

# Los Angeles Times Food

**F**  
Cooking  
Restaurants  
Wire & Spirits

Wednesday, October 1, 2003

latimes.com/food

COUNTER INTELLIGENCE: VIETNAM

## Baguettes with a twist, but not just a French one

The sandwich shop that specialize in banh mi are bridging culinary cultural gaps, appealing to the mainstream crowd.

By LINDA BURUM  
Special to The Times.

**P**ERFUMED with the aroma of dark roasted coffee and freshly baked bread, *banh mi* shops -- Vietnamese sandwich cafes -- are a familiar sight in certain local Zip codes. But the sandwiches they serve -- baguettes laden with Asian-style cold cuts -- while a staple in Vietnam for decades, are still a long way from the mainstream here.

That may change, though with the recent opening of Mr. Baguette in Rosemead. The immaculate, glassed-in dining rooms of these trendily designed shops attract young professionals and students who lounge at the tables sipping soy-based smoothies, ice-blended mochas or sparkling French lemonade. The efficient, fast-food-style service and smart logos make the restaurant seems imminently clonable. And why not? The beloved Vietnamese standards served in these shops should play well to a wider audience.

Although Mr. Baguette serves authentic, French-influenced Vietnamese dishes, the proprietors have made it a point to bridge cultural culinary gaps. Instead of the untranslated menus often encountered in little Saigon, Mr. Baguette posts large, colored photos to guide *banh mi* neophytes. A shop writes each sandwich description in English with Vietnamese names following. And it has added "European-style" baguette sandwiches, such as roast beef or ham and cheese.

Tang recently acquired a master of charcuterie certification in Dijon and now oversees the making of French and Vietnamese cold cuts in his restaurant's huge kitchen.

As for the sandwiches, the Mr. Baguette Special, a *banh mi* classic known as *dac biet*, is a hoagie loaded with thinly sliced ham, *cha lua* pork loaf (think an Asian mortadella). And a smear of pate. The dozen or so sandwich choices also include grilled beef (piled with thin slices of garlicky marinated meat) and shredded chicken roasted Vietnamese style. There's also a vaguely ham-like soy loaf. The crisp, salad-like garnish of shredded daikon, carrot, cilantro and

(optional) jalapeno is essential to this and every other *banh mi*.

The heart of great *banh mi* is the right bread. So the restaurant mix, proof and bake their baguettes from scratch. The skinny loaves emerging from their ovens almost hourly are dead ringers for the airy baguettes you can pick up in a neighborhood bakery in Paris.

Bryant Tang, owner of Mr. Baguette, credits his two American-raised children for inspiring his endeavor. Like the casual theme restaurants his teens love, his shop emphasizes a motif: French, in this case. The decor includes wrought-iron Parisian cafe chairs, a small garden and a glass display case filled with house made pates and head cheese.

For dessert you can go European with a light creme caramel or Asian with sweet rice and bean pudding in a rich coconut sauce. Tang's coffee is a fine blend of French and Italian coffees and, whether drip or iced, does not have the bitterness often found in the coffee in traditional *banh mi* shops.

The shop also prepares 12 inch sandwiches in full view or customers, allowing for modifications and special requests. His repertoire also includes cappuccino mousse cake and tiramisu.

The shop's espresso machine pumps out brew that's served iced or hot, Vietnamese-style with sweetened condensed milk. That's already a bit of a departure from the traditional drip coffee of a *banh mi* shop, so it's not a surprise to learn that servers will gladly make a cappuccino or an Americano, instead. It's another of the small touches that brings Mr. Baguette closer to the mainstream.

### Mr. Baguette

**Location:** 8702 E. Valley Blvd., Rosemead, (626) 288-9166.

**Price:** Sandwiches, \$1.50 to \$2.75; iced blended drinks, \$1.75 to \$2.75.

**Best dishes:** *Dac biet* sandwich, roast chicken sandwich, iced coffee.

**Best dishes:** Open 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. No alcohol. Parking lot. Cash only.

## Extraordinary Food, Extraordinary Service



Photographs by BRYAN CHAN Los Angeles Times



BRYAN CHAN Los Angeles Times

**GOOD COMBO:** With its modern vibe and fresh-baked bread, Mr. Baguette in rosemead has gained a following.

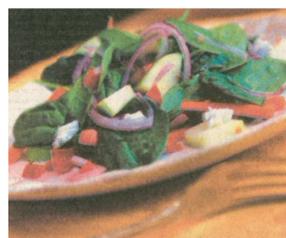
### INSIDE

#### Soups

- Butternut Squash Soup.....H2
- Hearty Vegetable Soup.....H4
- Sugar Snap Pea Soup.....H4

#### Salads

- Ensalada de Manzana y Espinaca...H2
- Haricots Verts and Tomato Salad...H5



WALLY SKALIJ / Los Angeles Times

#### Main Courses

- Beef Tzimmis with Butternut Squash and Matzo Balls.....H6
- Chicken in Peanut Sauce.....H3
- Grilled Sea Bass With Mango Salsa.....H5
- Lamb Tajine With Apricots, Saffron and Ginger.....H6
- Pork with Mashed Pumpkin...H3

#### Side Dishes

- Minted Rice.....H5
- Seasoned Mashed Plantains...H3

#### Desserts

- Hazelnut Honey Squares.....H6
- Nut Chews.....H5