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Sao Mai and Xe May Sandwich Shop: Finally, Your Banh Mi Tacos

The East Village gets two new Vietnamese spots

By Lauren Shockey Wednesday, Feb 29 2012

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It was an auspicious beginning: a squat stack of culantro nestled against the branches of Thai basil and crisp bean sprouts on the herb plate accompanying my pho. It's rare to find the dark green, jagged leaves in Vietnamese restaurants in New York City, as most eateries substitute the blander and more ubiquitous cilantro. Yes, my meal at Sao Mai, a casual Vietnamese joint on First Avenue in the East Village, was off to a promising start.

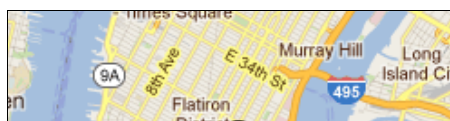
Unlike San José, Houston, and even the northern Virginia suburbs, the Big Apple isn't a hotbed of Vietnamese cuisine. Nevertheless, the brick-walled storefront marks a refreshing stop for flavorful—if standard—Southeast Asian fare. Begin by plopping down on the black banquette underneath the fake bamboo plants and slurping some soup. The classic beefy pho (\$9) comes showered with scallions and herbs and warms the gullet, but I actually preferred the more delicate chicken version (\$8). Yes, the broccoli and celery slices were odd choices and should be nixed, but the stock—garnished with fried onions—was rich, and the noodles retained a snappy



Lauren Shockey

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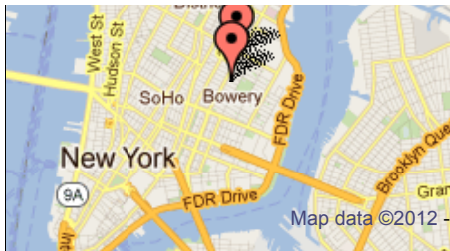
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bite. Canh chua (\$8), a tart tamarind broth accented with tomatoes and pineapple, works if you're looking for something spicier. Not quite as sour as other versions I've had but still a keeper.

Bánh cuốn, or steamed rice crepe (\$7), makes for a welcome change from the de rigueur summer roll. Minced pork and wood's ear mushrooms arrive wrapped in pliant rice paper, delicate and savory. Looking for something cool and crunchy? Go for the lotus-root salad (\$8.50)—though you might want to avoid the shrimp on top, which had an off-putting, muddy taste on one occasion. Or dive into the \$16 sampler plate for some DIY-wrapping action. It's chock-full of everything from barbecued shrimp and pork to pickled carrots to flat, woven noodle sheets and lettuce leaves.

Among the heftier plates, get down with the grilled chicken (\$12), super moist and singing with carbonized char. Or if you gave up meat for Lent, try the crispy, stuffed tofu on a bed of bok choy (\$10.50). Not everything's a winner, though. Skip the clay-pot dishes (\$10 to \$12), which feature a runny sauce overpowered by a glut of green bell peppers.

While Sao Mai dishes up the classics, the tiny Xe May Sandwich Shop, a few blocks away on St. Marks Place, is decidedly 21st century. With just four stools, it specializes in fusion banh mi, the popular baguette-based hoagies brimming with assorted cold cuts, pickled vegetables, and herbs. The sammies are quite good, especially the Super Cub Classic (\$6), which piles on headcheese, pork roll, and a livery pâté. The Lam'bretta (\$6.50)—which tucks thinly sliced lamb in a mild coconut-curry sauce into a soft, chewy loaf—works well, too, especially when paired with a cooling basil-limeade soda (\$2.50). But the most intriguing menu items? The banh mi tacos (\$2.50).



Xe May Sandwich Shop
 96 St. Marks Place
 New York, NY 10003
 Category: Restaurant >
 Region: East Village



Sao Mai
 201 1st Ave.
 New York, NY 10003
 Category: Restaurant > Vietnamese
 Region: East Village



Details

Sao Mai
 203 First Avenue
 212-358-8880
Xe May Sandwich Shop
 96 St. Marks Place
 212-388-1688, xemaysandwich.com

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Behold, the Banh Mi Taco



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Yes, you read that correctly. Less than a decade ago, the city went wild overnight for Vietnamese sandwiches. Then beginning in 2010, the Korean-taco craze migrated from [Southern California](#), and kimchi-spiked beef wrapped inside tortillas was all the rage. Now comes the apotheosis of culinary trendiness. In truth, these Mexicamese snacks don't work nearly as well as the sandwiches, mostly because the fillings are too dry for the corn disks. But it's an interesting glimpse into the fluidity among cuisines nowadays and the warp speed at which culinary fads evolve. And it's likely only the beginning. Spring roll manicotti, anyone?

lshockey@villagevoice.com

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