

Cochin in Swan St, Richmond, has a French Vietnamese twist

Review by Simon Plant of Herald Sun | September 18th 2015

TIGERLAND has been roaring ... and not just on the footy field. Richmond's restaurant scene has been going ahead in leaps and bounds as well, especially around Swan St. In the past two months, Saint Urban wine bar and a Jimmy Grants souva joint have joined seasoned players such as Noir, Fonda Mexican and Union Dining.

Now there's Cochin. This raffish bar and restaurant with a French-Vietnamese twist is only a few doors down from Fonda (look for the Parisian cafe chairs on the footpath) and just five weeks in, it seems to be kicking goals with hungry "locals". It's easy to see why. Cochin is atmospheric, flexible when it comes to food and equipped with one of the best cellars on Swan St. A real player.



Cochin | Photo by Simon Shiff

The Food

Cochin (pronounced co-shin) describes a southern region of Vietnam centred on Saigon — now Ho Chi Minh City — which came under French colonial rule. That power evaporated 60 years ago but French culinary influences still linger in the form of baguettes and croissants.

You won't find those baked goods at Richmond's Cochin. What you will find is deftly cooked Euro-Asian fare matched to a well-curated drinks list that favours France.



Cochin's Spicy chateaubriand | Photo by Tim Carrafa



Cochin's Strawberry Mille Feuille | Photo by Simon Shiff

Chef Edward Khen divides his menu into “small and medium share” and “larger share” (for two or more). Snacks “small” — best taken at the bar — can run to vegetarian spring rolls (3 for \$10) and prawns on sugarcane (\$12), pulled pork sliders with Viet slaw (\$14) and chicken liver pate with pickles and bread (\$12).

But sizes fit all tastes here. So, if you'd prefer to begin with a starter-size prawn coconut milk curry (\$30 large serve), just ask. Khen sends it out in one of Cochin's beautiful ceramic bowls, laying in bean-thread vermicelli under prawns that keep their crunch. His chicken curry (\$26) is a blander affair, needing a hot shot from Cochin's condiments tray. The hoisin sauce is darkly delicious.

Delve more deeply into Vietnam with a Mekong salad (\$8), composed of pickled carrot and wombok; some wok-fried bamboo shoots (\$8) garnished with sesame seeds; and sauteed green beans (\$10) cut through with lap cheong sausage and water chestnuts.

Then take a European detour by ordering fries a la Saigon (\$7) with your duck a l'orange (\$26). Khen brings citrusy zing to this French classic but the soft, yielding thigh meat in our serve was blessed with subtle Asian scents as well.

Spicy chateaubriand (\$44, below) sees blushing pink slices of eye fillet arranged like flower petals over a “sauce Cochin”, fashioned from lemongrass, garlic, shallots and five kinds of peppercorn, including smoky black kampot. But Khen — a young chef showing real promise — knows how to dial down these spice notes so they play evenly on the palate.

Desserts at Cochin are underwhelming by comparison. A strawberry mille feuille stack (\$12), The spicy chateaubriand with blushing pink slices of eye fillet, mortared with pomegranate jam, was pleasing enough but I suspect the kitchen here is hoping to elevate the list beyond coconut crème caramel and a banana pudding.

The Drinks

A shaken, not stirred, Cafe Martini Viet (\$19) will get you in the colonial mood at Cochin. So will the Sanpan Sling and the Mekong Sunset. But wine is the main game here. French wine, to be exact. Owners Bruce Dowding and Jason Baker are mad for it and their passion shines through in a compact yet cleverly curated list that will have you matching a petit chablis with your curry, a Burgundy pinot with your duck.

Baker, who earned his sommelier stripes at Walter’s Wine Bar, is hugely knowledgeable. Take his advice and embrace the top French and Australasian drops that come by the glass (75ml and 150ml).

The Service

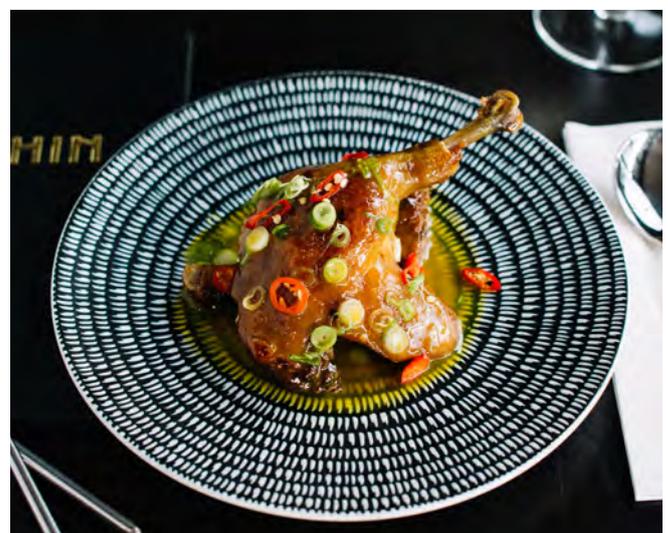
How nice to be greeted personally at the door, to be ushered to a table of your choice, to have a glass of wine in your hand within two minutes.

All that may change when word gets out about Cochin and reservations are hard to get. But I think not.

The team on the floor here is instinctively hospitable.



Cochin | Photo by Simon Shiff



The Duck L'Orange | Photo by Simon Shiff

The X-Factor

If the food at Cochin shows admirable restraint, so does the decor. No palm fronds and ceiling fans here. Instead, a sense of nostalgia is conveyed with discreet bistro touches: a misted mirror here, a sepia photograph there. Stools alternate with raffia chairs and lipstick red banquettes.

The duck l'orange, a French classic with subtle Asian scents. banquettes. High and low tables, lit by lanterns that flatter everyone, are tied together by a soothing palette of olive, brown and taupe.



Cochin | Photo by Simon Shiff

Bang For Your Buck

Cochin offers good value for money, especially if you concentrate on share dishes. The chateaubriand for two could almost satisfy three. Bottles are sensibly priced — very fine white varietals around the \$40-50 mark — and so are wines by the glass.

The Verdict

Thinking about a flight to Paris or Ho Chi Minh City? Then do your thinking at Cochin. This place will get you in the mood for both. But there's no mistaking the very Melbourne — very Richmond — feel of this place. Friendly, affordable and reliable, Cochin is a win-win.

CŌCHIN

ADDRESS	PHONE	WEBSITE
256 Swan Street, Richmond	(03) 9421 0510	www.cochin.com.au

FOOD	CHEF	PERFECT FOR
French Vietnamese	Edward Khen	Drinks after work, midweek share plates

HOURS	TABLE FOR TWO AT 7.30PM?	DESTINATION DISH
Dinner: Tues-Sun, Lunch: Fri-Sun	Likely	Spicy Chateaubriand

BOOKINGS	TIME BETWEEN ORDERING	NOISE FACTOR
Yes	6 minutes	Cheerful babble