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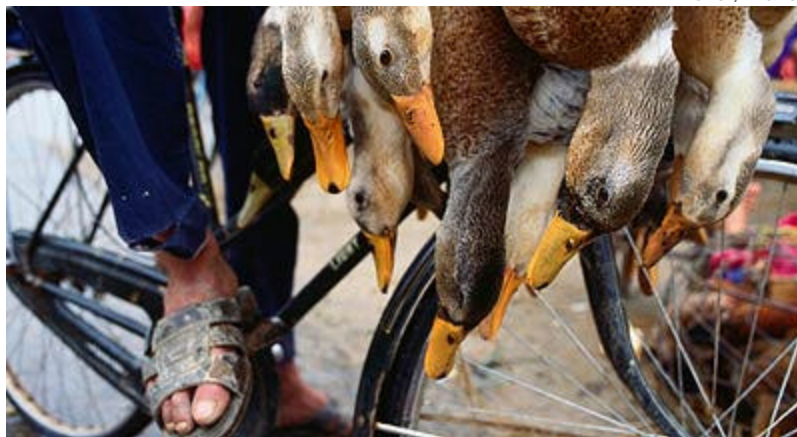
PRINT EDITION

CHRISTMAS SPECIALS

Vietnamese food

Eating out in Vietnam

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Lonely Planet

As communism crumbles, a great cuisine revives

IN VIETNAMESE, simple tasks are not as “easy as pie”—they’re “like eating dog’s brain”. But until recently, eating dog’s brain was not easy at all. Vietnam’s old communist regime frowned on bourgeois excesses, such as eating out. The few restaurants that survived were drab, soulless spots reserved for party grandees and visiting dignitaries. Anyway, there was not much food on offer. Thanks to a disastrous attempt to force all the country’s small family farms to merge into giant collectives, Vietnam flirted with famine in the 1980s. A decent portion of rice, let alone a dog’s brain, constituted a feast.

Faced with desperate food shortages and a growing exodus of “boat people”, the government undertook tentative market reforms. Its first step was to give peasants secure tenure over the land they farmed, and freedom to sell their crops at a profit. Gradually, other forms of private enterprise won freer rein. The ensuing revolution was not just agricultural, economic and social, but also gastronomic. Ten years ago, there were only three restaurants serving dog along the dyke that protects Hanoi from the Red river; now there are 25. Hungry Hanoians can feast not only on dog’s brain, but also sausages of dogmeat with beans and bitter herbs, grilled dog with ginger and shrimp sauce, boiled dog with lemongrass and steamed dog’s liver with chilli and lime.

Geography determined the basics of Vietnamese food. The vast deltas of the Red river and the Mekong provide the staple, rice, while the strip of coast that connects them supplies abundant fish. Every other aspect of Vietnamese cuisine, however, has changed along with the country’s tumultuous history. Chinese invaders introduced chopsticks and soy sauce. French colonists brought coffee, now the country’s biggest cash crop. Pressed rice cakes became popular during the war with America, as a durable and lightweight ration. American ice-cream, which had been

sidelined by Russian slush, has made a comeback since America and Vietnam re-established diplomatic ties in 1995.

Nowadays, free-market reforms are having a profound effect on Vietnamese food, most obviously in terms of the quantity available. In 2000, Vietnam produced some 32m tonnes of rice: more than twice the output of 1987. That huge increase has transformed the country from a net importer of rice to the world's second-largest exporter (after Thailand). Over the same period, production of chicken and pork—and much else—more than doubled.

But this plenty is unevenly distributed. A third of Vietnamese children are underweight, and even more are stunted. Ethnic minorities living along Vietnam's mountainous borders with Laos and China are the hungriest, and the north is hungrier than the south. The weather in the Mekong delta (in the south) is warm and wet all the time, allowing farmers to churn out three rice crops a year. The chilly northern winters, by contrast, limit their counterparts in the Red river valley to two. The war's legacy plays a role, too. The south was only subjected to collectivisation for about a decade after reunification, compared with some 40 years in the north, so agriculture suffered less disruption.

Many Vietnamese still have to eat whatever they can lay their hands on. Pet birds and dogs are kept indoors to save them from the cooking pot. In 1998, the government tried to reduce the consumption of snakes and cats by banning their sale, since the exploding rat population was damaging crops. Instead, peasants simply took to eating rats as well. The dwindling number of rats, in turn, has caused an explosion in the numbers of another tasty treat: snails.

Meanwhile, in nearby Ho Chi Minh city, the country's commercial capital, a recent survey found that 12.5% of children were obese—and the figure is rising. Local restaurants vie with one another in expense and luxury. Hoang Khai, a local businessman, recalls how his family always celebrated at home when he was young, because there was nowhere to go out. He decided to change all that, by ploughing the returns from his textile business into a restaurant lavish enough to suit the city's business elite. The result is Au Manoir de Khai, a colonial villa smothered in gilt and silk where a meal with imported wine can set you back more than most Vietnamese earn in a year.

