

cheap eats

feeding frenzies with pocket change

By MICHAEL C. ZUSMAN

Mekong

Sellwood's diverse dining scene just got better by one with the recent opening of Mekong (subtitle, "A Vietnamese Grill"). A tight selection of simple Vietnamese standards is listed on a menu board behind the cash register where orders are placed. Once seated, you get a fix on the attractive room: some well-spaced tables, a long, sleek communal table, a wall lined with bamboo poles and a vertical rock garden. This is a first venture for the bro-and-sis owners, Tuan and Sarah Nguyen, but the clean, cool design elements are clearly the product of lengthy deliberation.

The chow: Spare selection of appetizers, salads, rice bowls and noodle bowls. A rotating cast of around 20 specials is supposed to surface soon. Favorites include the sesame short ribs – thin, cross-cut rib portions that benefit from a long marinade dunk and a quick trip across the grill (\$7.75); salad rolls of pork, shrimp, noodle and vegetables with the house peanut/plum sauce (two for \$3.50); and grilled Vietnamese sausage over vermicelli noodles with sprouts, mint, mildly pickled carrots and daikon and an unfortunately bland *nuoc cham* dipping sauce (\$7.50).

Real deals: Appetizers are in the \$3 range; entrees and salads are under \$8. Add a skewer of honey lemon grass chicken, pork or tofu or sesame beef for \$2.75.

Hangout factor: Though the room is pleasant, the set-up seems geared to fill 'em up and move 'em out.

Liquids: No booze and limited nonalcoholic choices. The Vietnamese iced coffee (\$2.50) delivers a sweet java jolt that makes you wish they gave you more for your money.

What's half-baked? The menu is too short to remain enticing over the long run.

Inside tips: Do-it-yourself flavor enhancement is available from squeeze bottles of plum/peanut, soy and spicy sriracha and chili sauces.

The numbers: 7952 S.E. 13th Ave., 503-808-9092; lunch and dinner daily.

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