

IT ISN'T OFTEN I EAT AT A RESTAURANT, CONSUME NINE DISHES AND LOVE EVERY ONE OF THEM. NOR ENJOY EATING THEM IN AN AIRY ARCHITECTURAL SPACE WITH HIGH CEILINGS AND Poured CEMENT FLOORS WITH PRACTICAL YET COMFORTABLE SEATING, WHERE THE MUSIC IS A MERE PRESENCE WHICH DOESN'T OVERPOWER CONVERSATION, ATTENDED BY A CHEERFUL BUT KNOWLEGIBLE WAITSTAFF, IN FULL VIEW OF THE DAZZLING OPEN KITCHEN, WHERE A SQUADRON OF CHEFS MAN GRILLS AND FLATTOPS, FINISH SAUCES AND DRESS ELABORATE SALADS LIKE SURGEONS. ALL THIS AND A MENU WHERE NOT ONE ITEM EXCEEDS \$17.

SUCH IS THE CASE WITH **SIMBAL**, WHICH OPENED IN JULY AT THE CORNER OF SAN PEDRO AND SECOND IN LITTLE TOKYO. A MASSIVE STONE SLAB SCULPTURE BY SEIJI KUNISHIMA MARKS THE ENTRANCE TO THE RESTAURANT, WHICH IS TUCKED BENEATH THE PARKING GARAGE. SIMBAL MANAGES TO FEEL BOTH SOARING AND INTIMATE WITH A DINING ROOM SEPARATED FROM THE COZY BAR BY A SPARKLING KITCHEN.

SEAN PHAM WORKED AT THE FRENCH LAUNDRY, CRAFT, SONA, AND THE BAZAAR, BEFORE RETURNING TO HIS SOUTHEAST ASIAN ROOTS TO SPEND FOUR YEARS IN HO CHI MINH CITY. PHAM BRINGS HIS HAUTE CUISINE SENSIBILITY TO VIETNAMESE STREET FOOD. THE RESULT IS DISHES WHICH ARE BOTH VIBRANT AND SUBLIME. ALTHOUGH YOU WON'T ENCOUNTER ANY OF THE MOUTH-NUMBING FOOD YOU CAN EAT IN SCORES OF VIETNAMESE, THAI AND CAMBODIAN JOINTS IN HOLLYWOOD'S THAI TOWN, MOST EVERYTHING WE TASTED HAD A TENOR NOTE OF HEAT. YOU TASTE IT IN THE CRISPY SWEETBREADS WITH PICKLED MUSTARD GREENS, THE BROILED BLACK COD WITH CARAMELIZED SHALLOTS AND CHILI-KISSED PEANUTS, THE GRILLED CHILI JAM WHICH COMES WITH ROASTED BONE MARROW, AND THE GINGER BRAISED JIDORI CHICKEN THIGHS. MARINATED MAGRET IS MORE DORDOGNE THAN DONG VAN; THE LEMONGRASS GRILLED PORK RIBS, MORE SAIGON THAN SAVANNAH.

IF I WERE TO SINGLE OUT A DISH WHERE CROSS-CULTURE-ISM ACHIEVES ITS APOTHEOSIS IT WOULD BE THE BANH MI SALAD, A DE-CONSTRUCTED VERSION OF A SANDWICH WHICH BY VIRTUE OF BEING SERVED ON A BAGUETTE IS A FRENCH-VIETNAMESE MARRIAGE IN ITSELF. A JUMBLE OF PICKLED DAIKON, CARROTS, VIETNAMESE SAUSAGE, HEAD CHEESE AND HARD-COOKED EGG, IT IS SWEET, SOUR, CRUNCHY, AND FUNKY. WE ALMOST ORDERED A SECOND ONE. I'LL CERTAINLY HAVE IT AGAIN WHEN I RETURN TO SAMPLE PHAM'S MUSSELS, BEEF TARTARE, MARINATED SQUID, ROASTED EGGPLANT, TO MENTION A FEW OF A PANOPLY OF TEMPTATIONS WHICH GRACE HIS FASCINATING MENU.

TRUE TO THEIR SOUTHEAST ASIAN ORIGINS, NOTHING IS COOKED WITH BUTTER OR CREAM.

THERE IS AN EXCELLENT WINE LIST, LEANING APPROPRIATELY ON GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN WHITES, WITH REDS FROM SICILY AS WELL SEVILLA. THE

MIXED DRINKS WITH NAMES LIKE JADE OF HEARTS AND PINK PROMISE LOOKED TEMPTING AS THEY PARADED BY OUR TABLE.

SKIP DESSERT. TOO MUCH COCONUT. HERE, PHAM MIGHT BENEFIT FROM THE VIETNAM'S FRENCH INFLUENCE. A KAFFIR LIME PANNA COTTA OR A CHOCOLATE FINANCIÈRE WOULD MAKE A DAZZLING ENDING FOR SUCH LIGHT BUT SATISFYING FARE.

SIMBAL

319 E 2<sup>ND</sup> ST, ENTRANCE AT 120 SAN PEDRO  
OPEN TUESDAY-SATURDAY 6-10PM