

Despite food court setting, some Vietnamese dishes shine

Review and photos by
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Despite its location — just past the Carousel Mall, flanked by funky T-shirt shops on Broadway in the heart of Seaside's tourist vortex — the Saigon Deli can feel a little desolate. It's parked in the middle of a mall-esque food court, whose bygone, un-styled, worn dining room could use a hug. The space is home to three other vendor windows, though rarely are all four open simultaneously. Sometimes anodyne pop tunes play over the stereo. Other times you could hear a pin drop or the wailing of children and cars on the street outside. While only at a few feet's remove from Broadway, the court can feel a little lonely.

Fortunately, some of Saigon Deli's regional flavors supersede a somewhat neglected setting.

Best I can tell, the deli is the North Coast eatery centered around Vietnamese cuisine. The deli also carries an array of Bubble Teas, though I focused primarily on the food. Well, that's not entirely true. I did have a Thai Iced Tea (\$4), which — compared to the Vietnamese Coffee and smoothies — had the least sugar. It was orange and milky and, while still sweet, was punctuated with herbal flora.

I began with the Vermicelli (\$9.50), which the counterperson described to me as something akin to a salad. While I did appreciate the newly cut veggies dotting the top of the dish, the heaping base of rice noodles were fit for a marathon runner — anything but light. I dressed them with a mild, sweet fish sauce (served on the side) and combined them with the nicely charred pork but, not needing for empty carbohydrate calories, quickly ran out of any use for the noodles. The slippery white tangle began slurping up everything else in the bowl — the peanuts, shards of cucumber and carrots, the onion, cilantro and green onions — and I

dug them out. After I'd found them all, the bowl remained three-quarters full with those squiggly noodles. In the interest of not sounding too whiny: Better to have more filler than not enough, I guess.

My return trips to the Saigon Deli were somewhat fraught. One evening I arrived at 7:15 p.m. on a Thursday to find the gate shuttered. Despite the building's posted hours (11 a.m. to 8 p.m.) I would later learn that the Saigon, which displayed no hours of its own, closed at 6 p.m. It wouldn't be the last time I showed up to find the deli closed when it figured to be in prime time.

(Info online needs to be updated too.) Without any more hemming, hawing of finger pointing — indeed there is a critical shortage of workers — I'll just say this: The Saigon Deli is a spot for lunch, not dinner.

After tracking its rhythms, I finally returned to find the lights on. This particular day was cold and rainy. I had Pho (\$9.50), which warmed me through and through. But it did more than that — I was entranced with the broth, whose seasoning offered a dance with steps I have yet to encounter as the Mouth. It twinkled with anise, cloves, ginger and more. The salty, complex liquid made the rice noodles this time worth slurping up. The beef was supple — sliced wide and thin, cooked tender, peppery, just a shade over pink. Alongside the sloshing bowl came a plate of bean sprouts, slices of lime and jalapeños, and a forest of cilantro. I added the bean sprouts to the soup; they gave it crisp earthiness. A squeeze of lime opened the broth up like a springtime thaw.



Above: Saigon Deli's pho features a seasoned broth that will warm you up on a chilly day.

Left: The Mouth devoured the Bahn Mi sandwich in no time.

Below: The Vermicelli bowl is a cold salad of veggies, pork, onions, peanuts and sauce atop a heaping base of noodles.



Along the way too I tried the Rice Plate (\$9.50), which I found a tad underwhelming. The chicken was reasonably well cooked, but the veggies were lacking — there weren't nearly enough of them. I shouldn't even consider counting the amount of cucumber and carrot shards, much less actually do so. The iceberg lettuce had no place on the plate, be it in texture or flavor.

Much the same can be said of the Fried Noodles (\$9.50). While swapping egg noodles for the rice, this was another carb-heavy, flavor-light brick that yearned for more veggies. (In such cases, I found liberal use for the house-made, fresh-ground chili paste.)

The Banh Mi (\$7.50), however, was a champ. The slender chunks of pork were both juicy and blackened — good barbecue. The



bread offered a similar sensation — a flaky, crumbling thin crust and soft innards. With carrots, cucumber, cilantro and a creamy, mayo-like spread (it might've just been mayo), the ratios were right

SAIGON DELI

Rating: ★ ★ ★

200 Broadway, Seaside

PHONE: 503-738-6628

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Thursday to Sunday.

PRICE: \$ – No entrée over \$10

SERVICE: Helpful counter service.

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN

OPTIONS: Lacks tofu/meat replacements.

DRINKS: Thai iced tea, Vietnamese coffee, smoothies, bubble tea.

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

★ Poor

★★ Below average

★★★ Good

★★★★ Excellent

★★★★★ Best in region

on. The only issue? It could've been bigger. To put it another way: I devoured it in no time.

The sandwich, like the pho, is something worth coming back for — regardless of the setting.