

DAILY BREEZE

ENTERTAINMENT

Restaurant review: At Pho Dreams in El Segundo, Vietnamese spring rolls bring a happy quiriness



Shaking Beef — Bo Luc Lac, served with rice, is one of the many specialties at Pho Dreams in El Segundo. (Photo by Merrill Shindler)
By [Merrill Shindler](#), *Daily Breeze*

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Shrimp roll with peanut sauce (Photo by Merrill Shindler)

PHO DREAMS

★ ★ ★

Address: 413 Main St., El Segundo.

Information: 310-648-8278.

Cuisine: Vietnamese.

When: Lunch and dinner, Monday through Saturday.

Details: Strong Vietnamese tea and coffee drinks. No reservations.

Prices: About \$15 per person.

Cards: MC, V.

Whimsy is not something we've come to expect at our local Vietnamese restaurants.

They're not exactly dour. But they do tend to be functional at best, with a minimum of decor and a maximum of efficiency.

In the case of the well-named Pho Dreams — the latest addition to the colorful assortment of ethnic options on El Segundo's lively Main Street — there's an undeniable edge of happy quirkiness.

It's not just the name, though it's clearly more cheery than most. But it's also the happy logo of a steaming bowl with chopsticks sticking out of it; the tasteful tile work around the counter; the fact that there's a counter at all, which is uncommon in pho shops; the bright hanging lights and wall decorations; and the big screen showing the game of the moment.

Sports bar meets spring rolls? That's different!

Add onto that the cheeriness of the staff and the pleasant chattiness of Peter the manager, who'll talk herbs and spices all you want, and you have a uniquely enjoyable Vietnamese eatery.

When I say talk herbs and spices, I also mean the laminated pages atop metal displays that go into the Vietnamese sense of flavor in great detail, getting downright Wikipedia-ish on "Rice Patty Herb — Ngo Om," "Sawtooth Herb — Ngo Gai" and "Vietnamese Crab Claw Herb — Rau Cang Cua."

This isn't so much a restaurant as it is an education. Though it's also a fine place in which to grab some fine spring rolls and a bowl of beef noodle soup. No matter how you approach it, it's all good.

Too many Vietnamese restaurants serve spring rolls that taste, well, tired, as if they'd been made early in the day and have been waiting hours to be ordered. At Pho Dreams, they taste freshly birthed, filled with moist greens, shrimp, pork and tofu, as you wish. They come with a peanut sauce so good, I finished it off with a spoon.

God is in the details, and the details at Pho Dreams are properly holy.

Consider for a moment a dish at the end of the menu, called "Shaking Beef — Bo Luc Lac." As with the herbs, there's some annotation here, explaining that "Luc Lac is merely a description for the 'shaking'; or tossing of the beef back and forth in the wok after it's quickly seared ... some restaurants serve it with sauteed onions, lettuce and rice (white or tomato paste), while others may present it more like a steak salad served on a bed of watercress and tomatoes, topped with pickled onions ..."

At Pho Dreams, you have a choice of remarkably tasty beef, tender as Kobe, served with white rice and fantastic caramelized onions, or with fried potatoes. On the side, unexpectedly, there's a bowl of the broth used for the pho dishes — so good, it can't be resisted. It's almost a beverage, a beef tea as it were, that goes perfectly with the beef and rice. It's a dish that soothes and calms. This is what food is all about.

The menu is sizable, though not overwhelming. The pho comes in a bestiary of permutations, the biggest of which is called "Pho Dream" — steak, shank, tripe, brisket, tendon and meatball. The pho is also served Hue style, which is a notch spicier, and packed with rice noodles, thick noodles and vermicelli noodles.

The noodles are stir-fried, while rice is steamed and fried, and tossed with many ingredients. Lemongrass is everywhere, which is not a problem; cilantro is standard.

I left Pho Dreams and found myself in the midst of the Main Street farmers market, which felt like a dream all in itself. Despite the market being in full swing, and the restaurants filling up, parking was still easy.

It was, indeed, a dream. For the moment, it's how El Segundo works; let's hope there's no rude awakening.

Merrill Shindler is a Los Angeles-based freelance dining critic. Send him email at mreats@aol.com.

WANT TO GO?

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