

40-year-old Chinatown restaurant wins James Beard Foundation's 2024 America's Classics Award



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By Emma Dooling – Reporter, Philadelphia Business Journal
Feb 28, 2024

Updated Feb 28, 2024 2:44pm EST

A 40-year-old Chinatown restaurant has been named one of six winners of the James Beard Foundation's 2024 America's Classics Awards.

Vietnam Restaurant took home the award for the Mid-Atlantic region. Located at 221 N. 11th St., the concept serves barbecue, noodles, bowls, soups, stir-fries, stuffed grape leaves and spring rolls.

The America's Classics Awards are a category in the foundation's Restaurant and Chef Awards, which are considered some of the highest forms of honor in the hospitality industry. This category recognizes local restaurants that showcase the character of their surrounding communities and offer good food with a timeless appeal, according to the James Beard Foundation.

Vietnam Restaurant was founded in 1984 by Nhu Lai and Thuyen Luu after the couple left Vietnam and moved to Philadelphia in 1979. Their son Benny Lai later took over the restaurant and moved it to a larger, multi-level space next door to that location in 2000. At that time, he also changed the decor to add French colonial accents.

Vietnam Restaurant has a second location, called Vietnam Café, at 816 S. 47th St. in West Philadelphia, as well as a small grocery store near that called Fu Wah Market. Located at 810 S. 47th St., the grocery store is known for selling the family's popular bánh mì, a type of Vietnamese sandwich.

In addition to Vietnam Restaurant, the 2024 America's Classics Awards also recognized restaurants in five other regions around the country: California, Midwest, New York state, Southeast and Southwest. Lauren Saria and Allecia Vermillion, subcommittee co-chairs for James Beard's Restaurant and Chef Awards, said this year's America's Classics Award winners "emulate the spirit of their communities" and set a "commendable standard" for the restaurant industry.



Vietnam Restaurant is located at 221 N. 11th St. in Chinatown.

VIETNAM RESTAURANT

"The America's Classics Award showcases the beloved independent restaurants that have been integral to American food culture across cities big and small," Saria and Vermillion said in a statement.

Introduced in 1998, the award category has since honored more than 100 restaurants across the country. Past winners in Greater Philadelphia include Atlantic City's White House Sub Shop and Chef Vola's in 2000 and 2011, respectively; John's Roast Pork in 2006; and Corinne's Place in Camden, New Jersey, in 2022.

The James Beard Foundation has also named 10 other Philadelphia restaurants and chefs as semifinalists for other categories in its 2024 Restaurant and Chef Awards. Finalists for those honors will be announced on April 3, and the winners will be revealed during a ceremony at the Lyric Opera of Chicago on June 10.