

# Giving pho a new twist

Nam Quoc Nguyen, named most promising chef at the World Gourmet Summit, tells **GEOFFREY EU** how he has refined the dish

**I**T'S not often that one has the opportunity to sample *pho* — Vietnamese beef noodles — as part of a menu degustation in the elegant confines of a top French restaurant, but incongruous as it sounds, resident chef Nam Quoc Nguyen has pulled off a thrilling culinary feat with his just-introduced new menu, currently playing at The Lighthouse.

Of course, this is not just any old *pho* you might find on a street corner in Nha Trang (Chef Nam's hometown); this humble dish has been elevated to such a degree that while it retains its Vietnamese roots, it also takes on a refreshingly new and hitherto unknown dimension. Call it comfort food with a *pho*-bulous new twist.

The secret to this *pho*, which appears halfway through the menu degustation, lies within its refined and delicate, clean-tasting and consomme-like broth — the result of careful initial simmering with veal bones, oxtail and beef brisket, followed later by carrots, onions, garlic, star anise, cinnamon and a coriander infusion ("To give it that intensity," says Chef Nam).

Finally, add a few dashes of Thai fish sauce. Taken in combination with Thai rice noodles, slices of tender, raw beef and fresh herb garnishes, there is a definite temptation to ask for seconds before proceeding to the next dish.

"It's an everyday dish that people eat to get full — I just refined it a little," says Chef Nam, who watched his mother cook the popular dish at home and credits her with providing the basis of the recipe. Helping out in Mom's kitchen sounds normal enough,

but his career has actually been shaped out of unusual circumstances, from which he has developed his unique culinary identity.

At seven, he left his native South Vietnam in the wake of the communist takeover. Together with his parents and four siblings, he spent two months in transit in a Thai refugee camp waiting for documentation that would bring them to the US. Because of the appalling conditions in the camp, his father decided instead to accept relocation to the first country that would take in new refugees — a far-flung destination called Denmark.

"We didn't know anything about Denmark, except that it represented freedom," says Chef Nam. "It took many years for my mother to forgive him." The family settled about 250km from Copenhagen in the small town of Vejle in Jutland, where his mother opened the only Vietnamese restaurant in town.

He harboured ambitions of being an architect, but after a stint of military service — as a UN peacekeeper in Yugoslavia — he developed a passion for cooking. After qualifying from catering school, he served for a time at a grand hotel in Oslo, where he was part of an extensive team that served everyone from royalty to Nobel committee members. He later moved to Le Canard, a one-Michelin-star restaurant in town for a year before heading for New York's reputable Acquavit restaurant.

That was when fate intervened in the form of a regular customer who recommended that he focus his talents on Asia — specifically in a certain fine dining establishment in Singapore. So, after a nine-day trial period with the Les Arts group, he was offered



CHRIS LOVI

**Starring at The Lighthouse:** Chef Nam's cuisine is delicate, fresh, well balanced and impeccably clean-tasting

a position to open the latest restaurant in their portfolio: The Lighthouse.

Chef Nam says what he produces is based on modern European cuisine, but unlike some star chefs, he is not adamant that his clientele have to unconditionally accept what he offers.

"You cannot be blind in the kitchen," he says. "It's up to the customer to decide what good food is. All of us have different tastes, but the quality must be there. I'm still young (he turns 31 later this year), so I'm hoping for new ideas all the time."

There is little doubt that after stumbling a little initially, The Lighthouse is now firing gracefully on all cylinders, and there's ample evidence to be found in the restaurant's current menu. Despite having to contend with six courses, the portions are not overwhelming and diners are left with an impression of fare that is delicate, fresh, well balanced and impeccably clean-tasting. While

there is a definite Scandinavian sensibility to the food, it is also strongly influenced by a Viet-inspired love of fresh herbs and vegetables, and better still, there is a marked lack of heavy-handedness with the sauces.

He adds that although his cooking methods are founded on traditional French cuisine, "the food from my kitchen is different and interesting in taste". He may have journeyed a long way, both literally and figuratively, but he's happy to be part of such an exotic mix. It's more than enough to make diners sit up and take notice, and they obviously have — he was acknowledged as the year's Most Promising Chef at the recent World Gourmet Summit Awards.

Meanwhile, Chef Nam is eagerly awaiting a visit from his mother this summer. "Then you can try the real *pho*, not the copy one."

*The Lighthouse Restaurant, The Fullerton, 1 Fullerton Square, Singapore 049170, Tel: 6877-8932.*

## Cheese expert returns

THE man who treats his cheese like his personal friends is back in town — Gerard Poulard, cheese maitre'd from Montparnasse, is back for the 10th year running at Le Meridien's Cafe Georges until April 26.

The passionate cheese collector treks all over the French countryside to pick fresh and mature balls

of cow, goat and ewe cheese. Part of his appeal is his intimate knowledge of each cheese's origins and age, how best to enjoy them and what's right for each palate.

He has 206 varieties with him this time around and depending on your taste, he will be able to make recommendations and match wines to the cheese as well.