



WAV MEKONG: A VIETNAMESE GRILL

Mekong brings clean cuisine to a 'hood hungry for Vietnamese fast food.

After 30 years, we can safely bid adieu to the unpleasant connotation of the word "Mekong," as in the Vietnam War's Mekong Delta. Now it represents a fresh, pared-down cuisine a notch up from Southeast Asian street food. Prepared and presented by brother and sister Tuan and Sarah Nguyen, Mekong serves quick-but-healthy takeout or dine-in fare along fast-gentrifying Southeast 13th Avenue, which also boasts a high-end cheese shop, a wine bar/shop, Grand Central Bakery and several popular Italian restaurants.

When Mekong opened in mid-September on Sellwood's Antique Row, it was swamped with customers lusting for simple Southeast Asian food. The staff could hardly keep up with a hungry neighborhood pleased to order at the counter, sans table service. Luckily, a larger kitchen staff has popped up to deal with the heavy weekend traffic.

The restaurant's appealing design (a bamboo-pole motif frames a big table that seats about 10) harmonizes with the clean, inexpensive food. About 30 diners can sit inside, with a few more fitting at sidewalk tables.

As refreshing and affordable as the choices are—nothing tops \$8.25 (garlic shrimp skewers

over vermicelli noodles)—the menu is limited. We've stopped in three times and exhausted almost all combinations.

Four to five rice or noodle entrees (\$7-\$8.25) are served with skewers or chunks of either honey-lemongrass chicken, sesame beef, garlic shrimp, pork or tofu. Choose fragrant jasmine rice dishes and you'll find fresh cucumber, lively-looking lettuce, chives, fresh tomatoes and housemade *nuoc cham*, a fish sauce jazzed up with vinegar, sugar, salt, fresh garlic and chili peppers.

Vermicelli entrees, served intentionally luke-warm to cool, come with a fresh little salad of lettuce, bean sprouts, cukes, slim-sliced carrots, daikon, mint and chopped peanuts.

Appetizers are predictable: crispy eggrolls with fish sauce or two fat salad rolls with a rich, plummy peanut sauce cost \$3.50. Tofu rolls, for 25 cents more, are also coupled with plum-peanut sauce. Wrapped tight, they sport a fresh scallion stem tucked into the rice paper.

The Nguyens are working on obtaining a liquor license. But for now, there's iced Vietnamese coffee with enough sweetened evaporated milk to keep you revved for the rest of the day. ANGELA ALLEN. *Mekong: A Vietnamese Grill*, 7952 SE 13th Ave., 808-9092. Lunch 11 am-3 pm, dinner 5-9 pm Monday-Saturday. \$ Inexpensive.