

CHARLESTONSCENE

CO Banh Mi Noodles Bar feast for the senses

[Deidre Schipani](#) – Wednesday, July 25, 2012

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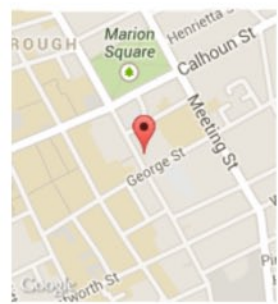
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CO Restaurant, at 340 King Street, for July 26, 2012 Restaurant Review. (Brad Nettles/postandcourier.com) 7/18/12

CO



CO Bahn Mi Noodles Bar

Cuisine: Vietnamese/Asian fusion

Category: Neighborhood Favorite

Location: 340 King St.

Phone: 720-3631

Hours: Daily 11 a.m.- 2:30 p.m., 5 p.m.-until

Food: ???1/2

Service: ???

Atmosphere: ???1/2

Price: \$

Costs: Dumplings \$5; small dishes \$6-\$7; banh mi \$8-\$9; salads \$9-\$14; broth noodles \$12-\$14; noodles and rice dishes; \$12-\$14; desserts \$5; specialty cocktails \$7-\$9; sake \$5-\$37.

Vegetarian Options: Yes

Bar: Full-service bar

Decibel Level: Varies

Wheelchair Access: First floor only

Parking: Street and public garages

Other: Facebook; Twitter, co-restaurant.com; info@co-restaurant.com. Happy hour menu; late-night menu Monday-Thursday 11 p.m.-midnight, Friday-Saturday 11 p.m.-1 a.m. No reservations; "no substitutions, no alterations."

CO opened on King Street in the spring. Owner Greg Bauer and executive chef Anh Toan Ho have crafted a Vietnamese-influenced menu with bits of Japan, India, Thailand and Korea thrown in for good measure.

Its name, CO, means feast in Vietnamese, and CO is as much a feast for your taste buds as it is for your eyes.

The former Teavana spot has been transformed into an industrial-retro chic spot under the direction of Neil Stevenson Architects and Mark Regalbuto of Renew Urban. Exposed brick walls with their stratified layers of memories are supported by structural steel rafters that speak to the 21st century. Weathered, almost driftwood-colored wood are used for the bar and long community tables.

Look for a few tables downstairs with a high-top community table perched front and center of the small kitchen. Upstairs, there are three long common tables and a few tables for two flanking one wall.

A lounge area with red upholstered banquettes and cube ottomans for seating is a small but stylish perch for those seated there.

The restaurant is small, does not take reservations and at the time of our visit was a happening spot.

Its popularity is well- deserved, with the clean, fresh herbal foods of Vietnam recalibrating the taste buds of locals and tourists alike. No greasy, heavy stir-fries, no cornstarch-thickened sauces but food that is fresh and bright with lemongrass, ginger, galangal, cilantro, mint and Thai basil.

Melting pot of flavors

The cuisine of Vietnam bears the culinary DNA of friends and foe alike. The Mongols brought the taste for beef and pho (\$12-\$14), the ubiquitous dish consumed for breakfast, lunch and dinner. From India came the spices and karis that perfume coconut milk and batters used for crepes. From China came the wok, stir-fries and chopsticks, and from the French came the baguette, French press coffee and pates.

From the land itself came rice and tea, vegetables and fragrant herbs; fermented fish sauce replaces soy and salt. Chiles are added to many dishes to provide nature's cooling antidote to the country's grueling tropical temperatures.

Many dishes will come with a "table salad" of mint, Thai basil, cilantro and bean sprouts that you add to a dish to make your own. Rice vermicelli and carrot shreds are as common as parsley to garnish a plate, and the fragrant nuoc mam (fish sauce) and spiced nuoc cham add dimension and refreshment to the food.

In this summer's heat, CO can be your go-to place to cool off your hunger. Summer spring rolls (goi cuon) (\$7 for two rolls) wrap a tangle of rice vermicelli with pork, shrimp, mint and leggy cilantro in a rice paper wrapper served with crunchy peanut sauce. Unctuous pork belly (\$6) is served on a fried bun (not the usual soft, white spongy steamed bun) and layers lightly pickled cucumbers with hoisin sauce and scallions. Vegetarians may opt for a tofu taco (\$6), edamame dumplings (\$5), tofu buns (\$6) and a variety of noodle and salads dishes that can be topped with crispy tofu.

Bun xao (\$9-\$13) may become your summer coolant. A base of clean-flavored rice vermicelli noodles are topped with Romaine shreds, cucumber julienne (the French, you know), bean sprouts, mint, cilantro and, for an up-charge, a topping ranging from tofu to pork springroll. We opted for the latter: a fried, greaseless fat cylinder of pork that cradles and scoops the noodle/salad into your mouth.

Should the drunken Thai noodles (\$14) remain on the menu, do order. They capture "wok hay": the breath or spirit of the wok when the patina of this primitive cooking tool inspires the food to taste more than it is. Part caramelization, part textural modification: When the wok has "hay," your dish will tell you. Local shrimp, fiery chile nam pla, sweet red onions, tiny beech mushrooms and Thai basil made this dish a winner.

More sauce

If there were gripes at CO, they were the small portions of dressings and sauces. I like that the condiments are not sitting out and are served with your dish as appropriate, but there was not enough peanut sauce for two spring rolls and clearly not enough dressing for the bun.

Pho (\$12), the stuff of soup parlors here and street food in Vietnam, is available in meat and chicken varieties. It was traditionally served with a "salad plate" and was fragrant with star anise.

Com ga (\$13) was another menu winner. Think of it as Southeast Asian fried chicken meats Charleston pilau: crispy pieces of chicken on a bed of rice topped with barley pickled vegetables (cauliflower, carrots, baby corn and beets) finished with a ginger dressing. Add some fish sauce and the house-made sriracha and you will be communing with your ancestors.

The banh mis are worth exploring (\$8-\$9) and have found a good base in a baguette that is not too crunchy but not too soft. The fillings seemed skimpy and the condiments less than generous. That is easy to fix on a sandwich menu.

The servers get a workout at CO with the staircase to the dining area a stair-monster for them to climb. The service model is designed with runners, but as the night wears on, this staff has gotten some serious leg work, not to mention hauling platters, drinks and place settings.

Kudos to them for aligning their dessert offerings (\$5) with their menu. Diners can try a coconut panna cotta with Thai basil, sriracha caramel sauce and sesame seeds. Or five-spice chocolate mousseline or the house coconut shot (\$3) with vodka, lemongrass syrup and coconut pulp.

I am waiting for bun bo hue (bun seven ways); banh xeo, a delicious crispy crepe; and bo luc lac (shaking beef) to appear on the menu. But in the meantime, XO shrimp (\$14) and Vietnamese ramen (\$12) are calling my name. CO is a welcome addition to Asian-inspired eating in the Lowcountry.