

Secret recipes: Minh Nguyen and wife Nui Chaichanachimplee and (inset) summer rolls
Pictures: Justin Lloyd

EAT OUT **best**

restaurant

XAGE

333 Crown St, Surry Hills; 9332 3344

Food: Vietnamese

Drink: BYO

Dress: Casual

Expect to pay: \$25 (two courses)

Vibe: Cramped and minimalist but open-plan dining, timber walls and tables of recycled fence posts contribute charm

Getting there: Short walk from Central station; buses service the area and there is metered street parking

WHEN Minh Nguyen opened Xage (pronounced "sage") in December it was compared unfavourably with (no relation) Luke Nguyen's Red Lantern.

That review irked Minh. In his view comparing casual Xage with up-market Red Lantern was likening apples with oranges. And he insists that three months down the track Xage is better than in its opening week.

Red Lantern is wonderful but

entrees can cost \$25 with mains up to \$38, while at Xage most starters are less than \$10 and all mains under \$20.

We started with red chicken skewers (\$7.50) and two varieties of summer (rice paper) rolls: lemongrass chicken (\$7.90) and duck fillet (\$10).

The rolls, served cold with a slick of hoisin/peanut sauce, were good, but not as brilliant as the red chicken. Two skewers, each with three pieces of the most flavoursome, tender chicken imaginable, came with a dip made from fish sauce, garlic and chilli. At \$7.50 this dish should be an obligatory order for every table.

Minh was reluctant to reveal the secret behind the red chicken, saying: "It's my mum Tuyet's recipe and she would kill me if I gave it away." A vital ingredient though is a Chinese red spice powder made with sweet chilli paprika.

Our table shared Xage's signature mains, caramelised pork belly and



beef curry with soft lotus root (both slow-cooked and \$16.90) along with grilled barramundi fillet (\$18.90).

Much of Xage's menu focuses on central (spices and seasoning-accented) and southern (French, Cambodian and Thai influenced) Vietnamese cooking. But the barramundi, with its pungent herbs, including dill and turmeric, was a nod to the north.

Slow-cooked dishes are rare in Vietnamese restaurants but that's what Nguyen cooks at home. We enjoyed the beef but liked the tangy fish even better. And an accompanying duck papaya salad (\$17.90) with a basil, chilli and peanut dressing, almost stole the show.

Xage has opened for light lunches at weekends, serving noodles, curries, soups, rolls and salads for \$10 per dish.

Verdict: Stools instead of chairs decree this is designed for a quick fix, not prolonged dining. But the food is plentiful, good and terrific value.

Jeff Collinson