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Num Pang Sandwich Shop: What's In A Name? A Lot, As It Turns Out

Posted by [Ed Levine](#), April 28, 2009 at 11:50 PM



The hoisin veal meatball num pang.

With Vietnamese banh mi shops opening up on every corner, I guess it was just a matter of time before our Southeast Asian sandwich explorations expanded beyond the borders of Vietnam. **Num Pang** chef and co-owner **Ratha Chau** introduced many of us to the vivid flavors of Cambodia when he opened **Kampuchea** on the Lower East Side in 2006, so who better to introduce us to the pleasures of *num pang*, which in the Cambodian language Khmer means "sandwich."

Would the sandwiches be as good as the name? *Num pang* rolls off the tongue so beautifully. Don't you think a food with that name would be delicious? Robyn and I decided we had to find out. Num num num num pang. I just love saying it. I really do. Don't you?

Chau spent his early childhood in his native Cambodia under the dictator Pol Pot (his four star general father was sent to a Vietnamese prison camp for 18 years by the Pol Pot regime). Chau and his mother and two brothers managed to escape his war-torn country when he was 11 years old and settled in Connecticut. He eventually graduated from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Chau has a genuinely cross-cultural background, so it makes sense that his sandwiches would be an authentic fusion of American and Cambodian food ideas, flavors, and ingredients.

All the num pang are served on a stubby semolina hero roll baked by Little Italy's **Parisi Bakery**. Not very Cambodian or Italian or Vietnamese, I'm sure, but it turns to be a wise choice. Each sandwich starts with crunchy fresh cucumber, pickled carrots, fresh cilantro, and a house-made chili mayo—and that turns out to be a most excellent sandwich foundation. As a result there is a certain sameness to the flavors layered into each sandwich, but the fillings are generally so good on their own that the blurring of each sandwich's flavor profile doesn't even matter.

Num Pang

21 East 12th Street, New York NY 10003; 212-255-3271; numpang.com

Service: Friendly, solicitous, helpful

Setting: Basically a kiosk with an upstairs dining area
Compare It To: Baquette

Must-Haves: pulled Duroc pork, hoisin veal meatballs, coconut tiger shrimp

Cost: \$10 for a sandwich and a drink

Grade: A-



The pulled Duroc pork (\$7.50) comes with a spicy honey that brings out the meltingly tender porky deliciousness of the pig.



Firm, perfectly grilled peppercorn catfish (\$7.25) comes with a house-made sweet soy sauce that completes the sandwich.



I kept resisting the impulse to order the coconut tiger shrimp num pang (\$7.50) because I have eaten so many bad dishes that feature coconut shrimp, but I eventually succumbed and was very glad I did. These tiger shrimp are grilled perfectly, and toasted coconut flakes added just enough crunch.



Chau's hoisin veal meatballs (\$6.75), just sweet enough savory meatball masterpieces come with jasmine rice, basil, and stewed tomato.



The vegetarian option these days is roasted cauliflower (\$6.75) with Chinese and Thai eggplant spread and a soy-milk-based chili mayo. It may sound boring, but it isn't. The sweet roasted cauliflower is cooked just enough, and the rest of the ingredients lend plenty of zing.



The grilled skirt steak num pang, whole (top) and cross-sectioned (above).

Grilled skirt steak (\$8.75) had an appealing crushed coriander and peppercorn crust, but the steak itself was pre-grilled and dry. For \$8.75 I also expected more steak for my buck.



A chili-liver pâté daily special sandwich is only for those people who love the taste of unadulterated chicken liver, or chicken liver extremism.

I loved the sweet grilled corn (\$2.25) slathered with chili mayo, a few more of those coconut flakes, and a little chili powder. I'm sure it wasn't local corn in mid-April, but it sure was tasty.



Wash your num pang down with a blood orange lemonade (\$2.50), which at various times has been just sweet enough and really tart.

Are Ratha Chau's sandwiches pricier than most of the banh mi joints around town? Absolutely, but for the most part they're made with first-rate ingredients and great care, and I for one am willing to pay for that. Ten bucks for a sandwich and either a piece of grilled corn or a blood-orange lemonade still seems like a square and fair deal to me.

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