

OPEN DOOR: Chef Charles Phan in the Ferry Building; (below) prawns and rau ram.

10 Things You Should Know About Charles Phan

Charles Phan's Slanted Door has been something of a moveable feast. From breaking new ground in the Mission District eight years ago to lighting up what had formerly been a doomed corner of South Beach, and now to an outpost in the Ferry Building, Phan has brought his old fans with him and garnered new ones along the way. But for all the acclaim that he's received for his fresh approach to Vietnamese food—including a feature in *Esquire* last year with the likes of Thomas Keller—Phan has no pretensions. He's often described as shy.

Against the backdrop of the Bay, amid a lot of hammering and whirring, Phan stands in his newest home-to-be, slated to open the first of April.

Raising his voice over the din, he says, "At

one point, they had a life-size photo of me up here. That was awful." While Phan isn't comfortable in front of the camera, the former architecture student is in his element here. "This is my dream kitchen," he says on a mini-tour. "After eight years of working in a sub-par kitchen at Valencia Street, I wanted to do things right." The other thing he's excited about is his proximity to all the produce at the new Ferry Building. "We were 80 percent organic already. It's just that everything is closer now."

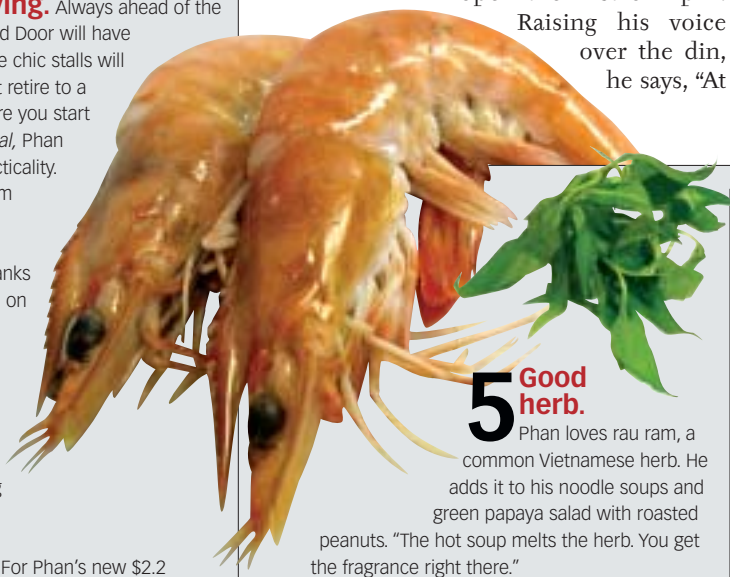
Phan doesn't want people to think he's forgotten about his original Mission digs. After a small face-lift, the yet-to-be-named restaurant will open in the fall with the old Slanted Door's original purpose: a casual, inexpensive spot, serving up Vietnamese street food and homey dishes such as soup and porridge until 2 a.m.—no reservations required. —Tracy Salamon x

1 Communal living. Always ahead of the curve, the new Slanted Door will have unisex bathrooms. The chic stalls will be "all individual rooms" that retire to a communal trough sink. Before you start reminiscing about *Ally McBeal*, Phan admits it's mostly about practicality. "I've never seen the show. I'm always in the restaurant."

2 Spot on. Giant tanks of live seafood will be on view in the open kitchen. Phan's especially jazzed about having fresh West Coast spot prawns. "They start to disintegrate almost immediately," he explains, so alive and kicking is the only way to go.

3 Heavy lifting. For Phan's new \$2.2 million space, a massive piece of glass artwork will add mystery to the open kitchen by obscuring the action. "It's actually sheets of stacked glass. It will weigh four-and-a-half tons!"

4 Card tricks. From tubs of dried mussels to "crazy, spiny fruit," Phan admits he doesn't always know the name or use for many of the mysterious products he sees in Asian markets. "I would love to create a deck of cards, like a glossary. There would be pictures. You could just show it to the store owner, and he could point to it."



5 Good herb.

Phan loves rau ram, a common Vietnamese herb. He adds it to his noodle soups and green papaya salad with roasted peanuts. "The hot soup melts the herb. You get the fragrance right there."

6 Beetle juice. On a recent trip to Vietnam, Phan stopped in one of the ubiquitous street soup stalls for the chef's specialty: "A gland from a beetle. I paid for two drops. I tasted pear and walnut. Licorice. It was as intense as a good bottle of wine. It was unbelievable."

7 Fish fry. Pleasing loyal customers can be a challenge. "We have two regulars. They went to Mexico and brought fish back with them that they wanted me to cook—frozen!" On a jam-packed

Friday evening, Phan faced the task of preparing pounds of rock-solid fish. "I cut it all up and fried the shit out of it!" he admits. His guests were enchanted.

8 Job opening. The original Mission District location had its up and downs. "Once, this guy in chef's clothes walked in off the street, grabbed a pair of tongs and started ordering everyone around. I said, 'Who is this guy?' He was full-on drunk." Phan manhandled him out of the restaurant. "As I came back in, this woman asked me, 'Did you just fire that guy?'" Phan says, laughing. "I didn't want to tell her what had just happened."

9 Sauced. Phan wishes he could get the tea-hued "first round" fish sauce that you can get in Vietnam here. "I smuggled some home." If it was affordable, he'd love to have it air-freighted over every few months.

10 Kid fare. Feeding his three kids—age five and under—was the inspiration for a kiosk in the Ferry Building that will feature home-cooking "kits," with prepared ingredients. "A bit of meat, vegetables, noodles and a simple broth—I want to change the way people eat."