

Making Sense of Vietnamese Cuisine

By Nir Avieli

“Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you who you are.”

(Brillat-Savarine, a French gastronome)

We live in an exciting culinary era. Food is not only extremely abundant in the West, but also more varied than ever before. Any Western metropolis features a huge array of ethnic restaurants from all corners of the earth, while the presence of Italian, Greek, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, or Thai restaurants in most American towns is almost taken for granted. Chinese food is so common in America that members of other ethnic groups, New York Jews for example, conceive of it as part of their own culinary heritage.¹

Yet how familiar are we with foods from other ethnic groups? Are we genuinely flexible, open minded, and experienced when it comes to the food we eat? Sociologists Alan Warde and Lydia Martens, who studied “eating out” in the UK, found that “only 20 percent of the people had experience of three or more different cuisines, while 48 percent had never eaten in an ethnic restaurant in the last twelve months.”² And when Britons do opt for ethnic restaurants, almost half of them (47 percent) order only dishes with which they are already familiar.³ While Americans are more accustomed to ethnic fare, it seems that beyond a narrow echelon of highly educated cosmopolitans, many are only vaguely acquainted with ethnic foods.

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In my own research on tourism in East and Southeast Asia, I found that most visiting Westerners were reluctant to eat at local restaurants and would only eat in tourist-oriented establishments where the setting was familiar, the menu comprehensible, hygiene was up to their standards, and the food itself resembled the ethnic foods with which they were familiar from ethnic restaurants back home.⁴ Thus, despite the extreme popularity of Asian restaurants in the West, Westerners often find themselves at odds when facing the food actually eaten in Asia.

However, during almost two decades of leading tourists and training tour guides in East and Southeast Asia, I have learned that eating the local food is one of the most effective and powerful ways to overcome the gap between tourists and the culture they visit. Gobbling dumplings at a Beijing street stand with the Chinese hordes or having a fish in a clay pot in a Saigon sidewalk restaurant surrounded by feasting Vietnamese families are moments that allow for the sense of “really being there” so much cherished by tourists.

I learned that the most effective way to achieve this moment of glory is by responding to the most common question asked by tourists and students when facing unfamiliar food: “What is this?”

In this article, I share categories I developed precisely to deal with this question and familiarize students in my classes with the Vietnamese cuisine and its meanings. The categories are “Basic Ingredients,” “Cooking Techniques,” “Meal Structures,” “Strange Foods,” and “Foreign Influences,” which together

allow for a comprehensive analysis. While I refer mainly to Vietnamese food, the categories are intended as analytical tools to help make sense of most Asian cuisines. Once the culinary rationale of a cuisine is clear, fear and suspicion fade away, and a sense of confidence and control emerges. Yet before turning to Vietnamese food, let us examine the dual nature of food as a physiological necessity and as a cultural artifact.

Food as Nature and Culture

Food, like the air we breathe, is essential for our survival as biological beings. It is also the most perfect cultural artifact, the outcome of a detailed differentiation process whereby wheat grains are transformed into French baguettes, Chinese dumplings, or Italian pasta that encompasses personal, social, and cultural identities.⁵ Brillat-Savarine’s famous aphorism, “Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you who you are,” suggests that when we eat, we become perfect consumers of our culture, physically internalizing its principles and values, swallowing and digesting them into our bodies. Thus, when American cowboys bite into their bleeding steaks, they reaffirm the masculine and violent vitality that distinguishes their way of living, while devout Southeast Asian Buddhists express their commitment to non-violence and the sanctity of life by opting for a vegetarian diet.

Human beings are the most flexible omnivores in nature. No other species consumes such a wide range of edibles. From abundant tropical forests to scarce deserts, from the warmest regions to the coldest parts of earth, we always manage to find “something nice to eat,” whether forest insects, desert lizards, or the fresh blood of arctic marine mammals. It is even argued that our culinary versatility and our willingness to eat virtually anything explains human domination over all other creatures. We are not the fastest, strongest, or fiercest, but we manage to inhabit all corners of the earth because we can always find food.

