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Culinary Culture and Trend

430-H01-AS gr. 05182

FOOD AND CULTURE INTRODUCTION OF VIETNAM

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College LaSalle

November 16th, 2018

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# Introduction

In recent decades, worldwide has witnessed a shifting number of tourist arrivals to South East Asian countries. Especially in Vietnam and its 3 main cities such as Hanoi, Hue and Saigon. In general, most of the tourists are impressed and fascinated with the Vietnamese culture and the cuisine. The country is famously known for their rich history of going through many occupations and impacts as well as the unique of flavours in gastronomy formed by locals. Therefore, each region of Vietnam has different ingredients, subculture and methods of cooking to aggrandize their traditional dishes.

# History, Culture & Geography

Geographically, Vietnam is a coastal country situated in South East Asia. Surrounded by China in the north, Laos and Cambodia in the west, the rest covered by the East sea shapes the country to an S. The skinny territory is enriched by a huge amount of resources of seafoods. Moreover, it is closed to the equator line which gives the country a tropical climate with two main seasons of hot and rain as an advantage to grow exclusive fruits like durian, lychee, mangosteen, rambutan and dragon fruit. Vietnam is also widely known for the presences of rare, exotic animals on the plates due to the natural sites like deserts, mountains and thousands of caves[[1]](#footnote-1). Tourists are usually surprised by strange domestic animals like snake, lizard and water buffalo. Concerning water buffalo, back at the time, it is the main tool to cultivate crops in the rice fields across the country which the two mains are attached with Red River Delta in the north and Mekong Delta in the south.

Speaking of impacts as mentioned, the Chinese culture plays a big role in patterning the Vietnamese cuisine. The Chinese had occupied Vietnam for almost a millennium (from 207 BC to 906). They have significantly influenced the northern side from the cooking styles to the ingredients. The Hanoi city was heavily influenced with the stir-frying, steaming and noodle-based soups. Some dishes are originally from China then later descend to Hanoi and formed their own versions like Nem Cuon (Spring Roll), Thit Kho Tau (Caramelized Pork and Eggs). However, the dishes are very light cooked and not oily like the Chinese. The boiling, steaming and stewing are very well adapted in the north, go with fresh herbs as spices.

In contrast to the north, the south seems to be more influenced from India, Thai and Cambodia. Sweet and spicy are the two main factors that identify the southern cuisine. The use of fruits like coconut, papaya is very commonly found in their dishes Example to make Canh Chua (sour soup), instead of using tomato like the north, the south uses pineapple. Indians did not only bring their values to Vietnam through food but also through religion. Like many Asian countries in the Est wing such as Thai, Korea, Japan, Vietnam is also affected from Buddhism[[2]](#footnote-2). It is the most popular and favourable religion among the Vietnamese people and somehow consequences to their way of eating. However, most people don’t consider it a religion, but a code of living. Example, they try to avoid killing as much as possible, even eating color red or black, especially on the first day of the month of lunar calendar. Those represent for blood, killing, therefore bring bad luck.

Vietnam became a unique and identifiable country in South Est Asia partly because of the French colonial period. The French had engaged its culture for almost a century (from 1867 to 1945). Till now, many of their heritages still present in Vietnam, particularly in the north (Tonkin), Hanoi which is one of the oldest cities and first settlements. It has been inhabited since 3000 BC and been the capital for many dynasties, including during the French colonization of Indochina. Old French villas, opera, hotels are now an indispensable part of the city appearance. Thus, it is considered as the home of Franco-Vietnamese cuisine. Speaking of cultural influences, the French had contributed a huge amount of western ingredients into the country firstly through merchandise, then the arrival of Catholic missionaries and lastly by colonization. The importation of new ingredients such as onion, coffee, wheat flour, are for the French but lately was spread and planted throughout the country to create a stable providing source. In conclusion, the French has unintentionally brought a new wave of cuisine into Vietnam. This part has collaborated with the people for a century, hence became a part of the Vietnamese tradition. Nowadays, people can easily see French dishes like Banh Mi (Baguette), Bo Bit Tet (Beef steak), Bo Luc Lac (Sauté diced beef).

# Ingredients/Food Items

Vietnam deals with harsh weather conditions throughout the year which greatly impacts the food choices. Because of this, green ingredients are not readily available. Spices however, are plentiful due to its mountainous and humid topography. The cuisine in Central Vietnam therefore, is spicier than the rest of the country and the dishes are colourful. It is described as having the strongest, boldest flavors in Vietnam.

Some of the popular ingredients:

Chilli peppers: Chilli is not indigenous to Vietnam but rather was introduced to the region, originally by the Portuguese. There are different types of chilli peppers; some mild and others hot. They are grown and harvested and dried. They are sometimes added to the dish in this form. Dried chillies are also ground into powders and then the powder is added to the food and sometimes mixed with other spices.

Shrimp Sauce: Shrimp sauce is blended into foods. The scent is strong and described as pungent. The shrimp is fermented, and other spices added. It is mainly used to add flavor to dipping sauces and other dishes.

Thai Basil: This is grown in the region and withstands the heat of cooking than other varieties of basil. It is slightly spicy, and the flavour described as a combination between anise and licorice. It is often served as an accompaniment to some dishes, so each person adds enough according to their taste.

