



The Viet Nam's food experience

Cuisine

Inside:

- * Our picks: Best authentic local cuisine
- * The culinary regions
- * Beer, wine & tea guide
- * Food trail map
- * Street food guide
- * The family table



Vietnamese cuisine, like its people, is pure, direct and honest. Celebrated around the world for its subtle, simple flavours and emphasis on freshness, Vietnamese cuisine is delicate and healthy and one of the most highlight experiences for any trip to Viet Nam.

The food of Viet Nam reflects history, climate and geography of the country as well as the spirit of its people. Cuisine in the North Viet Nam is noted for its simple but sophisticated use of seasonings. In the Central of Viet Nam, the influence of the ancient royal capital is pronounced, with smaller delicate portions served at meal time with a larger array of dishes which are more chili-spicy than in the North. Whilst, the warm tropical climate of the South, abundant fruit, vegetables and seafood, rice from the fertile Mekong River Delta are strongly factors that making the special characteristics of cuisine in the South.

Vietnamese cooking is steaming, stewing grilling and frying. Carefully considered, Vietnamese dishes are composed and combined according to a set of principals that dictate aspects of flavour, aroma, texture, colour, contrast, balance and even the sound a food makes when eaten.



For visitors, Vietnamese cuisine is a highlight and unforgettable memory of an entire journey.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Attend a cooking class on a junk cruising the spectacular limestone karsts of Ha Long Bay
- Join hot noodle soup (*pho*) at many street food stalls around the country
- Join a family for a traditional dinner in a village homestay
- Pull up a stool with the locals and replenish your thirst with a cool freshly brewed draught beer (*bia hoi*)
- Take a market tour and jostle with the local women in the early morning to snag the best fresh fruits and vegetables of the day
- Enjoy a meal of freshly caught and barbequed chili crayfish at dusk on Nha Trang beachfront



CULINARY REGIONS

Looked at as a whole, the Vietnamese culinary is a conglomerate of Viet Nam's three regional cuisines. Viet Nam country is separated geographically into three distinct areas: the North, the Central and the South, with Ha Noi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City being both each region's respective major city, as well as its culinary capital. On the other hand, due to the weather conditions as well as long coastlines in the Central yields a variety of lush crops. Whilst in the South of Viet Nam, with the water system, it provides more seafood and an array of tropical delights.

NORTHERN REGION

The food of the North is both a product of its cool mountain climate where fewer herbs are grown, as well as regional influences.

During the Northern winter, families enjoy nothing more than gathering around a big bowl of seasoned broth and cooking vegetables and meat for sustenance and warmth. Today, such hotpot dishes are commonplace and widely available in restaurants, and are a great fun meal to share with friends.





CENTRAL REGION

In the temperate climate of the Central Viet Nam where a variety of lush crops are supported, the food becomes noticeably more chili-picy. The greatest distinction of the Central Viet Nam cuisine however, is the influence of the ancient Imperial City of Hue at its heart. Here, the remnants of Imperial cuisine can still be found. Traditionally involving delicate portions of food served in multiple courses, each course becomes more artistic as the meal progresses. The food found in the Central region today is thus highly refined and reflective of how the former court chefs used to cook.

To sample a dish fit for a king, try roasted young pork or stewed chicken with herbs. Alternatively tuck into a meal of bird's nest soup, but be warned, you may also need to pay with a king's earnings. Other popular dishes of the region include *banh khoai*, a rice starch and coconut milk crepe, and *bun bo hue*, a noodle soup redolent of citronella.

SOUTHERN REGION

Rich with fresh seafood, Southern food also shows generously spiced with chillies, coconut milk and a variety of herbs and spices. The period of French occupation also left lingering aspects of French culinary influence as baguettes, sandwiches, filtered coffee, crème caramel (although made with coconut milk) and orange (or pineapple) duck.

