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➔ **Cambodian cuisine comes to the sandwich**



Courtesy of Peter Pioppo

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When I first got word that a Cambodian sandwich shop was setting up shop on 21 E. 12th St., I had a feeling there was going to be a problem.

It wasn't because I had a problem with Cambodian cuisine; on the contrary, when Num Pang opened two weeks ago, it doubled the number of the city's Cambodian dining options. It's not that I have a problem with sandwiches; in fact, I love the city's increasing number of diverse gourmet sandwich options. No, it's because I have to walk past the incredibly enticing smells of Num Pang every day on my way to the WSN office.

Num Pang is the brainchild of Ratha Chau and Ben Daitz, the owner of the city's only other Cambodian restaurant, Kampuchea, a more traditional restaurant located in the Lower East Side. The sandwiches are inspired by the cooking of Chau's mother, and the name comes from the Cambodian term for bread or sandwich. Having been open for just under two weeks, the place is already a hit, with lunch lines 20 people deep stretching down the street.

But don't let the long line scare you. It moves relatively fast, and you'll get your food not too long after you order.

The store fits well in the trend of Asian sandwiches, including 45th Street's Chinese-inspired Xie Xie (thank you in Mandarin), and the forthcoming Vietnamese banh mi shop Baquette on Saint Marks Place, which will replace the now-shuttered automat Bamn. Although the sandwiches at Num Pang are similar to banh mi, the sandwiches here are a bit pricier (the prices range from \$6.75 to \$9.25, compared to Baquette's \$5 sandwiches).

The store offers six types of sandwiches, from a vegetarian sandwich to the exotic peppercorn catfish. Each sandwich is served on a roughly six-inch baguette from the city's Parisi Bakery. The bread is lightly toasted on the griddle and has a wonderfully soft texture. Each sandwich is topped with cucumbers, pickled carrots, cilantro and chili mayo. The chili mayo can be a bit messy as it oozes out the sides of the bread, but it gives the sandwich just the right kick. The cilantro can be a bit much and takes away from the sandwich. However, a strict no-substitutions policy means you'll be picking cilantro out yourself.

Of the three sandwiches I tried, the coconut tiger shrimp is easily the best. The shrimps are large, plump and juicy, and the coconut flakes that top of them add the perfect yin to the chili mayo's yang. The pulled pork is also a treat, although you can't really taste the spiced honey the menu advertises. But the veal meatball is disappointing. Made with hoisin sauce, basil and stewed tomato, the flavors don't mix well together, and the meatball makes the bread too soggy. While the sandwiches are mostly harmonious, they are hardly filling.

The grilled corn, which is slathered with chili mayo, chili powder and coconut flakes, is reminiscent of Cuban corn, which uses cotija cheese instead of the coconut flakes. The cob was juicy and perfectly grilled, and the toppings flavorful and messy. I can't wait until the summer when corn is in season.

The house-made blood orange lemonade is a real standout here. This drink, mixed to order, is tart-yet-tasty. The sourness can be a bit overwhelming for those looking for a sweet drink to wash down that chili mayo, but it's an interesting combination worth trying at least once to see if it's your thing.

Num Pang, with its fresh ingredients and innovative sandwiches, certainly isn't Subway, and while these sandwiches will make your taste buds tingle, they'll probably leave your stomach craving more. Then again, with food this good, I'd be returning anyway.

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