

PROFILE | PHO BA LUU

SAIGON memories

BY MICHAEL L. JONES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN DRY

Saigon and Louisville are 9,000 miles apart, but Jessica Mach has found a way to merge the two cities. In July, she and partner Stewart Davis opened Pho Ba Luu at 1019 E. Main St., on the edge of the NuLu and Butchertown neighborhoods. Pho Ba Luu's menu is built around banh mi sandwiches and pho, a combination of broth, rice noodles ("bánh phỉ"), herbs and meat. Mach refers to this as "Vietnamese comfort food," and being around it every day makes her feel Louisville is a little closer to her homeland.



PHO BA LUU

1019 E. Main St.
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Pho Ba Luu owners
Jessica Mach and
Stewart Davis bring
Saigon street food
to NuLu with a little
touch of motherly love



"Shaken Beef" with jasmine rice

"My mother used to be a big cook because she had four children and was a stay-at-home mom," Mach remembered. "In Asia, they cook every meal. Nothing is frozen or canned, it's all fresh. I think I missed that."

Mach began working on the concept for Pho Ba Luu two years ago. In order to capture the flavors she remembered from childhood, she recruited her mother, who still lives in Saigon, to help her design the recipes. They wanted food that was as fast and fresh as that sold by Vietnamese street vendors. Pho Ba Luu's menu is split into six main categories: crispy rolls, spring rolls, pho, banh mi sandwiches, noodle bowls and rice bowls. Each category features vegetarian options. There is also an Asian cabbage salad that can be made with shrimp, chicken or tofu.

Mach was so grateful for her mother's input that she honored the elder woman with the restaurant's name: "Ba" is Vietnamese for "Mrs." and "Luu" is the family name of Mach's mother. "She cried when I told her the name of the restaurant," Mach said. "I liked it because it rhymes with Nulu and it describes where the food comes from. The name tells the story."

Pho Ba Luu is the first foray into the restaurant business for Mach and Davis, although they have extensive backgrounds in the hospitality industry. Davis, an Ohio native, held several positions with Hilton Hotels and Resorts. Mach received a degree in Hotel Management from Saigon University. She was managing a hotel in Vietnam until 1998 when she moved to Dallas, where she met Davis. The couple moved to Louisville after he took a job as direc-

tor of sales and marketing at the Seelbach Hotel.

The street food of Saigon

The idea for Pho Ba Luu grew out of the couple's travels. In Vietnam, banh mi sandwiches and pho are available on nearly every corner. Davis and Mach thought there might be a niche available for food that was healthy but could be served as quickly as fast food.

"We weren't worried about not having worked in a restaurant because both of us had managed hotels with restaurants in them," Mach explained. "When I was in Vietnam, I had to deal with the front of the house and coordinate with the restaurant for weddings and other special events. In the end it always comes down to customer service."

Mach, the managing partner, oversees the kitchen at Pho Ba Luu. She makes sure the recipes she and her mother designed are executed to perfection. The cooks at the restaurant chop vegetables three or four times a day to ensure all the ingredients are fresh. They also cook huge vats of pho broth every day. The goal at Pho Ba Luu is to maintain the quality of the Vietnamese street

(clockwise from top left) Tofu noodle bowl; a view from the beer garden into the restaurant; beef pho; the front dining room; the intimate bar; banh mi sandwich with house-made paté and house-baked French baguette.





vendors, but to use modern technology to do it on a grander scale.

"We have a 60-gallon jacketed steam kettle so we could make 60 gallons of pho at a time," Davis said. "We're boiling it 12, 14 or 16 hours at a time using about 90 pounds of beef bones. That's extracting everything out of the bones. If you did that in a bunch of different pots you'll be doing that all the time."

Throughout the time Mach spent designing the restaurant's menu, Davis was searching for a location and overseeing the build out. Pho Ba Luu is located on the former site of ABC Welding and Repair, a truck service station. Davis took advantage of some design elements left from the space's former life as a garage, while also rebuilding it from the inside out. He kept the two large openings where the service doors once sat, as well as the concrete blocks and steel beams from the garage. But he dug up the concrete floor to run new plumbing and electric lines throughout the building.

A functional and aesthetically pleasing place

Doing such an intense renovation allowed Davis to make sure the space was functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. The mechanical systems were moved so they would not be in the way of the guests or staff. The 2,300-square-foot dining room seats 74 guests and features an open kitchen and a bar made from reclaimed wood. The beer cooler was also placed on the outside patio, which seats an additional 50 people, with buried beer lines running to the bar.

(from top left) Grilled pork vermicelli noodle bowl; shrimp rice paper spring rolls; yellow chicken curry; seafood crispy rolls; "Ba Luu Rita" with lemongrass syrup.

"Even though it's an old building, all the finishes are brand new," Davis said. "It's probably better off than if we had to remodel a new restaurant."

Louisville has a sizable Vietnamese community and they have made an impact on the culinary scene. Vietnam Kitchen and Annie's Café are among the city's most popular restaurants. However, rather than viewing these other establishments as competition, Davis and Mach see them as an asset because they have already acclimated local diners to Vietnamese cuisine. What separates Pho Ba Luu from other Vietnamese restaurants is its emphasis on street food.

In just the short time it has been open, Pho Ba Luu has become a favorite hangout for residents of Nulu and Butchertown. The owners allow dogs on the patio which adds to the friendly neighborhood atmosphere, but Mach said it is the food that keeps guests coming back. Several people have vowed to eat their way through the menu, but a few dishes have already begun to separate themselves from the others. The restaurant's most popular dish by far has been the chicken curry rice bowl, a tender chicken breast and a variety of potatoes simmered in coconut milk with curry and other spices.

"I've literally seen two people lick their bowls after eating the chicken curry," Mach related. "The beef pho with rare steak and brisket is also very popular. The crispy rolls are something I'm proud of because I designed them myself."

Pho Ba Luu offers crispy rolls with seafood and pork and a vegetarian variety. The former features shrimp, pork, crab-meat, onions and vegetables, served with a fish sauce. The vegetarian crispy roll is stuffed with vegetables and tofu. It comes with soy sauce.

Another highlight at Pho Ba Luu is the homemade bread served with entrees. It is made daily. Mach said the combination of fresh bread baking and hot broth simmering draws in a lot of customers. Although she doesn't consider herself a chef, she thinks the kitchen fits her:

"When I worked in hotels, it was about making the customer comfortable," she said. "Running a restaurant is a little simpler, because I just have to worry about their stomachs. That open kitchen, with all those good smells, does half the work for me." **F&D**

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