



# THE SECRET

Behind the staple beverages, a hidden District 3 cafe has been designed to reflect a Saigon of 2011, says Giselle Whiteaker. Photos by Quinn Ryan Mattingly

AN'S CAFÉ IS DIFFERENT, WHICH WAS exactly the plan of An Le Ditty, design director of Unique Design, who planned and designed the cafe tucked down an alley off Tran Cao Van in District 3. It is one of those secret places where you have to know it to find it, partly because the address is 40c, but the alley is number 38. Past the alley there's 40a and 40b, but no 40c. This is one of those numbering anomalies common in this city, perhaps appropriate for a place such as An's Café.

In a city full of coffee houses, the owners set themselves a challenge — to create a space that steps away from the norm. Most cafés fall into one of three style categories; French, modern or Vietnamese. This place is designed to provide a different environment, which is both exotic and accessible. The designer was originally leaning towards doing something baroque based, but was concerned that the atmosphere would be too “heavy” and that style would alienate a fraction of Vietnamese as it would be too different from their normal cafe experience.

Instead, they opted for a combination of contemporary art and baroque. A baroque design is characterised by extravagance and elaborate ornamentation, and often focuses on contrasting elements such as dark and light. Contemporary or modern design, on the other hand, combines striking colours with clean lines and often uses industrial materials such as glass and steel. At An's Café, wide overstuffed armchairs lounge next to perspex dining chairs and

abstract paintings provide the backdrop for expressive sculptures to dramatic effect. Small gasps escaping the lips of first time visitors can be heard as they catch sight of the flamboyant interior.

But it's not all about design. It's also the ambience and service that stand out. The waiters make a direct approach and lay an iPad in front of the customer, a very unexpected move — the iPad serves as the menu. Digitally scrolling through the food and beverage offerings with a light finger swipe, like the décor, flavours from west and the east mingle. An believes this fusion of cuisines is a consequence of the evolution of the city.

“There is a new generation of young people who want to reach out and incorporate their international experience into Vietnamese daily life,” explains An, who is Vietnamese and studied design at university, but prior to delving into her new profession taught English. Another unique feature of the cafe is that it doubles as a showroom where all of the pieces — furniture, sculptures and rugs — are for sale and can be taken on the spot or ordered new. This allows the customers to take a slice of the experience home with them.

It's just minutes to lunch time and the cafe is starting to fill up with a largely Vietnamese crowd flowing in from the offices close by. Within moments the room becomes a reflection of the city; a microcosm combining Vietnam and the rest of the world.