

# Mom's Cooking at Ypsilanti's Da Lat

"Feeding produces family."\*

My mother is a lousy cook. She has many other fine talents, but creating an attractive, tasty meal has always been beyond her reach. Even so, breakfast and dinner were daily rituals in my childhood home for which attendance was required. Just as we kids had no end of complaints about having to show up for meals (instead of getting to sleep in before school or hang with friends in the evening), we also took it for granted that my mother made every one of those meals, day after day, year after year. Much later, I came to realize that not only did she make the food, but by constructing these gatherings at the kitchen table, she made our family. Like most mothers in the world, her daily work at the stove created the food-centered events around which our family grew, bonded, fought, and shared, and to which we return periodically to get reacquainted. Even as "women's work" is expanded and redefined, feeding the family remains a central responsibility in families of all kinds.

Lang Bui, owner of the Ypsilanti-based Vietnamese restaurant, Da Lat, knows all about the value of food and cooking to the creation of family. She does most all of the wonderful cooking for this low-priced, high-quality restaurant, while her two daughter-in-laws wait on the tables. (Lately, her one-year-old granddaughter also adds to the family atmosphere, toddling quietly about the front of the dining area.) Their efforts have

produced a family restaurant worth that designation that will leave you feeling well-fed and cared for, whether you dine with your own family, with a friend or associate, or by yourself.

Lang Bui and her husband opened Da Lat nine years ago, six years after U.S. Immigration told them that, upon their arrival from Vietnam, they and their two sons would live in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Ms. Bui's contribution to the household income first led her to work in a beauty parlor, but extensive handling of hair chemicals damaged her skin.



So, with years of motherly cooking experience, she decided to open a restaurant. She read books about Vietnamese cooking and visited restaurants to figure out how Americans like to eat. She tried many dishes to decide what would work on a menu, and she admits that the Vietnamese-style dishes are changed to suit an American palate. In this way, Lang Bui brings her family and business roles together to use food to please others. But unlike the demands on my mother, Ms. Bui mostly works in the kitchen to please people she doesn't even know.

Whenever you go, Lang Bui's cooking is sure to please you. The best bet for beginning the meal is the steamed shrimp roll, a kind of egg roll filled with bean sprouts, rice, lettuce, shrimp, chicken,

and cilantro. It's much better than an egg roll, though, because it isn't fried. Instead, the wrapper is moist and cool, just a simple covering for always fresh ingredients, with a sweet peanut sauce for dipping. Even their traditional spring roll, however, is better than at most restaurants, because it's very lightly fried, keeping it crunchy, not oily.

Soups at Da Lat are also impressive. The egg drop with crab, asparagus, chicken, and noodles is bland but hearty, and the hot and sour soup is unlike anything you've had elsewhere. This version has a thin, red broth full of spicy and sweet flavors with big pieces of pineapple, tomato, shrimp, carrots, and celery. For lunch, a small serving of this sinus-clearing soup and two shrimp rolls would be tasty and filling for under \$5.00.

When ordering entrees, I recommend eating family-style, no matter who you go with. Da Lat gives everyone an empty plate and serves rice in a large covered bowl. So set the main dishes in the center of the table and take some of everything. Entrees I've tried with my family of friends include the simmered shrimp (a generous serving of peppery shrimp with thick slices of sautéed onion and ginger), steamed fish in a clay pot (a bony but tender filet steamed with tangy green peppers, carrots and onions served in its cooking juices in a covered pot), and fried bean curd with lemon grass (sautéed until chewy in a spicy brown sauce and served over shredded lettuce and scallions).

A highlight at our most recent meal was the roasted chicken. This simply named item belies the impressive plate full of two large, split chicken breast halves, perfectly roasted in a sweet brown glaze (reminiscent of teriyaki), served over sautéed mushrooms, and partly sliced for easy sectioning. The care taken in this preparation was evident and well worth the extra few minutes it took to come out of the kitchen. The least exciting dish I've tried at Da Lat was a more traditional stir-fried beef

with broccoli and mushrooms. Although everything was cooked just right—with thin slices of beef and huge pieces of colorful vegetables—the sauce was rather tasteless.

Whatever else you might order, don't miss the hot tea. It comes to the table in a painted, porcelain teapot and smells like roses and jasmine. Let it steep for a while to intensify the aroma and the flowery flavor. Other beverage treats on the menu are icy fruit smoothies and sour lemonade. Da Lat also offers some wild-sounding desserts, but I've never tried them; let me know if you do. Even when the bill arrives, you'll still be pleased with the experience, since most entrees are between six and eight bucks.