With a climate conducive to a long growing season, there is a greater availability of tropical fruits and vegetables. Here, sugar from sugarcane is generously used – often being combined into savoury dishes. The custom of wrapping food in a lettuce leaf with herbs and dipping it into fish sauce is a tradition that has its origins in the South. Some other popular dishes from the South include *cha tom* – shrimp wrapped in sugarcane and *banh xeo* – rice pancake folded with shrimp, meat and soya bean sprouts.

THE FAMILY TABLE



The Vietnamese family's meal presents a sense of community and helps foster a close cohesion amongst family members. Not only important for providing families with time to be together, the family meal is also the principal component of Vietnamese celebrations and festivals.

The women of the houses are generally responsible for preparing the family meal, although men will lend a hand if the wife or daughter is unable. So important is the family meal that within Vietnamese culture the quality of a woman's cooking is considered a reflection of her character and upbringing.



DINING SETTING AND ETIQUETTE

Vietnamese family meals are a slow, friendly affair. Guests are either seated at a table or in a circle on the floor at the centre of which the dishes are placed. With the exception of individual bowls of rice, all dishes are communal and shared. In Vietnamese cuisine, there are no distinct courses and dishes are presented together and consumed in any order. According to tradition, the younger people at the table should ask the elders to eat first, and women will normally sit beside the rice pot in order to help serve rice for other people. Using chopsticks and in consideration of good manners, guests take bite-sized portions of food from the communal dishes, one at a time, placing it into their own rice bowl before bringing it to the mouth. In a show of care and respect, family members may also pick up food for each other.

COMPONENTS OF A TYPICAL FAMILY DINNER

Dinner is considered by Vietnamese to be the most important meal of the day and is usually consumed at home. The core components of a typical family meal include a large bowl of steamed white rice, a fish or meat dish (grilled, boiled, steamed, or stewed), a stir-fry dish, a vegetable dish, and a clear broth soup. Accompanying the dishes are a range of condiments and dips that often include seasoned fish sauce, minced garlic, fresh chili, soy sauce, *muoi tieu chanh* (salt and pepper with lime juice) or *muoi ot* (chilli and salt). In place of desserts or sweets, a plate of fresh fruit is normally presented at the end of the meal.

COOKING PHILOSOPHY

A yin-yang approach is commonly adopted when composing a Vietnamese meal such that a balance is created that is believed to be beneficial to the body. In this approach, contrasting textures and flavours are important, as are an understanding of the “heating” and “cooling” properties of ingredients with examples including serving duck meat (cool) in summer with a ginger and fish sauce (warm), or serving chicken (warm) and pork (hot) in winter. In addition to the yin-yang approach, Vietnamese cuisine is influenced by the Asian principle of the five elements and Mahābhūta. As such, many Vietnamese dishes will include five spices (*ngu vi*) that correspond to five organs (*ngu tang*), five types of nutrients (*ngu chat*), and where possible, five colours (*ngu sac*). In its completion, the meal should appeal to the five senses, through the food arrangement (sight), crispy ingredients (sound), spices (taste), aromatic herbs (smell), and contrasting texture and consistency (touch).

TEN OF THE BEST AUTHENTIC LOCAL DISHES

BANH CUON (Northern region)

Its light, delicate yet flavourful characteristics make *banh cuon* a popular dish for breakfast or a late night snack. Put simply, *banh cuon* are Vietnamese crêpes stuffed with ground pork and wood ear mushrooms served cut-up and dipped into a tasty *nuoc mam* (fish sauce). The dish is often completed with the adding of crispy fried garlic and coriander, sliced cucumber, *cha lua* (pork sausage), bean sprouts, deep-fried shallots and chopped mint.

BUN BO HUE (Central region)

The name itself gives the origins of this dish away, *bun bo Hue* hails from the royal city of Hue in the Central of Viet Nam. This meal-in-a-bowl noodle soup requires both spoon and chopsticks to enjoy its many components. Contained in this bowl of liquid heaven are pork slivers, rare beef, chopped spring onions, various kinds of pre-cooked luncheon meat and thick fresh noodles (*bun*). The distinct sweet flavor of the soup is derived from a broth composed primarily from beef bones, fermented shrimp paste, lemongrass, and dried chilies.

