



# diningout

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# A MIXED BAG

## Too many cooks disrupt the culinary kingdom at Pasteur



The papaya salad features thick white nubs of tender shrimp and crisp slices of green papaya bursting with a yin-yang of fish sauce and lime and microbursts of mint. | SCOTT STEWART - SUNTIMES

If you've ever wondered what it's like to dine like a dictator or an imperial ruler, then the newly reopened, upscale French-Vietnamese Pasteur in Edgewater is probably just the ticket.

That is to say the imperious tend to dig ridiculous opulence. The newly remodeled dining room at Pasteur, featuring chocolate-colored highback banquettes, huge wrought metal globe chandeliers and paneled wainscoting, is a swank respite from the traffic exhaust, street-corner hustlers and madness outside on Broadway. The adjoining private white-on-white dining room filled with white leather chairs and a column outfitted with birch branch tendrils is like something out of a Disney fantasy about a snow queen.

And though it's early spring, Pasteur's rattan dining chairs, grove of potted palms and shiny slowly undulating ceiling fans conjure a sweltering Hanoi afternoon.

A good dictator also appreciates obedient quick service. Pasteur sorts has that down. Our waiter who forgets to bring shared plates during certain course and silverware for our dessert is a little absent-minded and would likely be thrown in a stone dungeon in a particularly capricious regime. However, owner Kim Nguyen is an incredibly gracious host. She notices our table's slight wobble and shores it up with another. She stops by to discuss the restaurant's signature Co Kho To or claypot catfish and the best way to serve it. She also directs us to an incredible ginger tea for our dessert course.

Like the service, the cuisine is also a little schizotypic. Pasteur employs a Vietnamese chef, Amy's ex-husband and original Pasteur chef Dan Nguyen, and also a traditional French chef, Eric Aubriot

(formerly Aubriot, Toumessed and a whole host of others). Because of the French colonial rule in Vietnam, indulging in both cuisines is not a stretch. However, at Pasteur, there is no gentle fusion of the two approaches, but rather a very distinct line of confusion.

Aubriot's dishes such as seared duck breast with bacon, pearled octopus, succulent balsamic sauce, or escargot with parsley sauce, are slightly twisted, but fairly classical French bistro/brasserie standards and are starkly different from Nguyen's nuanced, bright and spicy gourmet versions of Vietnamese classics.

As this is the umpteenth incarnation of Pasteur in the last 20 years, I suspect the Nguyens felt as though they needed to cater to the more affluent destination diners or Edgewater residents who might be intimidated by Chef Dan's Vietnamese dishes, to ensure success.

Unfortunately, Aubriot, who was once a very great chef, has become a culinary mercenary, working in restaurants for a few months and then moving on to the next paycheck somewhere else. He doesn't hold up his end at Pasteur. His fishy-smelling sautéed scallops feature mushy tasteless apples, barely cooked, dusty-hard lentils and a parsimony of balsamic reduction. The seared duck breast is a chewy, desiccated mess. His bread pudding is too dense and has almost no custard. His foie gras, featuring a red grape port reduction that tastes like a foie fat-infused berry pie, is incredible, but up against Chef Nguyen's star anise-perfumed pho and curried beef, it's also ridiculously out of context (as if Chipotle started serving sweetbread burritos). You shouldn't try to be all things to all people.

Chef Nguyen's food, when it's on, still proves to be some of the best Vietnamese around. The aforementioned Pho Bo features a silky deep broth on par with my favorite at Pho 888 on Argyle. The well-trimmed, tender bits of rare eye-of-round and brisket are the highest quality (i.e. not rimmed with fat and chewy connective tissue) slices of beef I've



ABOVE: For dessert, try the Vietnamese fried bananas with green tea cream drizzled with strawberry and chocolate sauces.



LEFT: The Pho Bo is one of the best in Chicago. It features a silky deep broth with well-trimmed, tender bits of rare eye-of-round and brisket.



BELOW: The delicious foie gras boasts a red grape port reduction. | SCOTT STEWART - SUNTIMES PHOTOS

ever had in a local bowl of Pho. And priced at \$5 for a huge bowl, it's totally in line with what's served at the more informal storefronts.

His papaya salad features thick white nubs of tender shrimp and crisp shivers of green papaya bursting with a yin-yang of fish sauce and lime and microbursts of mint. It's easily the second-best papaya salad I've had in Chicago after Next Restaurant's version during their temporary Thai menu. Nguyen's Bo Xao Lan, or tender shards of curry beef sautéed with mushroom and baby okra, wafts mesmerizing waves of kafir lime.

Even when Nguyen's execution is less than stellar, the flavors are incredible. His sautéed clay pot catfish is flaky and spicy. My only issue is that the very excellent deep caramel glaze pools at the very bottom of the pot and is tough to fish out. Glazing the fillets themselves might be a better approach.

Thick smoky grilled Japanese eggplant dotted with a confetti of shrimp, scallion, sweet pepper and lime sauce is like the satisfying spicy-sweet vegetarian answer to a carnivore's ruddy steak. Unfortunately, some of the eggplant is raw in the middle.

But those are minor quibbles. I assumed I'd have a major one with Pasteur's deep-fried bananas with green tea ice cream drizzled with strawberry and chocolate sauce. I expected the green tea ice cream to be tannic and bitter and overpower the dish, but instead, the ice cream was slightly herbal, and incredibly smooth and sweet. It is the Vietnamese answer, and a much better one I might add, to the American banana split.

Ultimately, the big problem at Pasteur is that there are too many cooks in the kitchen. The Nguyens would be wise to take a page out of the dictatorial playbook and send Aubriot and the whole incongruous, middling, French bistro fare packing. If they do that, I expect they will reign supreme.

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