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THE ROVING FEAST

One bowl of pho can lead to another Vietnamese soup remains a favorite

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[Marlena Spieler](#)

My husband is addicted to pho. It started innocently enough, when we met for lunch in San Francisco with cousin Burt who took us to Irving Street, near 19th.

"I love pho," said Cousin Burt. We ordered our bowl, with everything, following Burt's lead and sat there waiting for what we thought would be just a bowl of soup. It was, in fact, a life-changing event.

Our bowls arrived, steamy and fragrant with the heady scent of beef, star anise, roasted garlic and ginger. The bottom of the bowl was filled with rice noodles, tender chunks of boiled beef, a few morsels of tendon and tripe; the broth was clear and richly flavored, virtually fat-free in its clarity. Floating on the surface were a few shavings of onion and rosy slices of beef.

The waitress brought out a bowl of crisp raw bean sprouts, sprigs of fresh mint, Thai basil, cilantro, wedges of lime, slices of chile. On the table were a cruet of fish sauce, soy sauce, a jar of hoisin, siracha chile sauce and a bowl of hot chile paste. We inhaled the aromatic steam that came up from the bowl, and began tearing this herb and that, releasing its fragrance then throwing it into the bowl, adding a handful of bean sprouts, squirting a bit of lime, dabbing in the hot chile.

One, two, three ... Dip!

I plopped a bit of hoisin and some pickled chiles into a dipping saucer and every so often would dip in with my chopsticks a slice of rare beef, a pile of rice noodles. Then we took a breath to relax and sip tea. Then we began to add more herbs and more bean sprouts, so that no one bite was the same as the next.

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It was like a happy frolic through the flavors of Vietnam and by the end of the bowl we felt invigorated though the bowl was so huge we barely got to the bottom -- and we had ordered the smallest bowls. Afterward, we felt light, despite the amount of soup we had eaten. And by the next day we wanted to repeat the experience.

We woke up and after a bone-rattling cup of coffee, thought about eating our usual toast, and then Alan and I looked at each other. We didn't even need to say it: pho. We both felt the first stirrings of addiction.

Vietnam in a bowl

Pho is sometimes described as Vietnam in a bowl. All of the flavors and textures are there, from the north to the south: the rich, the hot, the pungent, the sour, the crisp, the fragrant, the tender, the soft. It is a layering that trails the history of the land, from the Chinese-influenced beef- noodle soup that originated in Hanoi, through the spices of neighbor and conquering countries, ending with the freshness of toppings that is said to have been introduced by the French.

No other country serves such an invigorating herb and salad plate, especially with a bowl of soup.

When you eat pho, the noodles slap around your lips, scattering droplets of broth over your face. And, if you eat like me, you may splash some on your dining companion's face too. Eating pho together is a bonding experience.

Back in London we found two phos; one was close by on Wardour street so I met up with fellow food writers John Whiting and Josephine Bacon, then ordered up the big, big bowl. We were served a tidy small bowl. There was such a small amount of hot broth that my glasses did not steam up, not even once. Oh, it was delicious soup with a crunchy little salad of herbs, but we felt no frisson of pho-nirvana. Shortly afterward in Paris, we interspersed our traditional French meals of salads, meats, buttery creamy indulgence with bowls of pho. It seemed quite a good dietary move, healthwise, too.

Eating our merry way through the phos of Paris brought us from arrondissement to arrondissement, from dainty little Frenchified phos, with their subtle flavors and ingredients that had been put together in the kitchen, to the multiethnic Belleville, where we sat

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down to a big splashy bowl of strong and satisfying pho.

Our passion -- some might call it obsession -- with pho is leading me to one conclusion. Next stop: Vietnam.

PHO

When I want a bowl of pho at home, but don't have hours to spend in the kitchen, I make the following quick version by simmering canned beef broth with the requisite spices and aromatics, ladle it over rice noodles and serve with its classic fresh salad, herby and spicy condiments. While you won't get the long-simmered fragrant soup pho houses offer, this has the distinctive flavor of pho and the convenience of being very quick.

As a variation, chicken soup can be made pho-style, by using chicken broth instead of beef and substituting shreds of cooked chicken for the raw beef garnish; similarly I sometimes use vegetable broth with diced tofu in place of the beef.

INGREDIENTS:

Spiced Beef Broth:

1 (2-inch) piece of ginger, unpeeled

1 or 2 shallots, unpeeled and cut into halves

1/2 carrot, thinly sliced

Pinch of sugar

4 cups low-sodium beef broth

2 cups water or chicken broth

2 or 3 star anise

3 whole cloves

1 cardamom pod

1 cinnamon stick, about 2 inches long

Sea salt to taste

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Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Fish sauce to taste

To Assemble

12 ounces rice stick noodles

1/3 pound beef sirloin, slightly frozen (for easier slicing)

1/3 cup chopped cilantro

1/2 yellow onion, sliced paper thin, and/or 2 green onions, cut into thin rings

Herbs & Sprouts

2 cups fresh bean sprouts, washed and drained

10 to 15 big sprigs of Asian basil

Handful of fresh mint sprigs

12 saw-leaf Vietnamese herbs (optional)

6 Thai chiles or 1 serrano chile, cut into thin rings

1 to 2 limes, cut into wedges

Freshly ground black pepper

Condiments

Sriracha hot sauce

Asian fish sauce and/or soy sauce

Hot chile paste

Hoisin sauce

INSTRUCTIONS: Finely grate about 1 teaspoon of the ginger (don't worry about peeling); set aside.

Place the remaining whole piece of ginger along with the shallots and carrot in an ungreased nonstick pan and char lightly and evenly over high heat.

Transfer to a large saucepan and add a pinch of sugar, along with the beef broth and water.

Dry-toast the star anise, cloves, cardamom and cinnamon stick in a small ungreased skillet over high heat for a few moments. Add to the broth and vegetables.

Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low and simmer for about 30 minutes.

Season with salt, pepper and fish sauce; remove the spices and vegetables using a slotted spoon. Keep the broth at a low simmer.

Cook the noodles by boiling according to the package instructions; drain and set aside.

Slice the partially frozen beef thinly against the grain.

To serve: Into each serving bowl place a large portion of noodles (these may be cool and they may stick together -- not to worry, they'll unstick in the hot broth).

Top each bowl of noodles with a dab of the reserved grated ginger, a sprinkling of cilantro, a few onion rings and 4 to 6 thin slices of beef.

Ladle the hot broth into the bowls and serve accompanied by the plate of herbs and condiments.

Serves 4

PER SERVING: 420 calories, 16 g protein, 79 g carbohydrate, 3 g fat (1 g saturated), 17 mg cholesterol, 250 mg sodium, 3 g fiber.

Marlena Spieler's latest book is "Classic Home Cooking." She divides her time between the Bay Area and London, and is a regular contributor to BBC Radio and Television. E-mail her at food@sfchronicle.com, or visit her Web site at marlenaspieler.com.



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