BUN BO NAM BO (Southern region)

This bowl of noodles comes sans broth, keeping the ingredients from becoming sodden and the various textures intact. The tender slices of beef mingle with crunchy peanuts and bean sprouts, and are flavored with fresh herbs, crisp dried shallots, and a splash of fish sauce and fiery chili pepper. Textures of contrasting flavours, temperatures and flavours with each passing bite makes for a wonderful simple dining experience.

BUN CHA (Northern region)

By about 11am, the sidewalks and streets of many cities and towns in the North are filled with wafts of smoke from mini fan-owered barbeques grilling the pork slices and meat balls required for the *bun cha* lunch (only) trade. Served with rice noodles, a basket of



fresh lettuce and herbs, and a bowl of dipping sauce that all gets mixed together, this simple street food with all its savoury goodness, fresh flavours, and contrasting textures, is quite simply Viet Nam on a plate.

CAO LAU (Central region)

Urban legend has it that the signature thick, sticky rice noodles of *cao lau* can only be made from the water taken from a specific Ba Le Village well. Whether or not, this is actually the case is irrelevant as there is no denying that there is something unique about this dish only found in Hoi An City, the Central of Viet Nam. Topped with shrimp and pork and garnished with mint, basil, bean sprouts and lettuce, and served in a light soy sauce broth, *cao lau* is a dish well worth hunting down.

CANH CHUA (Southern region)

Related to the popular Thai/Cambodian tom yum soup, *canh chua* is a light, refreshing sour soup harking from Southern Viet Nam typically made with fish from the Mekong River Delta. Cooked in a broth of pineapple, tomatoes, and bean sprouts, the dish obtains its sour taste from the addition of tamarind. The soup is garnished with the lemony-scented herb, caramelized garlic, and chopped scallions, and other herbs. *Canh chua* may be served alone, with white rice, or with rice vermicelli. When



made in style of a hot pot, *canh chua* is called *lau canh chua*.

CHA CA (Northern region)

The popularity of *cha ca*, a fish dish originally conceived at the *Cha Ca La Vong* Restaurant in Ha Noi, is so great that it has spawned many copycats, and the street where it is served has been renamed from Paint Street to Cha Ca Street. The dish itself is composed of a delicate fish that is fried at high heat in peanut oil with dill, turmeric, rice noodles, and peanuts. A do-it-yourself dish cooked at the table in a Japanese style charcoal hibachi, this is a fun dish to have with friends and perfect for the cooler months with a glass of fiery rice wine or fresh *bia hoi*.

MI QUANG (Central region)

Not quite a soup, not a stew, *mi Quang* is to some an oddity of the soup world, being more like salad with a splash of soup. Originating from Quang Nam Province and Da Nang City, the dish is one of the most popular in the region. This popular lunch meal is composed of a combination of wide white rice noodles and yellow egg noodles, and served with seasoned pork chop or chicken, hard-boiled egg, sauteed shrimp, peanuts, *cha* (pork sausage), chili pepper, a plethora of fresh vegetables, and pieces of crispy *banh trang* (rice paper). With *mi*

Quang, only enough broth is added to moisten the noodles.

NEM CUON (Northern region)

These light and healthy fresh spring rolls are a wholesome choice and what many people know best about Viet Nam cuisine. The translucent parcels are first packed with salad greens, a slither of meat or seafood and a layer of coriander, before being neatly rolled and dunked in Viet Nam's favorite condiment - fish sauce. *Nem cuon* are great as an appetizer and may be found on the menu of any good Vietnamese restaurants.

