

THE SUUM TOTAL

WHILE CHINESE, THAI, ITALIAN AND INDIAN COME TOP OF THE LIST OF ETHNIC EATS IN THE UK, TIMES ARE CHANGING. CUISINE FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE IS MAKING ITS PRESENCE FELT, AND IT'S NOT JUST IN THE CAPITAL. GISELLE WHITEAKER FINDS FINE VIETNAMESE FOOD IN BUCKS.

Pretty little Marlow, sitting on the Thames in Buckinghamshire, has long held allure for those seeking to escape the big smoke. Set amongst the rich meadows of the river valley and alongside the Chiltern Hills, the vibrant Georgian market town's historic streets hold an abundance of boutique shops, adding to the town's unique charm. There's more than that, though. There's some fine food, too, with Tom Kerridge's Hand & Flowers, the first gastropub to hold two Michelin stars. But one cannot dine on pub grub alone, no matter how delectable. That's where Suum comes in.

I didn't expect to find a Vietnamese restaurant in Marlow. Especially not one open on a Sunday night. Certainly not one that is undeniably chic, yet unpretentious. The floor is covered in grey and natural tiles in complementary patterns, the dark wood tables match the latticed wood window frames and mirrors, and simple white-brick walls lend elegance. There's a bar between the semi-separated sections of the dining area and a nook housing a long table, with bamboo lampshades overhead. "I like it," I tell my boyfriend Elio, before I've even seen the menu.



The cocktails at Suum are superb.

I like it even more when my cocktail arrives. I've chosen a Lychee Cooler, with vodka and elderflower cordial, shaken with coconut cream and lychee water. It's just as it's described in the menu: creamy, tropical and fresh. Elio is equally pleased with his Pho Mojito, which makes use of fresh lemongrass, ginger and Vietnamese basil and is garnished with star anise and a cinnamon stick. Some Sundays are better than others. This one is shaping up well.

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Top: The exterior of Suum Vietnamese Kitchen in Marlow. Above: A tasting plate of starters.

The first dish to land on the table is *Bánh Xèo Sài Gòn*, one of my favourite southern Vietnamese dishes. The crispy rice pancake is packed with chicken, beansprouts, prawns and spring onions and served with lettuce leaves, fresh herbs, and a flavour-packed dipping sauce. The outer shell is delicious, retaining its crunch all the way through, giving it a levity that is often missing. My superior chopstick skills are put to good use as I deftly make my way towards the halfway mark, but when I pause to take a sip of my cooler, Elio takes the lead, swiping the final morsels from the plate.

The *Cha Lá Lot* up next are easier to divide, with six prune-sized rounds of marinated, char-grilled pork and beef wrapped in betel leaves sitting on a bed of room-temperature rice noodles. The accompanying pickled carrot and radish contribute piquancy to the deep, densely packed, smoky meat parcels.

We know we've ordered too much when the next three dishes are brought to the table one after the other. The first, *Vit Om Tiêu*, arrives sizzling, slices of duck breast paired with a medley of vegetables and cooked in coconut juice with garlic, green peppercorns and oyster sauce. It's rich and decadent and oh-so-easy to consume. The second sizzler is a lighter dish of *Hai San Thap Cam*, a mixed seafood plate of scallops, king prawns and squid, cooked with ginger, seafood gravy and spring onions, topped with dry garlic. It comes with a home-made green seafood dip that we are warned is a little spicy. It's a lot spicy, but in a good way, and we find ourselves dipping regularly.



Vietnamese coffee sees strong drip coffee sweetened with condensed milk



Bánh Xèo Sài Gòn



Bún Cha Hà Nội



Even the rice at Suum is packed with flavour



Banana fritters



Above: The bar at Suum.
Below: The chef works his magic in the kitchen.

The final dish is *Bún Cha Hà Nội*, which originates in the north of Vietnam but has found a welcoming home in Marlow. Cubes of almost-caramelised, char-grilled pork rest on rice noodles and salad. We pour the bowl of sweet and sour meatball broth over the pork and swirl the noodles in the resultant liquid, increasing the absorption of this delicious concoction. "We're coming back here, right?" asks Elio rhetorically as he slurps the last of the noodles from his chopsticks.



We're definitely coming back, but before we leave we decide to split a banana fritter dessert. The rounds of lightly battered and fried bananas with vanilla ice-cream and a drizzle of chocolate sauce are the perfect finisher, along with a glass of *Cà Phê Sua Dã* - strong filter coffee over ice, sweetened with condensed milk.

Marlow is an attractive town. Suum Vietnamese Kitchen increases the attraction. This is food worth travelling for. ■

INFO

For more information about Suum Vietnamese Kitchen, see www.suumkitchen.com

FOR OTHER TASTY ETHNIC EATS, TRY THESE FAVES:



Set in the heart of Bowness-on-Windermere in the Lake District, BAHA is breaking tradition in the Lake District's dining scene. BAHA blends flavours of the Pacific Rim with traditional Japanese Robata cooking techniques. It offers a unique menu of globally inspired, innovative street-food-style dishes with flavours from Eastern Asia, South America, Australia, North America and the islands of the Pacific.
www.bahabowness.com

Sea Spice, at the seafront White Lion Hotel, has brought the diverse flavours of exotic Indian cuisine to the Suffolk seaside town of Aldeburgh. The restaurant combines Suffolk's finest produce and local craft beer with classic and contemporary Indian dishes that originated some 4,000 miles away. The menu offers an exciting array of regional dishes ranging from Goan-inspired fish and seafood, to tandoori grilled meats and fragrant curries.
www.seaspice.co.uk



The first of its kind in Oban in Scotland, BAAB Grill inside the Perle Oban hotel brings the flavours of the eastern Mediterranean to the renowned fishing port. The dishes are a mix of recipes from Greece, Turkey and the Levant, all of which have a rich culinary heritage. The menu includes meats from the charcoal grill, local seafood, plenty of vegetarian and vegan-friendly dishes, and meze with delicious home-made bread.
www.baabgrill.co.uk

