

restaurant **Madame Nhu, City**



Lunch with punch

Shop 5, Lower Ground, The Galleries Victoria, 500 George St, City; 9283 3355
Open: Daily 10am-5.30pm; dinner Thursdays only
Food: Vietnamese
Drink: Licensed & BYO wine
Expect to pay: \$20 (two courses)
Vibe: Bustling food court with five tiny indoor tables next to kitchen
Access: Through underground arcade from Town Hall station

We don't yet have something as thrilling as Singapore's Newton Circus but street stalls, known throughout Asia as hawker food, have become fashionable here. The latest is Minh Nguyen's Madame Nhu.

Two years ago Nguyen opened Xage in Surry Hills, describing its cuisine as Vietnamese home cooking. This is a nod to his homeland's hawker food.

I've yet to see a busier kitchen than Madame Nhu's where, on a wet Tuesday, seven chefs in a tiny



space accommodated an onslaught of lunchtime diners.

The small menu is headed pho, fresh rolls, grills and vermicelli dishes. Pho, the rich noodle soup usually accompanied by beef or chicken, is Vietnam's national dish: Madame Nhu offers seven versions.

Beef brisket (\$9.50) had deep, complex flavours, courtesy of herby broth and vermicelli noodles, but the meat was chewy. Stand-out dishes were sugarcane prawn (\$7.50) and grilled lemongrass squid (\$9.50). Twice-cooked prawn mousse was threaded on to a pair of

sugarcane sticks, which imparted an additional subtle flavour.

Nguyen's squid recreates a dish typical of Phu Quoc, an island 50km off Vietnam's mainland and famous for seafood. Slices of char-grilled tiny, tender squid came with a punchy nuoc cham dressing, house-made from fish sauce, lime and garlic.

Pork belly (\$10.50), gently caramelised, was more like the food at Xage but fresh rolls, served cold, made a neat palate cleanser. From a choice of four we tried pulled pork, slow-cooked with rice vermicelli and Asian herbs, along with honey-infused tofu. Good value, as each \$8.50 dish comprised three fat rolls.

As the sister-in-law of Vietnam's bachelor president, Ngo Dinh Diem, Madame Nhu, who died this year aged 86, assumed the role of Vietnam's first lady from 1955-63. I think she would approve of the modest eatery named in her honour.

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Cosy cuisine: Madame Nhu brings tasty Vietnamese cooking to the CBD with sugarcane prawns (inset)
Pictures: Bob Barker