“The government appealed to farmers to eat fewer snakes, since the rat population was exploding. So they began eating rats”

Mr Khai's humbler compatriots are also learning to enjoy their food again. Take Lan, who has been cooking Hanoi's famous beef-noodle soup, *pho bo*, for over 20 years at a hole-in-the-wall stand in the city's old quarter. She learned the trade from her parents, she says, but never bothered to put any effort into it since the shop belonged to the state. In the 1990s, however, it was sold to an entrepreneur as part of the government's economic reforms. Now she uses only the softest noodles, and stews her beef broth for eight hours before serving—twice as long as before. People are fussier now, she explains, and won't tolerate slapdash service.

Of silkworms and goats' testicles

Indeed, Vietnam's culinary renaissance is helping to revive traditions lost during the years of war, famine and repression. Didier Corlou, a French chef who has married into a Vietnamese family, explains how his in-laws eagerly contributed old recipes for his recent book on Hanoian cuisine. Several new restaurants in Hanoi have helped to popularise old-fashioned medicinal wine. Diners at the inexpensive Highway 4, for example, merrily knock back shots flavoured with silkworm, snake, crow or goat's testicles. The food, too, is a souped-up version of traditional mountain cuisine, complete with rural treats such as eel or frog. Even street food is being gentrified: at Quan An Ngon in Ho Chi Minh city, bejewelled ladies wash down their stuffed pancakes and hot-

and-sour soup with sips of chardonnay.

There are innovations as well as resuscitations. Highway 4 serves spring rolls containing foreign ingredients such as wasabi paste and mayonnaise. These are so popular that several other local restaurants have copied the recipe. Mooncakes, a delicacy sold in the autumn, now come stuffed with chocolate as well as the standard beans and egg. Bars—a foreign concept in Vietnam, where food always accompanies drink—are beginning to spread.

Unlike the cheap pubs that draw only men, the comedy acts, raffles and bands at the new nightspots attract both men and women. But the biggest new craze of all is the ubiquitous *com*, a sort of Vietnamese fast-food joint. Whereas traditional street stalls serve only one dish, *com* stands offer a wide choice of ready-made toppings to accompany a bowl of rice. Poor Vietnamese, delighted by the variety and convenience, are flocking to them.

Not everyone is happy about these changes. Cha Ka Le Vong, a Hanoi restaurant which only serves a thick stew of fish and herbs, has survived three wars, two famines, several attempts at nationalisation, hyperinflation, and the dramatic boom and bust of the 1990s. But the old lady who runs it considers current culinary trends a tougher challenge than any of that. *Coms*, new-fangled foreign ingredients, and even well-entrenched French imports, such as bread or French fries, are “a threat to our tradition”, she rails. To this day, Vietnam has no McDonald's.

But most Vietnamese are adapting to commercial pressures all too readily. Farmers, suddenly paid according to what they produce, are slathering their crops in pesticides to increase their yields. Many Hanoians fear that this may damage their health; the market stalls that advertise “clean vegetables” are doing a roaring trade, even though their wares cost as much as 25% more. Eating *pho* probably poses a more serious threat, since some unscrupulous merchants try to preserve perishable noodles with formaldehyde or boric acid. Indeed, food scares have become common enough that the World Health Organisation is helping Vietnam to set up a food-safety agency.

Other dodgy tradesmen make a fortune serving endangered species to superstitious diners. The menu of the Lamrice restaurant in Hanoi offers a whole roast civet cat for 120,000 dong (\$8) or porcupine steamed with ginger for 50,000 dong. Liquor bottles filled with bear paws and tiger penises decorate the walls. In Ho Chi Minh city, sea-turtle meat goes for 300,000 dong a kilo, while one enterprising salesman offers to produce a bear and draw its bile on the spot for \$400. He also sells tiger meat, he says, to “men whose flags are drooping”. All these animals are protected by law, but as Pac Bo, the owner of Lamrice, puts it, he has “good relations” with the authorities, so no one bothers him. The unabated trade in wildlife is all the more alarming since half of the big new mammals discovered worldwide in the past century were found in Vietnam.

Piracy, too, goes entirely unchecked. La Vie, the country's most popular mineral water, contends with a host of blatant knock-offs with names like La Vi, La Ve and La Viei. Vietnam's best fish sauce comes from the island of Phu Quoc, off the southern coast—so every fish-sauce producer with initiative slaps a “Phu Quoc” label on his inferior swill. Despairing of official help, the islanders have entered a joint venture with Unilever, an international consumer-goods firm, which may have enough cash and clout to pressure the authorities to curb the counterfeiters.

There could be no better sign of the free-market turmoil to which Vietnamese food is suddenly being exposed. Fish sauce is the basic condiment for all Vietnamese food, and Phu Quoc its finest incarnation. Imagine French vintners granting Coca-Cola distribution rights over their *grandscrus*. In fact, one impassioned Vietnamese argues, the comparison is inadequate, since fish sauce is a more sophisticated product than wine: only a tiny number of wines survive longer than 50 years, whereas fish sauce continues to grow in flavour and complexity indefinitely. The wood of the barrels in which it ferments, the quality of the anchovies and salt from which it is made, the weather and temperature during the fermentation process—all these factors, he explains with a

faraway look in his eyes, affect the flavour of the finished product. The producer, he continues, knows that the sauce is ready for bottling when the flies have stopped swarming over the rotting brew.

Unilever has promised not to alter this challenging flavour for foreign palates. Nor will it need to. Given Vietnam's new wealth and interest in its culinary heritage, making money out of Phu Quoc fish sauce should be like eating dog's brain.

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