

Lakeside Bistro chef creates own style

By **CELESTE GRACEY**
Renton Reporter Staff Writer

Michael Le was the youngest vice president in Seafirst Bank's history, but he left it behind for a restaurant.

"I lived my dream twice, once for myself and once for my passion," he said.

This summer Le opened his sixth restaurant, Lakeside Bistro, on Rainier Avenue near the southern-most end of Lake Washington.

He sold the other five restaurants, but this one is for keeps, he says.

"I love every minute of it," he said.

Lakeside specializes in modern Vietnamese cooking, which means his dishes reflect all the major influences on 20th century Vietnam, including French, from years of colonialism, and neighbors China and Thailand.

"I created my own style," said Le, who is also the chef.

Leaving Vietnam at 15, Le grew up in Saigon under French colonialism. The family cook prepared both classic Vietnamese and classic French foods.

"I have a background in cooking, not just Vietnamese but French too," Le said.

Graduating from Eastern Washington University, he went directly into banking.

"I moved up the ladder," he said.

When a friend approached him for help with getting finances in order to open a restaurant in Chicago, he eventually became a partner in 1993, leaving the banking world.

"Chicago was the best place to make a start," he said.



Lakeside Bistro serves Modern Vietnamese food, which draws from Chinese, Thai and French traditions. Michael Le prides himself on serving fresh meats and vegetables, pictured is his wok-seared roasted chili jumbo prawns with bacon crumbles.

Celeste Gracey/Renton Reporter

He then opened a restaurant in New York, he said. But "the weather was too cold for me."

He then opened three more restaurants in the Seattle area, selling each of them.

"Michael is really well known not only in Seattle but also in the Vietnamese community," said general manager and family friend Tim Clark.

After spending a few years off work to spend time with his eight children, he decided to open Lakeside, he said. "It runs in the blood."

His son Vinh Le, the restaurant's operations manager, is trying to pick up cooking tips as he goes, Vinh said. "This is my wife, this is my life."

Taking a few ideas from his father's play book, he prides his finger-lickin'-kickn' hot wings.

The menu offers everything from garlic filet mignon on a

sizzling hot plate (\$16) to char-grilled tamarind curry glazed salmon (\$17).

Try the prawns with bacon crumbles (\$18). The colorful plate of fresh veggies is highlighted by prawns in a sweet chili sauce and bacon.

Le recommends his steamed basil clams (\$8) for a starter and claims his honey-glazed pork chops (\$14) have been a favorite among returning customers.

Each plate is a complete meal with noodles and vegetable sides that change with what's fresh at the market.

With subtle lighting and dinner plates running from \$14-\$18, the restaurant focuses on special occasions.

However the lunch menu is reasonable with combos and pho, Vietnamese noodle soup, starting at \$7.

Le is known for his pho, which is always available.

"This is the man that introduced pho to Microsoft," Clark said. "Our chef is a genius."

Michael Le, left, left a successful banking career to pursue his interest in cooking. His son Vinh Le, right, works as the operations manager at Michael's new "Lakeside Bistro," picking up cooking tips where he can.

Photo by: **Celeste Gracey**

