

eating out

Sweet reinvention

» A pair of eights is proving a lucky number for lovers of authentic Vietnamese food, says David Burton.

O PEN for two years now, Restaurant 88 is rapidly becoming a fixture on the Tory St strip. Its stark retro-modernist interior offers few frills and minimal decoration, yet is softened by a crimson colour scheme, pleasingly complemented by a row of lime green lampshades.

Assuming that Restaurant 88 has survived this long on more than just an elegant fit-out, however, I decided to put its food to a second test.

My first meal here two years ago left me distinctly underwhelmed.

While the cooking was competent, the concepts seemed bizarre, layering sweet upon savoury in such dishes as coconut-battered squid rings, slathered with honey and mustard.

I also recall venison with beetroot and excessively sweetened tamarillo, and something called "Italiano Fettuccini", in which the entire Italian store cupboard appeared to have been emptied into a single pot.

Suspecting it to be a case of Asians dabbling with European cooking but not really getting it, I wondered why it would bother when its own food is so delicious.

As it happened, Restaurant 88 did indeed overhaul its style some months later, into something called Metropolitan Vietnam.

There are still traces of the old style on the current menu, such as the T-bone steak with cracked peppercorns and a dollop of brandy butter last seen atop my Christmas pudding. There's also a stuffed filo parcel where fetta engages camembert

in what, on paper at least, seems a pointless, one-sided duel.

Never mind: nowadays a system of culinary apartheid operates at Restaurant 88. The Metropolitan dishes are all clearly marked on the menu with a red M, while those across the Vietnamese divide carry a V.

There's no doubt as to which side I'm backing, as every Vietnamese dish I tasted here last week was excellent. Unlike the metropolitan fusions, they are rooted in a long history of popular acceptance.

Many of them are Saigon classics, cooked by the owner-chef, Luke Duong, using family recipes brought to New Zealand when he settled here in 1980.

Vietnamese Caramelised Tamarind Prawns are absolutely fantastic.

Semi-shelled, they are deep fried until the whole beast turns so crunchy you can eat everything — heads, tails and all. But what really makes the dish is a final wok-tossing in a lemon-grass, palm sugar, chilli and tamarind sauce. Sweet, sour, hot and salty — this dish has it all.

Very similar, and almost as good, is a main course dish poetically named Vietnamese Chilli & Lime Wok-flushed Prawns.

While practically a Vietnamese national dish, the beef noodle soup known as pho is normally associated with breakfast or lunch, but here it is on the dinner menu, offered in a great big bowl which obligingly, the waiting staff supplied with a ladle and two smaller empty bowls for us to share.

The noodles are really just a filler, the heart of the dish being the slow-cooked beef broth, in this case really tasty and authentic; with the first sip, I was back on the streets of Hanoi. As tradition demands, the aromatics and spices were discernable, but they didn't overwhelm the concentrated flavour of beef.

Another winner was a Chinese-influenced



Restaurant 88 has overhauled its culinary style into something called Metropolitan Vietnam.

Picture: ROBERT KITCHIN

dish, Drunken Crispy Salt & Pepper Baby Chicken, in which a whole baby chicken is simmered in a master stock (used again and again, getting tastier all the time.) It is then fried and served with a dipping sauce and a parcel of sticky rice, flavoured with black mushroom and lotus seed.

Saigon Crispy Spring Rolls Duo mixes old and new. One of these fried rice paper rolls has the traditional filling of prawns, crab and pork, while the other delights with the fragrance of lemon-grass-infused beef.

The banana-wrapped fish disappointed slightly (for proper, those fillets seemed unusually thin) and there's a certain compromise with the abundant fresh herb garnishes normally found in Vietnam, with mesclun mix served in their place.

Nevertheless, of Wellington's three Vietnamese eateries, this would clearly be my pick.

nitty gritty

RESTAURANT 88

Where: 88 Tory St

Ph: 385 9088

Licence: fully licensed

Price range of mains: \$18-25

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Ambience: ★★★★★

Wine list: ★★★½

Cost: \$115 for two (excluding wine)