

## **In Maynard, Vietnamese fare is just what the neighborhood ordered**

**By Ellen Bhang** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 03, 2016

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Restaurateur Phan Nguyen thinks it's better to show than tell. "When I decided to open the restaurant, I didn't tell my mom and dad," he says. He knew they would balk at his choice to leave a career in biotech to open a restaurant. So Nguyen waited until the place was renovated and ready to open. "One day I told them, 'Let me show you something,'" he says, recalling how he unlocked the door and invited them inside. "My mom almost passed out," he says with a chuckle. She soon recovered, happy that her oldest son and his wife were embarking on a new path.

Gigi's Restaurant, open just five months, is located in the long-vacant space that once housed Cast Iron Kitchen in Maynard. The eatery is named for Nguyen's wife, Gigi Cao. Nguyen is the chef, and Cao runs the front of house. The 75-seat space, with a snug bar up front, is the kind of place you would want in your own neighborhood: warm and inviting, with orchids decorating tables, and pendant lighting casting a soft glow on exposed brick. The menu here is Vietnamese, the kind of fare that Nguyen began cooking as a teen while looking after his siblings in southern Vietnam. Later, he perfected his recipes through a part-time catering business in Miami.

One of his mainstays is pho, rice noodles in fragrant broth. Here, the iconic dish is available as an entree (\$8.95-\$9.95) or as an appetizer (\$4.95). A version with brisket, rare steak, and meatballs is deliciously scented. You get a whiff of star anise as it's placed before you. Flavorful and clean, the soup is not heavily salted like at other eateries, and there are no sticky condiment bottles to perturb the aesthetic. Dollops of hoisin and sriracha arrive in a ramekin, with a dainty spoon, on a plate with basil, bean sprouts, and jalapeno. Customize the steaming bowl to your heart's content.



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**Banh mi sandwich with lemongrass chicken and sweet potato fries.**



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**Vermicelli bowl with grilled shrimp and pork.**



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**Owners Gigi Cao (left) and Phan Nguyen.**

Vermicelli bowls (\$9.95-\$11.95) are rice noodles served cool, adorned with warm toppings. One kind showcases grilled shrimp, marinated pork, and a crisp summer roll, plus a tuft of shredded lettuce, a sprig of mint, and a chili-garlic dressing that is both sweet and tart. The crustaceans are snappy and succulent, with a hint of translucence. (Nguyen sources from the fishmonger next door, so fresh seafood is close at hand.) An appetizer of seared tuna (\$11.95), rosy within its sesame seed crust, rests on mesclun greens tossed in a dressing of soy, caramelized palm sugar, and a generous grind of black pepper.

The husband-wife team is tuned in to how folks here like to eat. Vietnamese fried rice (\$10.95), studded with edamame and Chinese sausage, is generously portioned, great for families that frequent the spot. Asian-style spare ribs

(\$13.95) are first brined then oven-basted, plated with a mound of sweet potato fries. While the slathering of sauce doesn't underscore flavors of Southeast Asia, this meaty entree is altogether appealing. Banh mi, the traditional sandwich (\$5.95) — a mini-baguette stuffed with mild lemongrass chicken — feels tidy and refined rather than street-food rustic.



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**Pho beef brisket and meatballs.**

Affable and attentive, servers here could teach their brethren at pricier Boston restaurants about polish, efficiency, and knowledge of dishes. They're happy to tell you about pairings from the compact roster of beer, wine, and cocktails. An ice-cold Vietnamese lager is tops with this food.

One weekday evening, a diner at an adjoining table leans over, inquiring about a Vietnamese crepe (\$11.95), a delectable half-moon that resembles an omelet, crafted from turmeric-spiced rice flour and coconut milk. It's griddled thin

and crisp, then filled with pork, shrimp, and bean sprouts. “We eat with our eyes, don’t we?” she muses, gazing longingly at the plate.

Since the owners here love to show, they can count on this customer to tell.

## **GIGI’S RESTAURANT**

177 Main St., Maynard, 978-793-8684,

[www.gigisrestaurant.com](http://www.gigisrestaurant.com)

All major credit cards accepted. Not wheelchair accessible.

**Prices** Appetizers and sandwiches \$3.95-\$11.95. Noodles and rice \$8.95-\$11.95. Entrees \$10.95-\$14.95. Dessert \$3.95.

**Hours** Lunch Tue-Fri 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Dinner Tue-Sat 5 p.m.-9 p.m.  
Closed Sun-Mon.

**Liquor** Full bar

**What to order** Pho with beef; vermicelli bowl with shrimp, pork, and summer roll; Vietnamese-style fried rice; spare ribs with sweet potato fries.

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