

eat&amp;drink

Bowl of pho with meatballs, flank steak, scallions, basil, cilantro and beef broth at Fuh  
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

# FAST PHO

FUH BRINGS BUILD-YOUR-OWN PHO TO LINCOLN PARK



By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

“The Chipotle of ...” is quickly becoming a ubiquitous phrase used by food entrepreneurs. What it usually means is the chefs or business people behind the venture have so many stars and dollar signs blocking their eyes in the quest to become a fast-casual sensation by serving quick versions of international foods that they forget the food actually has to taste good.

To the credit of Quan Dao, owner of Fuh in Lincoln Park, a new build-your-own pho (traditional Vietnamese noodle soup) shop, he never uttered that phrase. His goal, as he put it, was “to make a really exciting, accessible Vietnamese food experience that is an extension of the hospitality and soul of me and our business partners. We’re Vietnamese, but American born and raised. The restaurant reflects that.” He added, “My American friends are sometimes intimidated to go up to Argyle [Street] for pho. They always ask, ‘Can you come with us to be our translator?’ This place is for them.” I stopped in recently to see if Fuh would be a watered-down version for pho newbies or a quick, reasonably priced watering hole for excellent soup.

## The owner

Dao grew up working in his parents’ restaurant, the French-skewing Edgewater Beach Cafe located in the pink high-rise known as the Edgewater Beach Apartments that tower over Lake Shore Drive near Sheridan Road on the far North Side. “I’ve been washing dishes since I was 5 years old so I could buy comic books,” he said, laughing. Having grown up in the restaurant industry, Dao worked tirelessly to get Fuh’s soup recipe right. “We went through hundreds of gallons of soup and flavor combinations,” he said. “I have a cousin who runs 10 pho shops. He heard I was cooking the broth for 12 hours, and he said, ‘You want me to show you how to make a broth in an hour?’ We tried. It was watery, and it only worked for my cousin because he fortifies with beef broth. I wanted intense flavor and I didn’t want to use MSG, so I stuck with the slow method.”

## The scene and service

Fuh does feel a little like Chipotle, but only the best parts. Outfitted with chocolate-colored reclaimed woods, exposed brick and red lacquer metal stools, Fuh’s dining room is much cooler and more mod than the bland industrial-chic rooms of Chipotle. Fuh’s counter servers are intensely friendly and guide you through the process of building a bowl. Just like you would pick tacos, a burrito or a salad bowl

### MINI-REVIEW Fuh

2218 N. Lincoln Ave.  
773-270-4418

★★★★★  
Heating up

RATINGS KEY ★★☆☆ DEAD UPON ARRIVAL ★★☆☆ PROCEED WITH CAUTION ★★☆☆ GIVE IT SOME TIME  
★★☆☆ TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ★★☆☆ OFF TO A GOOD START ★★☆☆ HEATING UP ★★☆☆ ALREADY HOT



Spring rolls



Asian churros



at Chipotle, you choose noodles or a slaw salad as a base at Fuh. From there, you select additions from an assortment of meats, vegetables and garnishes and finally choose a broth or no broth to finish the bowl. It could get confusing, especially if it's your first time, but the employees all seem to have a secret combo they share, something Dao said he hopes to formalize as set dishes on the menu at some point.

### The food

The only real concession to newbies Dao has made is not offering traditional pho meats such as tendon or honeycomb tripe. But even that won't be for long. "I plan on having tripe and tendon under the counter as a secret menu for people in the know," he said. It doesn't matter much, for the braised beef shoulder, tendon meatballs and rare flank steak on offer are perfect. The meats are roasted separately, not cooked in the broth, and have great integrity and intense flavor. You don't miss the odd bits. If you're a

vegetarian, there's a hearty mushroom blend available instead.

I went with a combo of flank steak, meatballs, bean sprouts, mint, basil, pickled carrots, culantro (a spicy herb similar to cilantro), and fried garlic and shallot topped with that 12-hour braised beef broth (\$8.95 for one meat, \$2 more for extra beef). The broth itself was speckled with lip-smacking fat; wafted a heady brew of star anise, cinnamon, ginger and onion; and finished with a sweet balance imparted by traditional Asian rock sugar. I'd rate the broth up there with my favorite Argyle Street stock from Pho 888, which gets the nod because it's slightly thicker and has a touch more body, but the two are very close.

I also tried a simple noodle bowl (\$8.95) sans broth, fortified with the aforementioned mushrooms. The mushrooms were hearty and earthy, and the noodles were springy and fresh. The best part is that Fuh has a condiment bar where you can toss the contents of the bowl with your choice of housemade

sauses including a bright acidic Fuji apple ginger sauce and a salty-sweet, soy-ginger honey blend. As a condiment-loving freak, my heart was aflutter. If no one was looking, I might have stolen one of the plastic squeeze bottles of the ginger applesauce. I've done it before! (Sorry, Pecking Order, your banana ketchup was so good.)

The rest of the menu is short and focused. The housemade, fried-to-order egg rolls (\$3.95 for two) are crackling and stuffed with a crisp bounty of carrots, cabbage, taro, onions and bean thread noodle. The shrimp spring rolls (\$2.50), complemented by a salty, velvety coconut milk-and-peanut dipping sauce, were vibrant and exploded with refreshing bursts of mint. My only quibble is the wrappers were a little gummier than others I've had at some places on Argyle Street.

### Coffee and dessert

Three words for you: deep-fried dough. Fuh's Asian churros (\$2.99) feature airy layers of pastry drizzled with condensed milk, honey

and chocolate and are dusted with cinnamon and sugar. They're like a mesmerizing long john version of a cronut.

Fuh offers a great complement to the churros with their iced Vietnamese coffee (\$3.50) made with cold Trung Nguyen robusta coffee beans that are slow-roasted and fortified with butter and cacao. It drinks like the ultimate iced mocha, a perfect mix of bitter and sweet. I liked it so much I ordered a second cup to go.

### Bottom line

For those who love Vietnamese beef noodle soup and customizing their garnishes and don't want to sit down for a long meal, Fuh hits all the right notes. If you just need a quick java jolt or to sate a sweet tooth, the coffee and Asian churros are worth the trip alone.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@REDEYECICAGO.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK