along.

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