

vietnam

food pho thought

Vietnam's cuisine takes inspiration from around the world — then adds its own unique flavour

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Bun rieu (crab soup) is a northern dish widely available in Ho Chi Minh City; Top left to right: Banh mi heo quay; lunch at Ngon Restaurant; pho broth



Renowned heritage expert, William S Logan was of the view that Vietnamese culture survived long periods of colonialism by “bending with the wind”. His argument was related to the architecture in the nation’s “characteristically multi-layered” cities, but you could also examine the local cuisine in the same light.

Let’s start with a bowl of *pho bo* (beef noodles), the country’s most lauded dish. As you sip on the beefy broth with a (Western) spoon and pluck the linguine-thick noodles with your (Eastern) chopsticks, you might mull over how the word ‘pho’ may come from the French *pot au feu* (beef stew) or how Vietnamese cooks possibly created a dish from the beef that the steak-eating French colonials discarded. The noodles — not to mention the use of ginger and star anise — point to China, but the preparative charring of shallots also hints at French techniques.

Nobody knows the exact moment of conception; just that *pho* was born in the north about 100 years ago and that it migrated south to then-Saigon after the Geneva Conference separated Vietnam into two in 1954.

Today, *pho* is ubiquitous in the south, and fully assimilated to local tastes. At Pho Le restaurant, every bowl comes with a tower of fresh aromatic greens, beansprouts and fresh chillies; on every table there’s a jar of *sot tuong* (hoisin sauce) and three kinds of chilli sauce. Southerners like a spicy kick, which the venerable Vietnamese journalist Huu Ngoc attributes to the logic of traditional medicine (in hot climates, we should drink and eat hot things). The preference for a sweeter broth, he pins on Guangdong.

Pho is UBIQUITOUS and FULLY ASSIMILATED to local tastes

BONE AND BREAD

One popular local dish (also “invented” in the north) with a clear link to Guangdong is *banh cuon* (steamed, rice-flour crêpes filled with pork and wood ear mushrooms) as it’s a dead ringer for *cheong fun* (rice noodle roll). And there’s no denying the Sino-Vietnamese roots of *mi hoành thanh cha siu* (soft dumplings, slivers of pork, served with egg noodles in a pork broth).

Elsewhere, you’ll come across glaringly European dishes, like *bo ne* (steak and egg served on a still-sizzling hotplate with white onions and a blob of pâté). The more



Asiatic-looking *bo luc lac* comprises stir-fried beef cubes with white onion, bell pepper and tomato — all originally French imports — and is served with fried spuds.

No prizes for guessing the origins of the local baguette (*banh mi*) — sold throughout the city



in abundance. Meaty fillings on offer from vendors include *xiu mai* (Chinese-style meatballs), *heo quay* (crackling pork) and *pâté*. Each sandwich comes packed with yin (crunchy cucumber, shreds of pickled carrot and papaya) and yang (chilli and coriander).

As Thanh Nguyen, the Danish-Vietnamese owner of Grillbar Eatery & Café, says: “Everything is considered Vietnamese — even crème caramel.”

Everything is considered Vietnamese — even
CRÈME CARAMEL



MAIN: Banh mi; Inset left / right: Bo luc lac; banh cuon

take me there

When it comes to eating at Ho Chi Minh’s street stalls and family-run restaurants, no reservations are necessary.

PHO BO

» *Pho Le*, 303 Vo Van Tan, Dist. 3
» *Pho Hoa*, 260c Pasteur, Dist. 3

BO KHO

» *Pho Quynh*, 323 Pham Ngu Lao

BANH CUON

» *Banh Cuon Hai Nam*, 11a Cao Thang, Dist. 3
» *Ben Thanh Market* (look for a sign that says “Banh Cuon Thanh Tri”)

Hu Tieu Nam Vang; Below: Diners tuck into banh khot and banh xeo



IN THE SOUP

For a beguiling mix of ingredients, try *bo kho*, a lightly curried beef and carrot stew simmered in chillies and lemongrass with star anise, fresh basil and white onion also in the mix. Served with *banh mi*, this dish has evident French influences and local flavours but also nods to the Indian side of Indochina.

You'll spot the odd curried dish in an otherwise typical duck speciality or BBQ restaurant but these descendants of Indian and/or Thai cuisine all feel very local in taste. There is a dish known as "the Phnom Penh soup" (*hu tieu nam vang*) – vermicelli-thin noodles with a combo of prawn and pork (and a stalk of Chinese celery as a token green). But what's Khmer about this dish? Every vendor answers with a shrug. (It's likely created by southern Chinese migrants in Phnom Penh).



extra helpings

Go to **Nha Hang Ngon** (160 Pasteur, Dist. 1), where you can find many of the dishes mentioned in this story and many, many more.

Another option is the wonderfully and wilfully old fashioned **Nhu Lan**, which also sells a wide variety of local dishes (despite being best known as a bakery), 64-68 Ham Nghi, Dist. 1.

take me there

BANH MI



Grillbar Eatery & Grill, 122 Le Thanh Ton, Dist. 1

Le Banh Mi on the corner of Chu Manh Trinh and Le Thanh Ton, Dist. 1

Banh Mi Ba Lac, front of a photography shop at 46 Nguyen Hue, Dist. 1

Anh Phan, 164 Cong Quynh, Dist. 1 (near the backpacker district)

HU TIEU NAM VANG AND MI HOANH THANH



Ben Thanh Market, Dist. 1

BO NE



Bo Ne Le Hong, 489/27/39 Huynh Van Banh, Phu Nhuan Dist. 1

Another local staple, *banh khot* (shrimp cakes) bears more than a passing resemblance to Cambodia's *num kroot* but which came first? In Vietnam, *banh khot* is considered 100% Vietnamese and a miniature version of *banh xeo* – a turmeric-infused pancake stuffed with pork, shrimp and beansprouts.

Heritage experts such as Mr Logan might be aghast at the sight of so many skyscrapers and glitzy malls in Ho Chi Minh City today, and the aggressive expansion of global fast-food chains is disconcerting for lovers of traditional food. But Ho Chi Minh City's culinary heritage remains visible and intact – and the best strategy for its preservation means we should surely eat as much of it as we can. ■

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