Humans are the only living beings that cook, and virtually all human cultures process their food to some extent. Cooking sets humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom and defines us. To cook is to be human. Cooking, however, is what also sets people and cultures apart from each other. As we roam the earth, consume a huge variety of foodstuffs, and cook them in so many different ways, food has become one of the strongest markers of cultural difference and a common source for mostly negative stereotypes: the French are “froggies,” the Germans are “krauts” (after sauerkraut), while the Koreans (and many other East Asians) are “dog eaters.” Most food stereotypes are based on scant and inflated evidence that is removed from its original context.

Yet the most demeaning way to refer to the food of others is to argue that “they eat everything,” implying a lack of moral, cultural, and esthetic standards and, that they, therefore, are not fully human. Research shows, however, that no human group eats everything. In fact, members of most cultures consume roughly 20 percent of the edibles available in their environment, while other edible foodstuffs are shunned due to moral, religious, or esthetic considerations. This is an important point. Members of certain cultures may eat things that others find strange and repulsive, but the fact that they eat differently doesn’t mean that they eat everything. Indeed, they probably find our food as strange as we find theirs.

The Basic Ingredients of the Vietnamese Cuisine

Anthropologists suggest that when studying cultural systems, a distinction should be made between culture and practical reason.⁶ In order to understand the cuisine of a given culture, we must distinguish between the practical aspects—nutritional demands, ecology, and locally available ingredients—and cultural traits—cooking modes, eating arrangements, and the dishes themselves—shaped by social and historical processes. I therefore begin with a discussion of the main ingredients of the Vietnamese diet and then turn to their cultural transformation into dishes.

The Vietnamese cuisine evolved within a tropical ecology of warm weather, plenty of rainfall, and profuse rivers that allowed for intensive agriculture. The other dominant natural element was the sea, which provided fish and seafood. The third influence was hardworking people who settled in densely populated river deltas, valleys, and lowlands.

Under these conditions, growing rice as the staple was an ecologically sound practical choice.⁷ Irrigated, transplanted, labor-intensive paddy rice grown in the major river valleys and deltas was the most effective crop under the conditions of limited soil, plenty of water, high temperatures, perennial humidity, and a large number of available working hands.

Yet, while rice provides most of Việt Nam's carbohydrates and energy, polished white rice is nutritionally unwholesome and lacks fat, protein, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Nutritionally speaking, the Vietnamese cuisine is all about balancing these shortcomings with local edibles. Fish and seafood provide protein; aromatics and leafy greens (and some other fruits and vegetables) supply vitamins, minerals, and fiber; and ground nuts and coconuts supply fats. Raw greens and aromatics in great variety (basils, mints, corianders, lettuces) are essential components of any Vietnamese meal. Mixed with other foods, they are the elements that provide exceptional variation in taste and texture.

While fresh and dried fish and seafood are essential meal components, the most common way to consume them is in the form of *nuoc mam* (fish sauce), which is produced by fermenting fish in brine. This is actually a preservation technique, and the outcome is nutritionally rich. While many of my students found the smell of raw fish sauce hard to cope with, once cooked or diluted with lime juice and spices, the sharp smell is transformed into a rich and appealing aroma that is the main marker of Vietnamese food.

The most common spices—chili, lime, ginger, garlic, shallot, and pepper—are all important sources of vitamins and minerals. There is a preference for sour tastes (for instance, the pulp of unripe tamarind), which are considered cooling and appropriate for the warm weather. Vietnamese food is not as hot as Thai food, and diners determine the level of spiciness by adding shredded fresh chili into their dishes or biting into one while eating.

Altogether, the Vietnamese cuisine is shaped by specific ecological conditions and is clearly devised to supply human nutritional demands. Presenting Vietnamese cuisine as ecologically and biologically sound may demystify it when studying its cultural characteristics.

Cooking Techniques

Despite the sophisticated dishes they produce, Vietnamese kitchens are surprisingly simple when compared to Western kitchens. The most important kitchen utensil is a large oval iron pan (*chao*, Chinese wok), which distributes heat evenly for fast cooking (stir-frying), saves expensive fuel, and maintains crispiness as well as nutritional value. Another crucial utensil is a heavy cleaver, which—along with a wood block—facilitates slicing ingredients for stir-frying. Pestle and mortar come third, mainly to process the spices. These utensils do most of the work, with ladles, large chopsticks, and strainers doing much of the rest. Gas stoves are gradually replacing the traditional wood-fed hearth, and rice is cooked in electric rice cookers, but other modern cooking utensils such as ovens or microwaves are rarely used.

The kitchen is usually located at the back of the house or in a separate structure behind the house and is often low-lying, dark, sooty, and wet. Most

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of the processing is done squatting on the floor, while the hearth itself is low-lying and requires squatting too. Elevated cooking surfaces are modern and relatively rare additions.

Women do most of the cooking, and the kitchen is considered an exclusively feminine sphere. Hence, it may be argued that the kitchen setting reflects the low status of women in Vietnamese society, embodied by their squatting position. However, the status of Vietnamese women is relatively higher than that of women in neighboring Confucian societies. Vietnamese society is more bilateral than patriarchal, with women holding a complex social status, being charged with transforming nature into culture, ingredients into food, and babies into members of society.

Meal Structure

Vietnamese-style eating is all about food sharing, and mealtime is when the communal character of this society is most evident. Tables and trays are round, defining a sense of equality between the diners, and there is no “head of the table.” Food is served in common dishes, and morsels are picked with chopsticks into personal bowls. The diners are attentive to each other, avoiding gluttony and doing their best to ensure that the food is shared equally.

In the countryside, meals are usually taken on the floor or on a mat with the food served on a large tray. In more urban settings, people use tables and chairs. While most other Southeast Asians use forks, spoons, or the right hand to eat, the Vietnamese use chopsticks and eat out of bowls.

Although the Vietnamese cuisine features hundreds and even thousands of dishes, daily meals eaten at home are surprisingly uniform. Lunch and dinner are similar—dinner often consists of leftovers—and composed of a large quantity of steamed rice with a set of side dishes that flavor and color it. These usually include a mild soup, a bowl of mixed raw greens, a dish of cooked protein (small quantities of fish, meat, or tofu) with vegetables, and a bowl of fish sauce.

This combination of rice and four side dishes adheres to the important Chinese-derived cosmological principles of *am* and *duong* (yin and yang) and *ngu hanh* (the five elements). Yin-yang is an all-encompassing Daoist principle that champions a dynamic balance between the obscure, dark, wet, cold, feminine energy of yin and the hot, powerful, shining, violent male energy of yang.⁸ White, bland, neutral rice is compatible with *am*, while the colorful, savory, varied side dishes are considered *duong*. Within the culinary realm, the *am* and *duong* principle is translated into the cold-hot paradigm, within which some ingredients (such as ginger, beef), cooking modes (frying), and dishes (fried beef with ginger) are heating, while other tastes (sour, bitter), cooking modes (steaming), and dishes (fish in tamarind sauce) are cooling. The dishes themselves are not necessarily hot or cold, but their physical effect is of heating or cooling. Thus, sour fish soup is eaten hot but has a cooling influence.

The five elements theory suggests that the world and everything in it are composed of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. The elements are interrelated in cycles of production, destruction (e.g., water produces wood and extinguishes fire), and their relations and transformations generate the movement that is life. The culinary realm is also structured by this paradigm, with rice standing for earth (and center), soup for water, greens for wood, fish sauce for fire, and the dry dish for metal. This scheme also informs the five basic cooking modes: raw, steamed, boiled, fried/grilled, and fermented; the five tastes:

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spicy, sour, bitter, salty, and sweet; and the five textures: crispy, crunchy, chewy, soft, and silky.

