

# Silk has two winners that won't make you fat

by Tanya Barham

The former Pho Van Vietnamese Bistro is now called Silk, though the management hasn't changed, and the most popular menu items remain.

The décor is cleaner, with rope-wound mahogany chairs replacing the bamboo furniture and a "more tropical, more Vietnamese" look, according to assistant manager Ben Tan.

What has not changed is the balancing of flavor and nutrition typical of Vietnamese cuisine, which is shy on fat-laden ingredients such as oils and coconut milk, favoring colorful, fragrant, fresh vegetables and herbs, and makes judicious use of fried ingredients for flavor. Silk serves up seductively flavored dishes that, despite their decadent taste, are easy on the waistline.

Two of the restaurant's signature dishes are light on fat, packed with good carbs and full of complex flavors, aromas and textures. The *Goi Bap Chuoi* (banana blossom salad) is a beautifully festive plate. Like an artichoke, the banana blossom's outer leaves are often too tough to be eaten. Pho Van uses the burgundy shell of the blossom to cradle the tan, soft pink and yellow ribbon-like shreds of the blossom's interior, moist chicken breast, and a sprinkling of: grapefruit, julienned jicama and dark green *rau ram*.

*Rau ram*, also known as Vietnamese coriander, is a fresh herb. Along with a light fish sauce, honey and lime dressing, it gives the dish a strong taste of springtime. Hints of citrus are the first scent to greet your nose. Half an ounce of caramelized fried onion provides just the right amount of oil to balance the springtime taste of the dish and helps bind the unique blend of flavors. At only \$7, *Goi Bap Chuoi* makes a perfect health-minded lunch.

Ben returns to my table with a look of utter delight. Like a child presenting his most precious show-and-tell, he slowly unwraps a dark green banana leaf covering the *Ca Hap* (steamed sea bass). The filet is sprinkled with amber strands of fried and raw scallion. Beige underbellies of shitake mushrooms peer up from a honey-colored sauce. Hints of sesame oil and soy waft from the plate.



Manager Kim Van Mai with a "banana blossom salad."

I can understand Ben's enthusiasm as I savor the buttery consistency of the dish. Sea bass is white-colored fish; a lean member of the drum family. In this preparation, the flavors are so well-rounded that no one ingredient overwhelms. I note the gentlest suggestion of shitake, ginger and sesame oil. The dish is worthy of its \$21 price tag.

The *Ca Hap* is served with a cup of steamed rice. The restaurant gladly substitutes brown rice for the standard white upon request.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, more than half of Oregon residents are obese or overweight. If the World Health Organization has it right—"People's lifestyles and the conditions in which they live and work strongly influence their health"—we can thank Silk for sharing what the Vietnamese know about good health without asking us to give up what Northwest Portland foodies demand in flavor.

## Silk

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