



## Food and hospitality are the cornerstones of Banana Blossom Bistro

*By: Camila Velloso*

"There's no typical day," Annie Esguerra said laughing as she glanced over at her daughter, Emma, 8, coloring at a table nearby, and her husband, Philip Esguerra, sitting beside her.

"It's what makes things interesting," Philip said.

"Some people would call it chaotic, but it's normal for us," Annie said.

Annie and Philip are raising four young children and opening a new restaurant, Banana Blossom Bistro. And they wouldn't have it any other way.

Annie hails from a family of restaurateurs. The family business started back in Vietnam with her grandparents, who passed the craft on to her parents, uncles and aunts now running restaurants in Sacramento and San Jose. "It's just part of our family," she said.

Before moving to Maryland four and a half years ago, Annie and Philip lived in California where they first considered opening a Vietnamese restaurant of their own. But when Philip's work in government brought the family to the Washington D.C.-area, they decided on Riverdale Park as the perfect place to set up shop.

"We just fell in love with this area," Annie said. "We're kind of at the nexus of Riverdale Park, Hyattsville and College Park, so it's sort of a hidden gem," she added.

Banana Blossom Bistro is in a quaint, red brick building on the corner of 6202 Rhode Island Avenue in the heart of Riverdale Park: its Town Center. The restaurant - which opened its doors in early February - strengthens the heartbeat and character of Riverdale Park. Banana Blossom Bistro offers a fast-casual set-up that prioritizes hospitality.

"The owners are some of the nicest people I've met in my entire life," said Riverdale Park Mayor Alan K. Thompson. "Just having them as neighbors is great and having them run a restaurant in town is even better."

Berwyn Heights resident Jo Maralit spotted the restaurant from the Trolley Trail near Riverdale Park Station on her commute from work.

"I was coming through one night and I saw the lights on, so I was excited that something new was coming to the neighborhood," she said. "It's an added benefit to the county."

Annie and Phil both identified Riverdale Park as a diverse and community-based town, something that was important to them when looking for a place to host their business.

"We really want to have a relationship with our customers because we're nestled in the neighborhood," Philip said. "We want to be a place for the community where people feel welcome."

"Especially families with young kids," Annie added.

Besides high chairs, changing tables and crafts, parents can look forward to a kids' menu at Banana Blossom Bistro, a rarity in most Vietnamese restaurants according to Annie.

Replete with traditional Vietnamese dishes, including pho, rice vermicelli and Bánh mì sandwiches, the restaurant also provides vegan and allergy-friendly food options, something that Annie and Philip both take pride in. They even created a special side dish - an egg-free and vegan version of the egg roll - called "The Emma Roll", which is dedicated to their daughter.

"Our daughter has an egg allergy and that was one of the reasons that we want to be so conscious and sensitive," Annie said. Going out to eat proved especially difficult for the family, since they were constantly concerned about proper food preparation.

For this reason, the couple invested a lot in their open kitchen and equipment.

"We have dedicated equipment for certain items," Annie said. As customers line up in a queue to order, they can see three large pots in the back of the kitchen, one for each type of broth: beef, chicken or vegan. The kitchen also has different fryers allocated for meat and non-meat products.

The couple gave much thought not only to the menu options, but to the name of the restaurant itself. "We wanted something very meaningful," Annie said.

The banana blossom is the heart of the banana tree, which is abundant across the Vietnamese countryside and widely used in the Vietnamese cuisine, Annie explained. The banana blossom can be used to garnish in soups and the petal as a serving platter.

"For us, the heart of our mission is hospitality and food ... in the same way that the banana flower is the heart of the banana tree," Annie said.

“And not to mention our signature salad has the banana blossom in it,” Philip joked.

The couple designed the restaurant around both the banana blossom, reflected in the bold red and purple color scheme, and their deep roots in Vietnamese culture.

As a former colony of France, Vietnamese food and decor are heavily influenced by French culture, Annie explained.

“You see the French bistro chairs like you would see in a cafe in Paris,” Philip pointed out.

“We wanted to have French decor and French influence but then also have Asian elements throughout,” Annie said. One such detail can be observed by looking to the ceiling’s Asian-inspired lanterns.

Other fixtures in the restaurant are the work of local artisans.

“We are very community-based, so we tried to collaborate with local businesses where we could,” Annie said.

The tables are all from carpenter and woodworker Blake Sloane of Forty Third Place, who used reclaimed wood from a house in Washington D.C., that was knocked down in the ‘50s, Philip recounted.

As customers walk into the restaurant, they will find a micro-shop to their right, stocked with cookbooks, tote bags and other merchandise. The shelves are also lined with pottery and plants by local artists Leah Schaperow and Kate Geyer, respectively.

Banana Blossom Bistro is open for dinner from Wednesday through Sunday, with soft opening hours of 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Sundays\*.

The couple plans to slowly introduce more menu items to allow their staff of 12 to familiarize themselves with the process and to ensure the quality of food and service.

“We just want to get it right,” Annie said.

For now, Annie and Phil will keep busy by catering events and preparing for the restaurant’s grand opening in the upcoming weeks.

*\*Editor’s Note: Banana Blossom Bistro recently added lunch hours. They are now open from 11 AM to 9 PM Wednesdays through Saturdays and 11 AM to 7 PM on Sundays.*

Photo Gallery:



