



TERRY DURACK RESTAURANT REVIEW

Duck in for cheap 'n' chic

Groucho Marx famously refused to belong to any club that would have him as a member.

Conversely, I insist on going to any restaurant I can't get into.

So when I first saw this relatively new and modern Surry Hills Vietnamese heaving with a young, lively crowd, I immediately wanted to have what they were having.

It was completely booked out. On a Monday night. In Surry Hills. Good grief.

Now I'm back to see what the fuss is about and it's staring me in the face. Red chicken nem nuong skewers with nuoc cham, \$7.50. Duck fillet summer rolls, \$10. Ginger soy chicken with asian greens, \$15.90. Yellow curry of chicken with hot mint and sweet dried shrimp, \$16.90.

The most expensive dish on the menu is \$18.90. In the past few weeks of dining around Sydney I've not only left a tip higher than that, I've avoided a supplement of \$115

for rock lobster, paid \$12 for a green salad that wouldn't feed a rabbit and \$15 for a glass of wine.

Xage (pronounced "sage"), sits comfortably perched on an open terrace under a contemporary residential block with long share tables open to the street and a small kitchen popping with bright lights at the back. Owner, chef and self-taught cook Minh Nguyen (no relation to Red Lantern's Luke Nguyen) has put together a simple menu of home-style dishes that can be cooked without too much fuss. They range from six different "summer rolls" to sprightly salads, stir-fries, curries and stews.

So what do you get for your money, apart from a smiling waiter who brings menus and iced water without having to be asked? You get three tightly wrapped duck fillet banh xeo summer rolls (\$10) that are heavy on the lettuce, light on the duck. Cut in half and stood on end, they look as if they have grown out of the plate. As with most goi



On a roll ... Xage in Surry Hills serves down-to-earth, home-style cooking. Photo: Quentin Jones

cuon, it's a bit like eating a rubber glove and they need a good dunking into the hoisin, peanut and chilli sauce, when they become more like eating an interesting rubber glove.

Next are nem nuong (\$7.50), cute little deep-fried chicken patties as finely minced as chinese fishballs. They don't look much but taste good and juicy. Again, doctoring with sauce helps – this time with a sweet/sharp/hot nuoc cham of fish sauce, lime, chilli and sugar.

Bun bo xao, a southern Vietnamese salad of beef rump with rice vermicelli (\$14.90), is a warm, choppy, messy mix of wok-tossed lemon grass beef served with a few lettuce leaves and slightly overcooked noodles.

It lacks finesse but it's filling. The dish of the night is a dark, swampy, caramelised Berkshire pork shoulder (\$16.60) slow-cooked in the kho style and freshened with a thatch of beanshoots, cress and red chilli.

The pork is rich, its layers of fat and meat clearly defined, and it gets carried along beautifully on a big, bold wave of caramelly sweet and savoury juices, without being as salty as the traditional version.

Now for a quick recap on what you don't pay for and don't get.

Xage

Address 333 Crown Street, Surry Hills, 9332 3344

Open Dinner daily
Unlicensed BYO (\$2pp)

Cost About \$60 for two (cash only)

12/20

You don't get Wagyu, crab, game, premium cuts or high-status ingredients. You don't get a wine list (BYO is \$2 a person).

You don't even get walls, although some sort of screen is mooted for the restaurant's first winter. Unless you're sitting on the street, you don't get a chair (just a stool) or a table to yourself (it's all share and care).

You don't get cloth napkins (paper only), fancy loos (one size fits all), credit card facilities (it's cash only) or great lighting (it's dim apart from the spider-like installation near the kitchen). You don't get desserts – they simply don't do them. Finish instead on lemon grass tea (\$2) straight from the teabag to you.

But you don't get any attitude, either, or any pretension. And you do, at least, get to make a booking,

rather than hang about waiting for a seat all night.

This is a good, honest little spot full of down-to-earth, home-style cooking and charming, can-do service; a more personal, next-gen interpretation of Vietnamese than you will find in Chinatown, Marrickville and points west. It's both cheap and chic, as Moschino might say.

In a world in which "cheap food" is increasingly being produced by means of genetically modified grains, intensively farmed poultry, frozen seafood and factory-processed, chemically tainted rubbish, we need to be careful what we wish for. We're all looking for a place that will give us a decent feed for not much money and allow us to feel good about going there. I think I just found one.

tdurack@smh.com.au

THE ONE DISH YOU MUST TRY

Caramelised slow-cooked Berkshire pork shoulder thit kho, \$16.90

