

# CONCORD MUSIC HALL

DECEMBER 6TH



**NETSKY**

12.07 • THE GHOST INSIDE  
EVERY TIME I DIE

DECEMBER 10TH



**GOAPELE**

12.12 • DIGITAL TAPE MACHINE

DECEMBER 13TH



**KEYS N KRATES**  
WITH LINDSAY LOWEND

12.14 • TYLER THE CREATOR

12.26 • THE DISCO BISCUITS (NIGHT ONE)  
W/ MODERN MEASURE

12.27 • THE DISCO BISCUITS (NIGHT TWO)  
W/ COSBY SWEATER

01.10 • G-EASY

JANUARY 17TH



**LUCERO**  
W/ THE SADIES - CBB FEST

01.31 • BORGEOUS

02.06 • GALACTIC

02.07 • BORGORE

02.14 • CHERUB

02.20 • DATSIK

02.21 • DATSIK

02.28 • THE FLOOZIES

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SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION

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eat & drink

Honey-grilled pork  
banh mi at Lotus Cafe  
HILARY HIGGINS PHOTO FOR REDEYE

WORTH A TRIP

## BANH MI

Lotus Cafe 719 W. Maxwell St. 312-733-7585

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

How many civil engineers does it take to build a great Vietnamese sandwich? Judging by the excellent banh mi served at Lotus Cafe in University Village, the answer is at least one.

It also apparently takes a biologist, too. While earning their degrees at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Kim Dao (a biologist/nutritionist) and Dao Nguyen (the civil engineer), who now are married, felt there weren't a lot of great cheap and fresh food options available near the school. "After we graduated, we didn't know what to do. The job market was just OK. We had a hard time as students finding food in the area, so after a couple months we said, 'Hey, let's open a restaurant,'" Dao said.

Though Dao and Nguyen were inspired to open a restaurant serving modern versions of the Vietnamese cuisine they grew up with, they had no restaurant experience. "We loved to eat, so we thought we could do this," Dao said. "But, it turned out to be much harder than we expected." What they didn't know, they tried to make up for by traveling and eating and developing menus from the flavors that inspired them along the way. Dao said recipe development took more than a year, and even then, the menu they launched in September 2012 only contained about half the ideas they developed. During that year, Dao also worked at some of the best Vietnamese spots in Chicago, including Nhu Lan, Ba Le and Saigon Sisters, picking up tips along the way.

She studied well. The honey-grilled pork banh mi (\$6.45) is one of the very best I've had in Chicago. The baguette used at Lotus is crusty and wafts a fresh yeasty perfume with

every bite. Because it rivaled the bread served at Nhu Lan, one of my favorite Vietnamese sandwich makers in town, I swore the stuff must have been made in-house. Dao said they had hoped to bake their own bread, but that they didn't have enough experience or room to install the oven system capable to produce the amount of bread they'd need. Instead they get loaves custom-baked by local bakery Biondillo and toast each sandwich roll to order. What gave Lotus the edge over Nhu Lan was the high-quality of the grilled pork shoulder inside the sandwich. It was tender, caramelized and coated in a sweet, bright and garlicky glaze of honey and lemongrass. The jalapeno, cilantro and cucumber salad topping the whole sandwich also was crisp and refreshing.

In addition to the banh mi, the goi cuon (aka spring rolls, \$6.95) also are some of the fresher ones I've eaten in the city. The wrappers are crisp, not gummy, and the shrimp inside are plump, butterflied and fresh. The kicker is the killer peanut dipping sauce that's spiked with a bright, sweet pineapple juice.

Dao and Nguyen have plans to one day open up a quick-service Vietnamese noodle shop based on the Chipotle model. Despite their success at Lotus, Dao said she and her husband still have a few tough critics to win over. "When we first started out, both of our parents thought we were wasting our degrees," she said. "I think my mom has come around, but my husband's parents still aren't convinced this is a good idea."

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.  
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