



# FRESH AND ZEST

**CÔBA IS ONE OF THOSE RARE FINDS. IT'S A RELATIVELY SMALL VIETNAMESE RESTAURANT IN AN OFF-THE-BEATEN-PATH LOCATION WITH A PASSIONATE CHEF – DAMON BUI – WHO KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT HE'S DOING. AND HE DOES IT WELL. GISELLE WHITEAKER DINES OUT.**

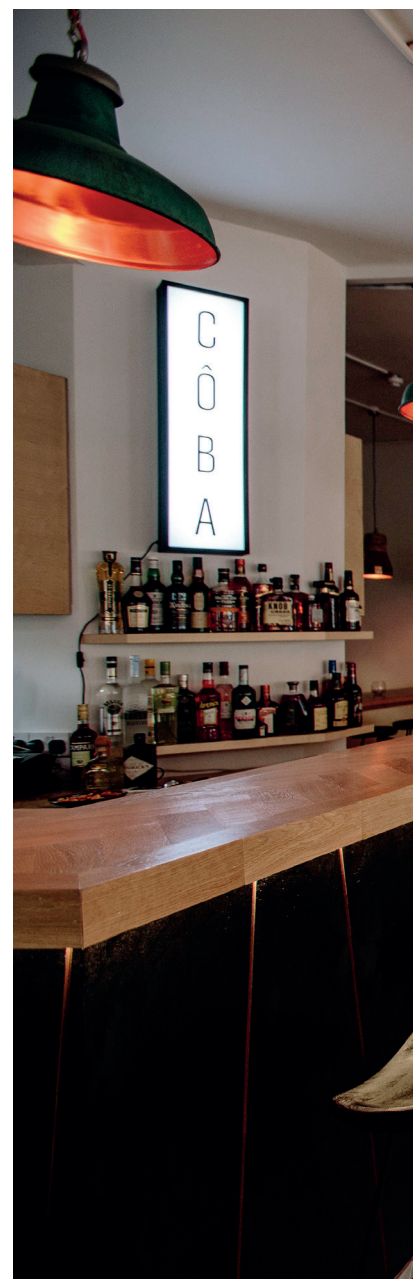
“Little Vietnam” in East London is considered the home of Vietnamese cuisine in the Capital, where a row of restaurants dishes up steaming bowls of the ubiquitous *pho* – Vietnamese noodle soup. At CōBa, in North London’s Holloway, *pho* makes an appearance, but it’s not necessarily the star of the show.

Damon Bui, the Australian-Vietnamese chef at CōBa, cites his mother as his main cooking influence. She is also behind the restaurant name. According to Vietnamese tradition, you are called by the order of your birth, rather than your given name. CōBa means ‘Auntie Number Three’, representing Damon’s mother as the third sibling. Judging by the cuisine here, she deserves to be called ‘Chef Number One.’

In an attempt to discover the one clear winning dish, my friend Dionne and I plan to eat our way through as much of the menu as we can in one sitting. We start by sampling one of CōBa’s signature cocktails. The Rose Mary is a light concoction of gin, Green Chartreuse, lime and rosemary. A smoking spring of rosemary floats in the centre of the glass, wafting its herbed scent with every sip. I’m not partial to the bitterness of gin, but the lime moderates the aftertaste and leaves my tastebuds tingling.

When it’s time to order, we ask for one of everything from the small plates list and move to a larger table. We’re going to need it. Then we order two more cocktails: CōBa’s G, with Hendrick’s, Elderflower Liqueur, mint, cucumber, egg and tonic; and CōBa’s Fling, with Zubrowka vodka, Elderflower Liqueur, apple juice, cucumber and a scoop of lemon sorbet.

Above: CōBa’s signature cocktails are works of art.



Four plates arrive simultaneously. Dionne immediately tucks into a chunky triangle of prawn toast. "It's so juicy," she says, nodding in appreciation, "...more prawn than toast and the creamy sauce is amazing." Not one to be left out, I scoop a summer roll, the soft rice-paper wrap giving my fingers purchase. Green leaves sprout from the top and I dip them in the accompanying *nước chấm* dipping sauce before biting into the crisp, fresh flavours.

"Those are vegetarian," says Damon, pointing to a pile of spring rolls. "But most people don't believe us when they taste them." I can understand why. The crispy rice paper gives way to a deliciously meaty filling that is utterly moreish.

Dionne doesn't eat pork, so the *bánh mì* is all mine. I pick up half of the crusty bread roll and bite in to a smoky barbecued pork flavour that takes me back to days of eating street food in Ho Chi Minh City. It's heavenly.

Before we can commence a second round, Damon adds two further plates to our groaning table. "Technically, the fried butter chicken is not Vietnamese, but my mother used to make it at home, so I didn't know and it's too good to leave off the menu," he explains. He's right. The skin gives a satisfying crunch and the seasoned chicken simply melts in the mouth.

There's just one more dish to sample: BBQ lamb cutlets. CòBa bills itself as a Vietnamese barbecue restaurant so I'm expecting good things. Instead, I get brilliance. The meat is packed with flavour that speaks of dark bars and cigar smoke. There's a reason for that. The cutlets are marinated in whisky, leaving them beautifully tender, with an almost caramelised coating.

"More cocktails?" asks Damon as we start another circuit of the dishes. Moments later a beverage titled Thyme is Money appears by my right elbow. It almost looks like an artisanal

Below: The industrial chic interior of CòBa.





CôBa's Fling.

coffee with its deep apricot colouring courtesy of apricot jam, which swirls into the egg froth on top. I lose myself for a moment in the whisky, thyme, lemon and bitters, interrupted by a surprised "Whoa" from Dionne. "Taste this," she says, pushing her Hot Scarlett towards me. I take a tentative sip and the flavour hits me – Triple Sec, cranberry and lime, with a kick from chilli-infused vodka.

"Would you like dessert?" asks Damon once we've cleared the plethora of plates. There's only one sweet dish on the menu, the dessert of the day, which today is coconut panacotta with passion fruit. We dive in, our spoons clashing as we ladle the creamy pudding into our mouths. It holds just the right amount of sweetness, the coconut leaving a nutty aftertaste.

"Any favourites?" Damon asks as we sip the final dregs of our cocktails. We pause, running the flavours through our minds. We reach an impasse. It's impossible to choose a clear winner from these well-crafted, fresh and zesty dishes. Rather than a single starring dish, dining at CôBa is like a stroll down Hollywood Boulevard – a journey through the stars. ■

**INFO**

To reserve a table at CôBa or read more about Vietnamese cuisine, see [www.cobarestaurant.co.uk](http://www.cobarestaurant.co.uk).

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Prawn toast.



Fresh summer rolls.



Vegetarian spring rolls.



Bánh mì.

## CÔBA'S THE SECRET COCKTAIL

### INGREDIENTS

- 30ml gin
- 20ml hibiscus liqueur
- 25ml lemon juice
- 1 egg white
- Sugar syrup to taste
- 4 dashes of angostura bitters

### METHOD

Combine all of the ingredients in a shaker and dry shake. Taste and adjust sugar levels. Add ice and shake it up well. This will break down the egg and give it the foam and a velvety taste. Double strain the mixture into a chilled coupe glass. Garnish with grated chocolate.