# Cooking Methods

Northland dishes commonly have frugal and light flavour, people mainly use fish sauce for cooking. Tonkinese usually use boil, poach, steam cooking methods. Specifically, they use boil method for some dishes such as the beef of Pho so as to sweeten the broth and also keep the rich nutrients value of the meat. Besides, Tonkinese usually have their food grilled. One of the most traditional grilled dishes is called *“bun cha*” (*grilled pork with rice vermicelli)*. They use this technique in order to savour and also deodorise the ground pork. People marinate ground pork with garlic, onion, some seasonings and grill them until they are well cooked. Grilled pork will be dipped in fish sauce and pickled vegetables for the dish.

Central region of Vietnam is famous for steam method with variety of steamed dish. Prominently, “*banh bot loc*” (tapioca shrimp dumpling cake), the most wide-known traditional steam dish of this region. The dumpling is wrapped and tied in lightly oiled banana leaves, and the packets are tied together by banana leaf strips and then they steam. By this method, while opening the parcel, people can still smell and taste the banana leaf flavor. These kinds of steam dishes are usually used with the combination of fish sauce, vinegar, shrimp stock, sugar and fresh chilis. Furthermore,

Saigon is a big city which represents for the south side of Vietnam. Its cuisine has the combination of different culture, blends between Western and Eastern culture, modernity and tradition, however, it still maintains own specialty. Saigonese mostly use stir frying technique to their food. They consume very small amount of oil for the dish so as not to be oily like Chinese food and also still be healthy. One of the most popular stir fry dishes in Saigon is stir f*ry cellophane noodles with crab*.  The noodle is stir fried with shredded carrots, garlic, onions, mushrooms, fish sauce, fresh crab meat and claw. It is also garnished with fried onion and fresh scallions.

# Dishes/Recipes

Hanoi lies in the middle of Red River. Furthermore, Hanoi is a thousand-year-old city, used to be the capital of different dynasties so that Hanoi’s culture contains the elite of the whole country. Besides, Hanoi’s culinary is also influenced by French during their colonization, specifically “pho” - its traditional dish. Most historians concede that “pho” first appeared in the late 19th century when French first colonized Vietnam. Some said that the source of “pho” comes from the word *feu* from French dish “pot au feu”*.* Since then, Vietnamese has pronounced “feu” as “pho” as the dish we know today. Some others said that the Vietnamese back at the time were impoverished by colonizers and had to gather the leftover bones, meat and stewed them to had it with noodles.

Huế, a city in Central Vietnam, was once the capital city of the last dynasty of Vietnam which explains the highly decorative and colorful food influenced by the ancient Vietnamese royal cuisine. The cuisine has less of a Chinese influence than the north while still have traces of the French cuisine used in the south of Vietnam. Bun Bo Hueis usually eaten for lunch, dinner or late dinner. The broth is a mixture of beef bones and beef shank simmered with lemongrass. It is then seasoned with shrimp sauce, sugar and spicy chili oil. Slices of marinated and boiled beef shanks along with oxtail and pig knuckles are then added. When it is served, lime wedges, cilantro, green onions, onions, mint, basil, red cabbage, other spices and sometimes mung bean sprouts are served along with it and the individual adds according to their taste.

On the other hand, Saigon or also known as Ho Chi Minh city is situated in the South region of Vietnam, near the Mekong. It features a warm, humid, tropical climate with large amount of rainfall. Owing to its condition, the fertile land and the weather have contributed vital role to vegetable and breeding here. By this reason, their dishes are very balanced and well combine with different colors. The significant dish for that example is Goi Cuon or Fresh Spring Roll as many restaurants in Montreal call it. Thin rice paddy rolled with vermicelli, herbs, shrimps (sometimes can be replaced with other seafood) and then dipped in the fermented fish/shrimp sauce.

# Tradition vs Modernity

With the influences of the occupation of other nations and the introduction of certain foods to trade and the women working outside the home, the trend has shifted from the long hours of cooking at home to more modern comforts where lots of road side food stalls and restaurants now sell their different foods. The trend has now also shifted to where certain foods that were once considered at a certain meal are now eaten as leftovers at another meal. However, even today, the royal traditions are present. Households, even though not affluent, serve a variety of dishes at meals echoing ancient the royal traditions of the Nguyen Dynasty. The foods are still considered rich and complex. The distinct flavours continue to dominate the foods making Central Vietnam a must for those who enjoy bold and spicy cuisine.

Therefore, despite the impact both from the occupations from the past or the huge amount of tourist arrivals in present, the Vietnamese can keep their values in food items and dishes. Comparing to those who has changed their methods of cooking to satisfy the tourist and the new customers, the Vietnamese people in contrast conservatively protect its flavour. Tradition still plays the main role in featuring the gastronomy. The conservatism not only appears in food but also in their life style and their nationalist mentality in general.

# Conclusion

Vietnamese cuisine is more diversified and richer as studies the essence of the world and inherits the prominent characteristics of the nation. Thanks to those figures, Vietnam cuisine has asserted its position in the world’s gastronomy and has several consecutive high-ranking dishes in the prestigious list. Furthermore, cuisine has played an important role to the development of Vietnam’s tourism. Tourists, who travel to Vietnam, are not only impressed of beautiful sightseeing but also delectable traditional food. In short, Vietnam cuisine has some unique values and huge contributions to its economic development by attracting more and more tourists all around the world.

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1. Among them is Son Doong cave, which is the biggest cave in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Buddhism is principally known for promoting peace [↑](#footnote-ref-2)