



East meets West

The aesthetic is clean and contemporary, avoiding the clichés of Oriental design

Hugh Trung Bui is exporting his fiercely authentic Vietnamese concept from Shoreditch to Soho. Restaurant gains exclusive access to the inner workings of this ambitious London opening

The key people involved in the launch of *Cây Tre Soho* are sitting in the basement of *Viet Grill*, one of restaurateur Hugh Trung Bui's existing operations in Shoreditch. This informal get together is primarily a menu tasting (Trung Bui's chef has just returned from a research trip to Vietnam), but many of the variables that make for a successful restaurant opening are up for discussion, from the final design of the Dean Street eaterie to the menus, which will either be laminated or Polpo-style disposables torn from a roll.

Round the table are Ratnesh Bagdai (Mark Hix's business partner, financial consultant), David Archer (designer), Malcolm Gluck (wine consultant), Clare Lattin (public relations) and Trung Bui himself, operator of East London restaurants *Cây Tre*, *Viet Grill* and *Kêu!*, a fast casual concept specialising in *banh mi* sandwiches.

We're sampling a series of Vietnamese dishes and the slightly nervous head chef is enjoying an 80% success rate. Things tend to either be massive hits or unequivocal flops, little is deemed mediocre. We kick off with mackerel summer rolls and deep-fried crab rolls, both marked down as

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dead-cert winners. A debate arises about the price and how many to put on the plate, a very reasonable two for £3 the final consensus.

Mashed pork and prawn skewers served with a chicken liver-based dipping sauce are brilliant, but glutinous balls of sticky rice with duck meat are lost in translation. The Vietnamese like the texture and the bland rice taste, the Westerners are not so sure. Trung Bui grudgingly agrees they're not right.

Wine writer Malcolm Gluck - rather miffed that certain members of the party are drinking beer - is talking about wine and Vietnamese food. "Like all Oriental cuisine it is challenging to get it right, but Vietnamese food is a joy to match with wine. At Soho we'll do aromatic whites and interesting, sexy pungent reds to go with the marinated meat dishes. We won't be afraid of screw caps either," he says.

The wine list is certainly in safe hands. Stand-out matches are the aforementioned rolls with a Riesling from Australia's Clare Valley and a New Zealand Pinot Noir paired with spicy lamb cutlets, which makes the few remaining beer

drinkers reconsider their position. We move onto larger dishes. A 'handbag of pork', both loin and belly flecked with an unknown, medicinal tasting Vietnamese herb, comes encased in perfectly crisp skin. It's a bit Lady Gaga, but undeniably fantastic.

Soft shell crab curry with delicate steamed rice noodles is influenced by India, yet distinctly Vietnamese (it packs a supremely fiery chilli punch), and signals that *Cây Tre Soho* is intended as a snapshot of what's happening in contemporary Vietnam. "People might not think dishes are authentic but this is what's in the country now. There are other influences," says the Ho Chi Minh City-born Trung Bui.

The word authenticity comes up again and again. The key reason that *Cây Tre* and *Viet Grill* are successful is that the cuisine is not adjusted to placate western palates. However, when setting up in less familiar territory there is always the worry that the less adventurous will be put off by strong flavours and unfamiliar ingredients.

It's a common quandary for ethnic restaurateurs: how authentic do you dare to go? Part of the solution to this dilemma for *Cây Tre Soho* will be sharing plates. "We all have opinions," explains



Raising the bar: Hugh Trung Bui hopes to revolutionise Vietnamese food in London



'Luc Luc Beef' flamed in Cognac with garlic cloves and black pepper



Spicy duck is soon to be on the menu at the new Soho site



Hugh Trung Bui now operates four Vietnamese concepts

Bagdai, gesturing to the dozen or so plates on the table. "If four people share a selection of dishes and one person doesn't like one of them it's not an issue. I won't use the term tapas, but sharing plates are becoming the contemporary way to dine out."

The small plates at Cây Tre Soho will also increase spend. Selling four dishes priced between £4 and £8 will yield significantly more revenue than a single main course. Indeed, for the business to work in the West End, spend per head will have to rise considerably if the weighty premium paid for such a central site is to be recouped, as well as pay rent and rates that will be much higher than in east London.

Like Trung Bui's other outlets, tables will need to be turned. Part of the trick of being a good mid-market restaurateur is the ability to maintain food quality in a quick turnaround, high-volume environment, a feat we're currently admiring at Viet Grill, which is going full tilt on a Tuesday evening. The new 80-cover Soho restaurant is anticipated to do a seating and a half at lunch and two seatings on heavier nights, around 250 covers a day generating between £35,000 and £50,000 revenue a week.

"I work from the bottom up when I do my financials," says Bagdai, who is a financial consultant for the business rather than a backer and, judging by the way he is devouring the food, a card-carrying fan. "I look at the prime costs - rent, rates and labour - and work out the minimum amount the restaurant needs to take to break even.

We're in a good place at Cây Tre Soho. Most people do the reverse, starting with what they think they'll take. If they pitch that figure too high it can cause serious problems down the line."

The total investment for the new site is £600,000 all in, half from the Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme offered via Lloyds Bank and half is organic, proving the success of Trung Bui's existing estate. Considering it includes the premium for the site, formerly Malaysian restaurant Kaya, it appears a conservative figure.

Part of the reason for the low initial outlay is the

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design direction. The team hasn't exactly skimped, but, as designer David Archer explains, it has gone for a clean and minimalist look that avoids the potentially costly trappings of Oriental restaurant design. "Most recent high-profile Asian restaurant designs have been opulent in style using expensive materials: lots of dark wood and a heavy aesthetic overall. At Cây Tre Soho we wanted to do something lighter with more energy and youth to it. But it's still a striking space."

These design sensibilities chime with the overall proposition of the restaurant. Vietnamese food is often tipped as The Next Big Thing but - with the notable exception of five-strong street-food outfit

Pho - Vietnamese restaurants in the UK tend to be cheap and cheerful, serving basic food (often with unwelcome Chinese influences) in underwhelming, café-like surroundings.

In London, high-quality Chinese and Japanese food is offered in glamorous, trendy spaces - think Hakkasan, Nobu, Zuma and Sake no Hana - but this is yet to happen to Vietnamese food. The key USP of Cây Tre Soho will be the authentic, high-quality food and the contemporary surroundings.

The PR strategy is subtle, not the carpet-bomb approach used for some major openings. The aim is to engage a select group of bloggers and journalists to get a buzz going in the right circles, playing on the skill of the kitchen, the authenticity of the food and the trendy contemporary surroundings.

About three weeks after the menu tasting we walk through the door at Cây Tre Soho. It's the second night of the soft opening (50% off food) and the smell of fresh paint and a busy kitchen is in the air. The softly, softly PR approach has paid off, the space - every bit as clean and contemporary as Archer described - is heaving and the occasional camera flash indicates the presence of bloggers. The menus are, incidentally, single-sheet placemats with a vivid floral print.

Trung Bui is on the floor. There are a few teething problems with the service, but this is what soft openings are for and, judging by the beatific smile on his face, the opening of Cây Tre Soho should be marked down as a resounding success. ■