



Saigon Street Cart chef  
Bryson Fairlamb

# FULL MEAL SANDWICH

Saigon Street Cart brings a taste of Vietnam to the Whiteaker BY RICK LEVIN

When, in 1787, the French military came to the aid of Nguyen Anh in his efforts to reclaim territory lost to the Tay So'n, a long and tangled history of imperial intervention and colonial carpetbagging was unleashed upon that part of the globe now called Vietnam. And yet, as any anthropologist will tell you, it isn't only shrapnel that flies when societies collide; there is also assimilation, melding, brokering and borrowing, often leading to new and surprising cross-cultural pollinations. In the case of Vietnam and the legacy of French Indochina, there is at least one silver lining: That food is damn tasty. The French introduced bread baking to the Vietnamese, as well as pâtés and other comestibles, all of which local cooks made uniquely their own.

Local chef Bryson Fairlamb was turned on to Asian cuisine when he and his wife traveled to Thailand in 1999 and then again in 2000. A Eugene native who spent about a decade as an executive chef in Bend before returning home three years ago, Fairlamb recently opened Saigon Street Cart in the bustling Whiteaker district. Located between 2nd and 3rd on Van Buren, the cart opens five days a week between 11 am and 3 pm and specializes in *banh mi*, those baguette-style sandwiches that are in many ways the epitome of the Franco-Vietnamese fusion.

For Fairlamb, starting up a food cart was something of a lark, a combination of timing, know-how and good luck. "I'd seen a restaurant built from the ground up," he says. "I saw how hard it is, how expensive it could be. I just wanted to go the minimalist approach." When he spotted a used food cart for sale, he decided to dive in head first — a decision that was sweetened by the fact that a buddy of his owns the lot where he's set up shop. "I just kind of went for it," says Fairlamb.

While in Bend, Fairlamb worked under a chef with an Asian background. "I had free range to do all kinds of Asian specials," he says. His travels to Thailand only furthered his interest in the cuisine. "I just really got into it," he says. "I love the flavors of Southeast Asia," especially, he adds, the combinations of hot/sour and saucy/sweet that are its trademark.

As with many Eugene chefs these days, Fairlamb is punctilious about using organic, locally produced ingredients. He gets all his meats from Long's Meat Market, and he buys his French rolls from Sunrise Market, which ships in loafs from a traditional Vietnamese bakery in Portland. The bread is crucial. "It has to have a crispy, crunchy crust," Fairlamb says, "but yet be fluffy on the inside."

All of Saigon Street Cart's sandwiches, which run between \$5 and \$6, are garnished with pickled carrots and *do chua* (daikon radishes), sliced cucumber, cilantro, jalapeños and mayo. The hum-dinger is the "deli special," a savory, tangy sandwich that — along with tender, hoisin-glazed pork — includes layers of ham and country pate, which Fairlamb describes as "ghetto French pâté with Vietnamese flavors." It's these touches that put the sandwich, which is rich, savory and tangy, right over the top. It's exotic but unpretentious, and completely delicious.

Saigon Street Cart also offers lemongrass chicken (\$5) as well as sides of pate, chips and pickles for a buck each. Vegetarian options are available; Fairlamb says he's been extremely pleased with the Soy Curls product made in Salem, which he puts on bread with a homemade mushroom pate.

"My cooking philosophy has always been kind of family style food, something you'd eat at home," Fairlamb says. In this case, home is where the street cart is. ■

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