

**restaurant**

It has been a good decade since I've sidestepped Kelvin Grove Road and entered the suburb itself – and boy, hasn't the place changed. The uni campus has mushroomed and brought with it an abundance of commercial life. Its streets are lined with sparkingly new, low-rise buildings that house a multitude of industries, including restaurants. Tucked away in the newest-of-new buildings is a wee place that appears to be fast gaining a reputation.

Sago looks terrific in a colourful, brightly lit, uber-modern kind of way. And it is incredibly neat and clean, almost clinically so. Not that it's dull or cold; it's actually quite cheerful and inviting and there has been a fair bit of effort put into the decor and presentation.

I'm guessing that a similar mind is behind the food – it is some of the most beautifully presented Asian food I've seen, artfully arranged, colourful and fresh, following traditional Vietnamese favourites but giving them a very contemporary makeover. Chef Michael Lam previously owned the award-winning modern Asian eatery Two Seasons in West End.

Sago's lunch prices range from \$7.50 to \$13.50, but for dinner, the real eye-catcher is a main of roast duck with Vietnamese salad (\$26.50), inset. It's a layered stack of duck meat and fried wonton pastry sitting on a bed of mint, Vietnamese mint and a bunch of other leafy goodies. It's not the best dish on the menu (although it is pretty delicious), merely the best-looking.

Possibly the highlight, in terms of taste, is steamed barramundi fillet with Asian greens, ginger and shallot (\$25.50). It doesn't have the same visual appeal as the duck (and many other dishes) but it's a substantial hunk of barra' that remains ridiculously moist and succulent, and the chef gets the balance of the dish (the sweet, salty, sour thing) bang on. Terrific.

Nearly as good is spicy calamari salad (\$17.50). OK, it's not really spicy, but the calamari is cooked perfectly and the salad is fabulous – complex, fresh and punchy. And the pork dumplings (\$9.50 for four) are delicious.

There are a few misses. Duck lettuce cups (\$14.50) is a quirky take on san choy bau and has the potential to be a killer dish. But even though it works texturally (the crunch of water chestnuts and terrifically fresh iceberg lettuce against the meatiness of the duck), it is just a little bland, wanting for spice, seasoning and general flavour hits. Good, but not great.

Another entree of crispy tofu (\$8.50) nearly makes it, but is just a bit too oily.

These are paltry issues, but the highs are so good and the place shows so much promise that I yearn for it all to be singing.

Sago is BYO, awaiting a liquor licence. Let's hope the drinks' list arrives with as much culture, imagination and panache as the rest of the package. Even if it falls short, Sago is well worth a visit.



**SAGO**  
 Shop 2, 88 Musk Ave,  
 Kelvin Grove. Ph: 3832 7244.  
 Lunch & dinner, Mon-Fri; dinner,  
 Sat. Chef: Michael Lam. Owners:  
 Pung Thanh Hong & Tram Thi  
 Bich Nguyen. Eftpos & most credit  
 cards. V options. Street parking.  
 Wheelchair access.  
**FOOD** • 7.5 **WINE** • NA  
**SERVICE** • 7.5 **AMBIENCE** • 7.5  
**RATINGS** 10: perfect; 9: excellent; 8: great; 7:  
 good; 6: passable; 5: disappointing; 1-4: woeful

PHOTOGRAPHS • Richard Waugh

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