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Restaurant review: **Bistro B**

05:04 PM CST on Wednesday, January 6, 2010

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Restaurant Information
[Bistro B](#)

Rating:

(Good)

Average meal price:

(\$14 and under-\$30)

Service:

Fast and brusque. There may be a wait for a table at peak times.

Ambience:

One big, clanging room with bright lights, blaring music and flat-screen TVs tuned to football or Asian variety shows.

Location:

9780 Walnut St., Suite 340, Dallas

Hours:

Sun-Thu: 8 a.m.-midnight
Fri-Sat: 8 a.m.-2 a.m.

Payment Information:

Visa and MasterCard accepted.

More Information:

Wheelchair accessible, smoking allowed on the patio and BYOB – no corkage fee

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I have a longstanding rule for dining out: Avoid restaurants that feature bright, colorful photographs of their food, either on the menu or, worse, on signs or placards. The virtue of this rule, of course, is that it will help you avoid the worst tourist traps, the sorts of places that seem to believe their customers are contemptible nincompoops who won't know what minestrone or shish kebab is without a picture.

But every rule has its exceptions, and I am happy to make one for Bistro B, a lively Vietnamese restaurant in Lake Highlands. Despite the photos perking up the big plastic-coated menu, which runs to hundreds of items, this is no snare for the unwary eater. Much of the food here is fine, with the fresh, herbaceous sprightliness that characterizes good Vietnamese cooking.

That's what draws a multinational crowd to this big, bright, noisy room set in a bustling strip mall packed with Asian restaurants and businesses. Bring your sense of humor with you to Bistro B: It's a hoot. On a recent visit just before the holidays, Christmas trees in front of the restaurant were flocked with artificial snow; the windows were painted over with cheerful pictures of Santa, elves and reindeer; and the sound system was blaring strange disco versions of show tunes.

Servers wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the legend "What the Pho?" sport wireless headsets. Half the flat-screen TVs scattered around the room are tuned to football, half to an Asian variety show.

This is not, in other words, a place to come for a soothing, quiet dinner. It is, instead, a place for some solid, authentic renditions of Vietnamese standbys and a few dishes with inventive twists, all in copious portions at astonishingly low prices.

Ordering here is a bit hit-or-miss. The vast menu occasionally veers into ominous Pan-Asian territory. And the dishes I sampled were not uniformly good: A stir-fry in particular seemed gluey and bland, and something called clay-pot rice with fried chicken managed to be both mysterious and dull. But order wisely, or perhaps just luckily, and you can put together a dandy meal.

Start with some variety of the spring rolls, particularly the ones containing grilled chicken or beef. The soft rice-paper rolls enclose a cool filling of savory meat, vermicelli rice noodles, lettuce, herbs, and – here's the neat part – a tight curl of crispy fried egg-roll skin that gives the whole thing an unusual, delightful crunch.

You might move on to a pho, the meat-and-noodle soup that is a centerpiece of Vietnamese cooking. The broth is the thing with pho, and Bistro B's version is properly steamy, rich and redolent of beef and anise. You can have it with various choices of thin cuts of meat – rare beef, brisket, flank or tripe – or with meatballs or chicken. Garnish it with bean sprouts, Thai basil, cilantro and lime, and it's a hearty, fragrant meal. Fans of the hot and spicy might opt for the bun bo Hué, a chile-spiked soup with beef, pork and rice noodles.

Bistro B also offers several hot pots, copious cauldrons of broth, vegetables and meats that get heated to a simmer over gas burners placed on your table. The Vietnamese seafood hot pot is an abundance of shrimp, squid, green-lipped mussels, fish, fish balls and vegetables. The broth is savory, tart and slightly sweet from chunks of pineapple, but the seafood was a little on the fishy side, and was fairly heavy on the surimi, that unfortunate fake crab substance.

A good nonsoupy choice is the vermicelli with grilled lemon-grass beef. Choose a lettuce leaf, put a little pillow of rice noodles on it, and nestle a roll of thin-sliced, charred beef on top. Add a few leaves of Thai basil, cilantro or fresh mint, perhaps a few slivers of marinated carrot, plus a dollop of chile-garlic sauce. Roll it all up, dunk it in the tart, slightly sweet dipping sauce, and try to eat it without having the whole thing explode in your hand. Wipe fingers and repeat.

A less, um, involved option is the salt-and-pepper toasted squid: lightly battered and deep-fried calamari curls that are especially good when swiped in that aforementioned chile-garlic sauce.

There's no alcohol to be had at Bistro B, but you can BYOB or wash it all down with fresh coconut juice or iced Vietnamese coffee that's strong enough to make your head spin. And when you pay your tab at the cashier in the back of the restaurant, be sure to check out the wide variety of Vietnamese desserts in the cooler.

Mark Vamos is a journalism professor at Southern Methodist University and a dedicated foodie.

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