PHO BO (Northern region)

If there were just one dish that could be picked to represent Viet Nam then this dish, adored by the locals, would likely be voted number one. The best *pho bo* begins its life at midnight, when a large pot of water is brought to the boil with beef bones and pork bones. With the adding of fish sauce, ginger, onion, and star anise, the broth is allowed to simmer for about five hours whereupon it is ready to be served with rice noodles (*banh pho*), chopped onions, mint, basil and pepper to the throngs of salivating customers from early morning until late-afternoon and often beyond. Chicken is also available instead of beef.

VIET NAM'S STREET FOOD GUIDE



DECIDING WHERE TO EAT

Most street food restaurants in Viet Nam specialise in only one or two types of dish, so selecting where to eat requires you to first decide what to eat. With food choices in Viet Nam, numerous and varying from region to region, the support of a good guide book, suggestions from fellow travellers, or even a chat with your hotel front desk can be invaluable. With your dish chosen, your task is to then locate the best street food restaurant. In the large cities, this decision is easy, with whole streets often dedicated to a particular cuisine, think: barbeque chicken street (*chan ga nuong*), grilled fish street (*cha ca*), or sea food. From here, the adage about eating where there are lots of locals is the best guide. But then again, half the fun of choosing where to eat can just as equally be by throwing caution to the wind and trying any random place you come across. Who knows what culinary delight you might discover?

KNOWING YOUR TIMES

Like culinary of other countries, specific dishes in Viet Nam are often only eaten at



particular times of the day, or even times of the year. For example, *banh cuon* is most commonly eaten for breakfast; *bun cha* and *mi Quang* for lunch, *banh xeo* for winter. Feeling hungry after a night on the town? Sit down for *pho bo*, it's the perfect fix after a big night out.

PLACING YOUR ORDER

With most street food vendors only serving one dish, ordering is easy - all you need do is grab a seat and indicate with your fingers how many servings you would like. If there is more than one dish or item, simply point to what someone else is having and indicate how many. Alternatively, check the walls – even the smallest stalls tend to have one or two food items tacked on the wall with prices.



When visiting Viet Nam, it will soon be clear the locals have a passion for food that goes well beyond satisfying the biological need for energy. Unrepentant about being loud eaters, the locals enjoy every morsel put before them. Eating open mouthed, slurping on noodles, crunching on vegetables, and gnawing on bones with hand is more a display of a love of the food before you than sign of poor manners. The rules of 'proper' street food dining are few, with the cleaning of bowls and chopsticks with napkins before the meal about the only ritual. After that, it's all in with whatever tools suit you best. With discarded bones and food scraps on the floor and napkins from previous diners left to be cleared when things down, street food dining is not for those uptight about hygiene, but it is part and parcel of the experience, so embrace it. With such great food on offer you are unlikely to regret it.



KNOWING YOUR ETIQUETTE

Across every city and town in Viet Nam, you will be confronted with a similar picture: crowds of locals sitting hunched, cheek-to-jowl, on small plastic chairs, roaring traffic just inches away, munching, slurping and gnawing over their meal of choice - and having the time of their lives. Street food in Viet Nam comes fast and furious, with such high demand and turnover, there is little time for pleasantries. As the meal progresses, ladies walk by, offering goodies from baskets hanging at the end of a bamboo poles skillfully balanced over their shoulder. Yes, it is crowded, noisy, and the food service sometimes indifferent, but it is also one of the most fun and sociable culinary experiences you will have, and as any local knows, it's not about the setting and all about the food.

ADDING IT UP

Street food as a whole is extremely inexpensive. Most dishes will not cost more than a few US dollars. Whilst hotpots and barbecued meals can cost a little more, with a few friends you will still not be paying much. When your meal is done, calculation and payment of the bill is normally done at the front on your way out. Look out for the obvious matriarch of the business, as they are often the ones who also handle the money, or alternatively giving your payment to your food server is also acceptable - if you can get their attention! In most cases however, don't expect a written bill. If you are not sure about the cost of your meal, watching what the diners before you pay can provide a rough guide, or gesture for the cashier to show you the cost on a calculator.



