

## San Jose Mercury News (CA)

March 27, 2005

### FROM CLAY POTS TO SMALL PLATES

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Four years, three restaurants is unusual for one address, even in this topsy-turvy business. But in the case of downtown San Jose's 19 N. Market St., the rapid overthrow of regimes actually makes a lot of sense.

For years, cozy and dark Rue de Paris was the height of romance, pampering diners with coquilles St. Jacques and prawns bordelaise. The French lost it in 2002, and in came Clay Pot, aimed at the city's large Vietnamese population.

But last year Hanna Pham took control of Clay Pot from her then-husband and saw that semi-upscale traditional Vietnamese food and tired decor weren't making it. Pham closed the place for four months and reopened in early February as 19 Market, a name that doesn't tell you much. But you notice the face-lift right away. Out with Clay Pot's Vietnamese knickknacks and the Parisian dark booths and tight spaces. In with windows and glass front doors so passersby can see what's happening inside. As my companion said, "Maybe that's why I've never been here. It always looked like it was closed."

Recently in the restaurant business, the road to success is paved with open spaces, cocktails and menus of small plates, and that's the route 19 Market takes. The front room seats 50 people at gleaming wood-finished tables, set with cloth napkins, painted chopsticks, durable forks and spoons. Stylish sconces hold fresh lilies against earth-tone walls, while calm jazz plays in the background.

The menu adds Singaporean, Chinese and California touches to Vietnamese fare. Prices are up. Instead of catfish in a clay pot, Pham uses sea bass, which caramelizes nicely and nobody hates. (Price change: \$9.95 then, \$16 now.) The shaking beef previously was sauteed in butter and served with rice. Now the cubes of filet mignon are tossed in a hot wok with sesame sauce and served on a bed of watercress and tomatoes. (\$10.95 then, \$15 now.) Still, there are lots of dishes under \$10. Chicken noodle soup (\$7) will fill you up with fresh pieces of breast meat and a concentrated, aromatic broth. Call it a crossover soup. 19 Market also serves pho (\$7), beef noodle soup in a large bowl on a large saucer. Fresh, cold spring rolls come in three varieties. Bo Bia rolls (\$6) get a kick from spicy Chinese sausage.

The English-only menu gets straight to the point, most often just naming the two main ingredients. Green papaya and mango salad (\$9 with poached shrimp, \$8 vegetarian) has been an early hit. For a full meal, try the terrific banana blossom and pomelo salad (\$12). Strings of shredded banana blossom look like cabbage but taste like fruit, curling around sections of pomelo, the sweet-tart citrus fruit sometimes called Chinese grapefruit. Chew on just-poached calamari rings and shrimp and pieces of mint and basil in a luscious lime vinaigrette. Roasted peanuts and fried shallots dot the top.

Entrees are equally exciting. Spareribs and quail eggs (\$10) -- who knew? The braised ribs are fork-tender but the little eggs are the stars, soaking up a heady reduction of fish sauce, garlic, onion and black pepper.

Four tiger prawns are butterflied and grilled in their shells, then plopped on a bed of flat egg noodles sizzling with garlic (\$18). "A little greasy, but it's a good grease," said my eloquent companion.

Lemongrass lamb chops (\$17) would have been stellar if served medium-rare. Also disappointing, mango tofu (\$7) achieved steam-table dullness.

At lunch, there's an inventive twist on the bento box. You get soup, salad, spring roll, pickled daikon and carrots, jasmine rice, dessert and a main dish. With tofu or chicken the box is \$10, with seafood or meat, \$12-\$14.

Also beautifully presented, desserts are \$6 each. Pham's tropical sweet rolls (banana in fried wontons) from Clay Pot are still on board, but she has changed the flan to a Grand Marnier creme brulee. Raspberry mango cheesecake is another winner. No crust, just a cylinder of dense mango cheesecake with a swirl of raspberry puree inside.

Among the specialty cocktails, the 19Market-hito (\$7) was strong and the lychee martini (\$7) weak. But the bar is well stocked with single-malt scotch and so on. A full page of wines is nicely organized. There are plenty of choices by the glass, but you might ask for a taste. Opened bottles with corks in them don't bode well unless they're being drunk at a rapid clip. Black-clad servers blend into the stylish room, mostly know what they're talking about and are always pleasant.

Pham has plans. The back room is now used for overflow, but it's made for private parties, with hardwood floors and a service bar. And by now happy hour should be happening, every day from 5 to 7 p.m., with bar snacks and half-price cocktails.

**19Market Restaurant – Modern Vietnamese Bistro & Bar**

19 N. Market St., near Santa Clara Street, San Jose. (408) 280-6111

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**The Dish:** Stylish California-Vietnamese bistro & bar w/ inventive dishes, some dazzling.

**Price range:** Lunch appetizers \$6-\$7, Entrees ! \$8-\$14.

Dinner appetizers \$6-\$10, Entrees \$9-\$18. Corkage \$15.

**Details:** Full bar. Sidewalk seating. Flat-screen TV.

**Pluses:** Tasty and fresh takes on traditional Vietnamese cuisine.

A good place to meet after work.

**Minuses:** Pacing can be off, so you get everything at once. Some dishes lack punch.

**Hours:** Lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays.

Dinner 5-9:30 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays, 5-10 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays.

*Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.*

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