Da Lat is located on the corner of Cross Street and Ballard. From the outside, it looks like an old gas station building, but don't let that fool you. Inside, booths and hanging lamps create a warm, welcoming room. It's small, with only twelve tables, but Ms. Bui told me that Da Lat will soon be moving to a new location on the corner of Michigan Avenue and Huron Street and may have an expanded menu, an upstairs coffee bar, and perhaps even serve breakfast.

I guess as Lang Bui's family grows, so does her business. And no surprise, given her excellent skill in the kitchen. But don't take it for granted. Be sure to thank her family for their efforts for you and yours. Though she could teach my Mom a thing or two about good cooking, I'm reminded to thank my Mom for making our family, by making our meals. No one could have done that better.

\*See Marjorie L. DeVault's book, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (1991) ☑

## ROSE KNOWS



by Rose Martin,  
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It has been my experience that the forms of racism among the powers that be, and the total lack of respect towards all minority groups have been nearly unbearable, to say the least. This has been especially true in police enforcement. It's just sad to witness the total uncaring by some officers toward human kind. Sometimes I have wished that I was a cat stranded in a tree seeking assistance rather than a person needing police assistance. You see, I've always witnessed the cat getting better treatment.

Some say it's because of the bodily harm police officers themselves have suffered in the line of duty over the past thirty years, and the way they've

been trained in these times to protect themselves from that. Others say it's the growing disrespect for boys in blue who've sworn to protect and serve life. I can surely understand those explanations, given the attitudes and behavior of some folks in our community towards law enforcement officials.

But I can remember growing up in a small East Coast ghetto with "Big Jim," the cop who policed our block everyday. He was magnificent. We were not afraid of him or his fair decisions in all cases. Big Jim didn't talk no mess, and was the most loved of anyone in our neighborhood. He always got good home cooked free meals and assistance from neighborhood residents when he needed it. It was nothing for him to walk us kids to school, or comfort a crying mother who had just learned her husband or son had been killed in the war, World War II that is. He was excellent at maintaining peace in the food rationing lines, where folks would have to stand sometimes hours for milk, sugar, cigarettes, etc. Big Jim was truly the epitome of the "protect and serve" philosophy. When folks took family pictures on our block, he was always summoned to take his place in their photos. Folks on my block hardly had any family functions that did not include him. I can see him now turning the corner, nightstick in hand, being polite and helpful, smiling at the kids playing, and loving by greeting the adults

too. Which brings me to my point, I am thankful for the opportunity to have had an experience last week with a Washtenaw County Sheriff's Deputy that caused me to reflect back on my memories of "Big Jim," the cop.

Last Tuesday, at ten o'clock at night, I called home to ask the two young homeless women staying with me if they needed anything from the store. There was no answer, just the answering machine. I was concerned, but not alarmed, until I pulled into my driveway and saw a Washtenaw Co. Sheriff's Deputy and my houseguests in deep conversation on my porch.

As I approached the gathering, the deputy began assuring me that nothing was wrong, and that he, Ed Grimes, had just given the two a ride home. Later that evening my guests, Jessica and Tyler, told me the story of how Jessica, who is six months pregnant had fallen down and injured herself while walking to my house from work at a local department store. Tyler, four months clean from drugs (and alcohol), became frightened when she realized that Jessica was hurt, and that they had not one cent to call for help. The two noticed a Sheriff's Deputy vehicle parked on a side street nearby and began yelling and summoning the officer. As he pulled around the corner it appeared like he was going to pass them by, but instead was

just making a U-turn to return to the spot where Jessica was struggling to her feet, cold, tired, and injured. Tyler began right away telling the officer what had happened. To their amazement, the officer (although being cautious) made a decision to help.

While transporting Jessica and Tyler, he constantly repeated the questions, "You girls aren't going to hurt me, are you? and, "So, do you have any type of weapons on your person?" He was in constant contact with his radio dispatcher, which seemed unusual to my houseguests. (We later found out that this was normal procedure.) Still, he assisted them in a caring manner. Now this might not sound like much to many. But in my neighborhood the police almost never stop to help. It is rare to say the least. It was very cold that night and my guests' clothes were less than perfect for the sub-zero temperatures. What a caring thing to do for two people whose only contact with police in the past had been negative, not because they'd violated laws, but because they were born poor and a minority in more ways than one.

My hat goes off to Deputy Grimes, and I'm convinced he's cut from the same cloth as "Big Jim" the cop.

I remain in service to our community. ☑