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FOOD

BY TODD SOUTH



Clams in black bean sauce were tossed with cooked celery, red bell pepper and onion.
PHOTO/TODD SOUTH

Pho real

Following an afternoon Discovery

Museum excursion with the kids on a blustery day, my family group decided to warm up with a visit to Pho Cali in the heart of downtown Reno. The menu is large, including plenty of Chinese and other Asian dishes alongside Vietnamese goodies. Following a lengthy bit of menu consideration, we finally settled on a game plan.

Although there are plenty of appetizers to choose from, everyone always wants to start off with fresh spring rolls when eating Vietnamese or Thai. We chose the combo pork and shrimp rice paper rolls (\$6.25), stuffed with plenty of mint, cilantro, vermicelli and lettuce, with a decent peanut sauce for dunking. My grandson loved the “peanut butter” on his “cold burrito.”

The rolls were followed by orders of grilled mussels (\$12.25) and clams in black bean sauce (\$13.95), both exceptionally good. The mussels were sprinkled with chopped peanut and minced, sautéed celery, carrot and scallion, garnished with lime wedges and sprigs of long-leaf Vietnamese coriander. The flavor of the meat was very present—with perhaps a hint of fish sauce—and not a bit dry. Tossed with perfectly cooked celery, red bell pepper and onion in their sauce of garlic, ginger, scallion and fermented black soybean, there were plenty of clams to share around the table.

Often when I see *banh mi* on the appetizer menu, I expect something small enough you might enjoy it with soup. That’s not the case with Pho Cali’s big-ass grilled beef sandwich (\$6.25), featuring ample amounts of fresh veggies and tender meat in a rich sauce with a little kick. The housemade, crusty roll filled the plate. However, it was reminiscent of the “unfortunate burrito syndrome;” i.e., one

bite is sour cream, another is guac, and—oh wait—there’s the cheese. The sandwich ingredients were added in succession from the seam of the roll outward—instead of layered atop each other—and you couldn’t really get all the goods into one bite.

A cold noodle bowl (\$8.95) of vermicelli, grilled pork, shredded lettuce, mint leaf, bean sprout, pickled carrot and chopped peanut was lightly seasoned with sweet vinegar fish sauce. It was tasty, though the noodles were ice cold rather than the more usual room temperature. A plate of seafood fried rice (\$10.50) with shrimp, shrimp patty, squid, peas, carrot, corn, green bean, scallion and cilantro was hot, satisfying and didn’t require additional seasoning. We had asked for another rice dish, but instead received two plates of the same thing. It was good enough we just shrugged and rolled with it.

Rice noodle chicken soup (\$9.25, large) was simple, yet full of tender breast meat and al dente broccoli. My go-to *pho dac biet* (\$9.25, small) didn’t disappoint, the vermicelli combined with medium rare steak, flank, brisket, tendon, tripe and meatball in a flavorful broth, to which I added plenty of bean sprout, Thai basil, lime and a bit of jalapeño.

As good as my beefy pho was, I suffered a bit of envy over a bowl of wonton soup (\$11.25). Yeah, there were plenty of meaty dumplings, but they were overshadowed by a flurry of shrimp, squid, shrimp patty, chicken, grilled pork, zucchini, carrot, cabbage, broccoli, scallion, celery, mushroom and peapods. The broth was a little bland, but the meats and veggies were great. With the side items, it was just the thing for a chilly autumn evening. □

Pho Cali

440 N. Virginia St., 470-8272

Pho Cali is open Wednesday through Monday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.