

NADINE EATS HAWAII

PUTTING 'DA BEST' TO THE TEST

STORY AND PHOTOS BY NADINE KAM

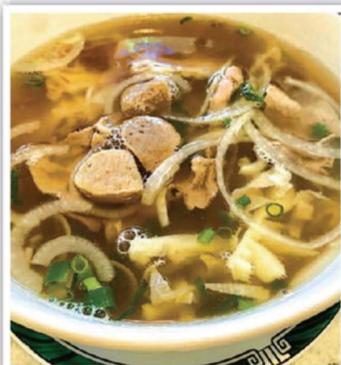
What's the first thing you do when a restaurant calls itself Da Best Pho Vietnamese Noodle House & BBQ? You gonna put the pho to the taste test, right?

In reality, the new restaurant in Market City Shopping Center is so much more than a simple pho palace. You can certainly start with the traditional Vietnamese noodle soup, but the menu is huge and calls for much more exploration. Given the ubiquity of pho around town, my news instinct always directs me to try something different.

After thumbing through the menu it was the bo boy mon, also known as "bo 7 mon" or seven courses of beef, that caught my eye.

I'd never seen it on any local Vietnamese menu before, though it's been a longtime traditional course meal at high-end restaurants in Vietnam. Here, it adds up to an affordable feat at \$39.99 for two. But without thinking about what that feast might entail, I went ahead and ordered the green papaya salad (\$15.99), an appetizer of crispy honey-garlic chicken wings (13.99), and an add-on of raw shrimp to accompany the beef fondue, or hot pot, that is part of the beef menu.

It turned out to be way



A combination beef bowl (\$10.99-\$13.99) is one of Da Best Pho's claim to "da Best!" title, with an aromatic chicken-infused broth.

too much food for two. The seven courses of beef alone would have been enough for three or four people. The feast started with a salad of lemon-marinated rare beef tossed with lettuce, basil, pickled vegetables, cucumbers and peanuts.

Even with two salads on the table, I had no regrets about ordering the green papaya salad, impressive in its size, including thin slices of pork for extra heft and packing a fair amount of chile pepper heat. It's not a salad for wimps.

Central to the meal is a



▲ Seven Courses of Beef

Beef fondue, or hot pot, is included in Da Best Pho's signature seven courses of beef (\$39.99). Shrimp can be added for an additional cost, but the meal for two is already filling without it.

combine them with the veggies provided. Before you fill up, remember that a sixth course is beef fondue, or what we know as a beef hot pot, which will be on its way and best consumed on the spot. Here, the raw beef is

(Right) A rice vermicelli bowl (\$14.99) is topped with barbecue pork and pounded shrimp. The pounded shrimp is a bouncy, steamed, fried fishcake made with sweetened pounded shrimp paste. Pair it with barbecue pork for a salty-sweet mix.



The centerpiece of the seven courses of beef menu is a platter of beef, vegetables and rice vermicelli noodles for rolling DIY summer rolls.

served in Southern Vietnamese style with a sweet-sour broth that lends enough flavor to the meat without using an accompanying sauce of fermented shrimp and pineapple. If you were to order beef fondue à la carte, the cost would be \$24.99; with beef and shrimp, \$27.99.

As fun and interactive as the meat tray and fondue are, the final dish of beef porridge brought a comforting closure to the meal. It might be described as the best you'll ever have, full of clean-tasting ground beef, with crispy dried onions and green onions adding their pungency to the mix.

I had to return another time for pho of rare steak and beefballs (\$10.99 small, \$13.99 large), but to be honest I couldn't tell you if it's the best pho on the island because I haven't been to

every Vietnamese restaurant. I can tell you I did enjoy the bold cinnamon note of the broth, along with its mellow sweetness.

Otherwise, I don't consider myself a pho connoisseur at all because I don't enjoy filling up on soup, so at Vietnamese restaurants I tend to order the cold vermicelli noodles for their lighter ambiance. There are a lot of protein options here including pan-fried ginger chicken (\$14.99), spicy lemongrass shrimp (\$15.99), and combinations such as spring rolls

and barbecue pork (\$14.99) and pounded shrimp with grilled meatballs (\$17.99). The pounded shrimp is a bouncy, steamed, fried fishcake made with sweetened pounded shrimp paste, and another favorite on Vietnamese menus that I paired with barbecue pork (\$16.99) for a mix of salty and sweet.

Desserts include taro tapioca (\$3.25) and banana tapioca (\$3.25) puddings, and drinks of strawberry or taro milk shakes (\$6.99 each) could easily work as dessert as well.

The restaurant makes a nice addition to the shopping center, which, in spite of its small size, offers quite a global mix of cuisines.

Da Best Pho Vietnamese Noodle House & BBQ
Market City Shopping Center
2319 Kapiolani Blvd., Honolulu

FOOD: ★★★★★
SERVICE: ★★★★★
AMBIANCE: ★★★★★
VALUE: ★★½

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RATINGS COMPARED TO SIMILAR RESTAURANTS:
★★★★ - EXCELLENT
★★★ - VERY GOOD
★★ - AVERAGE
★ - BELOW AVERAGE



Nadine Kam's restaurant visits are unannounced and paid for by *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*. Follow Nadine on Instagram (@nadinekam) or on YouTube (youtube.com/nadinekam).

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