



BUN THIT NUONG
PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

All About the Fish Sauce

Bringing traditional Vietnamese cuisine to the streets of Eugene BY WILLIAM KENNEDY

Tam Howitt and her husband Heath Howitt say that to understand Vietnamese cuisine, you have to understand fish sauce. The pair recently opened Tam's Place Vietnamese Cuisine, a food truck located on 29th and Friendly in Eugene.

Fish sauce is made with fermented fish extract and sea salt. Different people use different ingredients to taste — for example, peppers to add a little heat. The Howitts add lime, giving their sauce a tangy bite.

On the appetizer menu, Tam's Place offers deep-fried fish-sauce chicken wings or tamarind chicken wings, dipped in the sweet-sour sauce made from the fruit of the tamarind tree (also known as the "Indian date"). To get

the full experience of seafood-heavy Vietnamese cuisine, order the fish-sauce wings.

Tam Howitt is inspired by tradition in Vietnamese food. She says her upbringing in Vietnam was full of simple food prepared at home: stir fries and rice. When she moved to Shanghai, with its multinational dining scene, her eyes were opened to the cuisine of her region. Relocating to America, she missed Vietnamese food and was disappointed in American cuisine: "Too much fat, not enough veggies," she says.

Tam Howitt taught herself how to make the traditional cuisine of her home and a passion for cooking was born. While she is inspired by fundamental Vietnamese food, she adds her own twist. Unlike how chicken wings are

prepared in Vietnam, Tam Howitt's deliciously sweet-sour fish-sauce chicken wings — with just the right amount of heat — are cooked in tapioca, giving them a sweet crispiness.

Heath Howitt says alongside fish sauce, when eating traditional Vietnamese food expect rice and lots of fresh vegetables. Also on the starter menu is a papaya green salad: shredded papaya, shrimp and carrot served on a house-made cracker — a wonderful interplay of refreshing, fresh vegetables and sweet fruit with a light, crispy rice cracker.

The Howitts say their signature dish is the Broken Rice Plate: grilled pork chop, chicken or tofu, pickled veggies, shrimp, cucumber, rice and Viet meat loaf. All meat at Tam's is sourced from the Eugene-based Long's Meat Market. Most options on the menu are gluten-free.

Heath Howitt says it's important with Vietnamese food to blend everything into one bite, unlike in the West where our dishes tend toward strict segregation of flavors; load your chopsticks with sauce, pork chop, shrimp, rice and the assortment of veggies to experience the subtle, fresh flavors, appropriate levels of heat and aromatic, sweet, sour and spicy fish sauce.



Perhaps the most intriguing dish at Tam's is the traditional Vietnamese honeycomb cake for dessert. The lime green cake is made with tapioca, coconut and pandan extract, giving the cake its unique hue. Pandan is a tropical plant; its leaves are widely used as a flavoring in Southeast Asian cooking and frequently compared to vanilla.

Tam's Place Vietnamese Cuisine is open 11:30 am to 2:30 pm and 5 pm to 8 pm Tuesday through Saturday on the corner of 29th and Friendly, except when it's on location for special events. Check its Facebook page for updates and a full menu.

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