With its mostly warm tropical climate, the Vietnamese people have developed a range of refreshing drinks that quench the thirst and revitalise the body. In Viet Nam, what a person drinks and how it is drunk is considered an indication of their demeanor and is thus often an integral part of building friendships or even brokering business deals. As a proud tea growing nation with a long history, Vietnamese teas are well worth sampling. In the North, the accompaniment of a meal with a few glasses of strong rice wine is a great way to ward off the cold, whilst in the towns or cities there is no better way to wind down at the end of the day with the locals at a *bia hoi*.

TEA

With thousand years history, it is no surprise that drinking tea in Viet Nam is a national pastime. At any time of the day, you will see groups of men and women sitting outside discussing the news of the day over a tiny cup of tea. For Northern students, meeting friends at the most popular tea joint, chatting and people watching whilst slowly cracking into a bowl of sunflower seeds is de rigueur. To Vietnamese people, tea is not just a drink – it is a refresher when working in the field, a welcome for house guests, an offering to ancestors, or protection from disease. The way to make and drink tea varies from region to region, as does its type and flavour. Green tea is by far the most popular, although black, *o long* and yellow teas are also available.

RICE AND FRUIT WINE

Rice wine is the second beverage after tea in Viet Nam and is used as an offering, to cure ailments and to celebrate or commiserate at special occasions. Particularly popular in Viet Nam's mountainous Northern area, rice and fruit wines are consumed in large quantities. *Ruou gao* (rice wine) is made from rice, *ruou nep* is made from sticky rice and comes in different colours, purple and white, resulting from the different types of rice used to make it. In some ethnic minority cultures, *ruou nep* is drunk communally from a ceramic jar with a straw. Fruit wines are made from just about all upland fruits including plum, strawberry, apple and, of course, grapes. Another type of rice wine, *ruou ran* (snake wine), is said to cure everything from night blindness to impotence. Fiery and warm, strong and, in cool weathers, the perfect winter blanket, sampling some rice wine in Viet Nam is an experience not to be missed.



BEER

In addition to many imported beer brands such as Tiger, Heineken and Carlsberg, bars, cafes and restaurants normally also serve a range of local beers including 333, Ha Noi and Sai Gon beers. However, for anyone who enjoyed a truly Viet Nam drinking experience, spending an afternoon at a *bia hoi* is a must-do. Literally translated to air (draught) beer, *bia hoi* is both a type of drink and the actual activity of drinking the beer. Freshly made every night, *bia hoi* is light and free of preservatives. Usually poured out of a plastic jug or a keg at street corners around the towns and cities going out for a *bia hoi* is something beer lovers and non-beer lovers alike must experience at least once during their visit to Viet Nam.





The food of the Northern region is both a product of its cool mountain climate where fewer herbs are grown, as well as regional influences. In the North, you will find soups, stews, stir-fried dishes and a plethora of noodles. During the winter in the North, families enjoy nothing more than gathering around a big bowl of seasoned broth and cooking vegetables and meat for sustenance and warmth. Culinary hotspots of the Northern region include Ha Noi and Sa Pa.

Signature dishes: *bun cha, pho bo, cha ca.*



With the temperate climate of the Central region, the food is more chili-spicy. Here, the remnants of Imperial cuisines can be found. To sample a dish fit for a king, try roasted young pork, stewed chicken with herbs, or bird's nest soup. Culinary hotspots of the Central region include Hue, Hoi An and Nha Trang. Signature dishes: *cao lau, bun bo Hue, mi Quang.*





The tropical cuisine of the Southern region is influenced from the food of the neighbouring countries namely Kingdoms of Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia. Rich with fresh seafoods, the food of the South is generously spiced with chilies, coconut milk and a variety of herbs and spices. With a climate conducive to a long growing season, tropical fruits and vegetables feature highly and sugar from sugar-cane is generously used - often being combined into savoury dishes. Culinary hotspots of the Southern region include Ho Chi Minh City and Da Lat. Signature dishes: *canh chua*, *bun bo Nam Bo*.





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