

A Steaming Bowl of Pho Kim's Meal-in-One Soup Hits the Spot

By DOMENICA MARCHETTI
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On cold and rainy days and nights, such as we've been having of late, nothing beats a bowl of *pho*, Vietnam's treasured beef and noodle soup.

Lucky for us, there are lots of places to get this mainstay of Vietnamese noodle shops, some better than others. My current favorite is a small unassuming restaurant in the Rose Hill shopping center in Alexandria (technically, the Alexandria section of Fairfax County).

Pho Kim, named for Kim Nguyen, who owns the restaurant with her husband, Lam Nguyen, serves 17 variations of the soup, each as good as the next. For those who are unfamiliar with *pho* (pronounced *fu*), it can be heavenly when done well. The soup consists of a light, fragrant broth ladled over a nest of steamed rice noodles and thinly sliced beef, garnished with cilantro and sliced onions. Served alongside are additional garnishes of bean sprouts, fresh basil leaves, sliced chili peppers and lime wedges. It's up to you to toss onto your soup as much or as little of these as you like.

The magical thing about *pho* is that it gets more delicious with each bite as the broth absorbs the flavors of the meat, herbs and other garnishes. *Pho* devotees, including the Nguyens, extol its virtues as a nutritious, wholesome meal-in-one that manages to be light and filling at the same time. "It makes you feel full, but it doesn't make your stomach feel heavy," said Lam Nguyen.

The dish's variations are in the cuts of meat and other ingredients served with the soup—eye of round, flank steak, brisket, soft tendon, tripe or meatballs made with soft tendon, giving them a pleasant chewy texture. Like many *pho* noodle shops, Pho Kim also offers a version with chicken and one with shrimp.

Most non-Vietnamese customers steer clear of the variations with soft tendon and tripe, Lam Nguyen says, preferring the more familiar combination of eye



Virginia Shih, 6, of Alexandria wrestles with the noodles in her Vietnamese soup at Pho Kim.

round steak and well-done brisket in *pho tai chin*. But, he adds, intrepid diners who have tried the combinations with tendon or tripe have usually not been disappointed.

There is one *pho* variation at Pho Kim that you won't find elsewhere, the

Nguyens say: *pho saté*, a recipe created by Kim Nguyen's mother. The soup has less broth, but it's more robust—deeper in flavor, reddish in color and spiked with curry and spices, with garnishes of cucumber, tomato and crushed peanuts. Pho Kim, which opened in July 2001,



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE K. KUYKENDAL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Pho, above, is served with bean sprouts, chilies, lime and basil. Egg rolls and lemon grass chicken, below, are also on the menu.



is the Nguyens' first foray into the restaurant business. Lam Nguyen was a computer programmer, and Kim Nguyen worked in customer service.

"We got tired of working," Kim Nguyen joked, noting that she and her husband still have not figured out how to squeeze in vacation time in their new roles as restaurant owners. They sought advice from friends and family before opening, and they continue to seek the advice of their regular customers.

In fact, in spite of its Vietnamese menu, Pho Kim has the feel of a small-town American diner, with blue laminate-topped tables and a pay-at-the-register policy. The Nguyens are on a first-name basis with many of their customers, mostly people who live and work in the area, and Lam Nguyen estimates that 90 percent of them return.

It was customers, he says, who suggested that Pho Kim add some non-soup items to its menu, saying they wanted some other choices for the summer months. So the restaurant recently added a few new dishes: grilled lemon grass chicken, grilled pork and grilled shrimp, all served over noodles or rice. For appetizers, there are fried egg rolls, rolled tight as cigars, and steamed, chilled spring rolls stuffed with lettuce, rice noodles and minced meat.

Pho Kim also offers some intriguing beverages, including a sweet-sour drink made with club soda and salt-preserved lemons and a similar one made with salt-preserved plums.

For something a little more indulgent, try the iced coffee with condensed milk, which is brewed right in your glass through a little single-serve drip gadget. It's the perfect chaser to that wholesome bowl of *pho*.

Got a restaurant recommendation?
E-mail Domenica Marchetti at dfm1@verizon.net.

Pho Kim

- **Address:** 6050-C Rose Hill Dr., Alexandria.
- **Phone:** 703-719-6200.
- **Hours:** 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Friday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday.
- **Prices:** \$2.50 for appetizers; \$4.65-\$7.95 for *pho* and entrees; \$1.75-\$2.25 for desserts; 50-cent surcharge per carryout item.
- **Payment:** All major credit cards accepted.
- **Atmosphere:** Casual.
- **Parking:** Lot parking available.



Lam, left, and Kim Nguyen, owners of Pho Kim, talk with customer Pat Haynes at the restaurant in the Alexandria section of Fairfax.