Street foods are extremely popular, and cooked food is sold from millions of stands that dot urban and rural streets. Some vendor stands offer a variety of dishes served over rice, while others feature elaborate cooking. A new urban and increasingly popular kind of stand offers “take away,” a variety of cooked dishes purchased to be consumed at home. However, most stands specialize in a single “whole-meal dish” that includes all the ingredients necessary for proper nutrition.

There are several kinds of whole-meal dishes (pancakes, porridge, stuffed baguettes, and different kinds of fried rice and noodles), but the most prominent and popular is a bowl of noodles. There are dozens of kinds of noodles and thousands of variations regarding ingredients and seasoning. Most Vietnamese would argue that their own town or village has at least one unique noodle dish. Yet the basic nutritional logic is common—fresh or dry noodles made of rice, wheat, and other starches provide carbohydrates; bones, meat, and seafood broth provide water; a small amount of meat or other animal protein such as fish-balls or wontons provide protein and fat; leafy greens, aromatic herbs, and fish sauce contribute more protein, minerals, and vitamins; and chili and lime supply vitamins and flavor. As such, a bowl of noodles is a complete meal, nutritionally and psychologically, and it includes all the ingredients of a proper meal.

Strange Food

Part of Việt Nam’s mystery and exoticism has to do with specific ingredients and dishes that are perceived by non-Vietnamese as exotic, strange, and even repulsive. These food items can be grouped into three categories: insects, jungle beasts, and dogs.

Insect-eating was an important source of protein for humans before the development of farming, and it is still common among hunter-gatherers and subsistence farmers in many parts of the world. However, it is a powerful taboo in Western cultures. Insect-eating is still practiced in Việt Nam among the poorer subsistence farmers and among some of the ethnic minorities.

Two points are important. First, insects are cheap and abundant, require minimal resources, exert little ecological pressure, and thus make for accessible “green” protein. Second, insect-eating is always selective. Only certain kinds of insects or larva are consumed—particularly those that are farmed. For example, silk producers often consume silkworms. Other popular insects include grasshoppers, crickets, water beetles, scorpions, and spiders. Despite common myth, cockroaches are inedible and are not eaten anywhere.

The meat of jungle beasts is a rare, expensive, and sought-after delicacy. Dishes made of monkey, bear, tiger, elephant, snake, and lizard are sold in restaurants that specialize in “forest meat.” It is a cross-cultural convention that, when eating the flesh of specific animals, the eater absorbs their power.⁹ In Western culture, red meat, and especially beef, is considered highly nutritious and power enhancing. Thus, the British Royal Guards are called “beefeaters.” In Việt Nam, the flesh of wild animals known for their prowess is considered both physically and sexually invigorating. Forest food is therefore a man’s affair and is often associated with heavy alcohol consumption and prostitution.

If there is one kind of flesh that scares most visitors to Việt Nam, it is dog meat. Being “man’s best friend,” the dog is perceived in Western culture as almost human, and eating it is considered repulsive. In Việt Nam, dogs live next to men but are not considered pets—with the exception of the educated urban elite—or quasi-humans but, rather, working animals like the buffalo. Most Vietnamese avoid dog meat, mainly due to religious and moral reasons, while Buddhists consider dogs polluting, possibly because dogs eat their own excrements and are highly incestuous. Vietnamese farmers avoid both dog and buffalo meat, as they work shoulder to shoulder with these animals. Most Vietnamese find dog meat as repulsive as do Westerners, though for different reasons.

Dog meat, however, is popular among northern Vietnamese men as an aphrodisiac. While this is probably the outcome of Chinese influence, southern Vietnamese argue that as Buddhists, they avoid dog meat, but the northerners, who “converted” to Communism, eat it avidly. While Communism may not be the best explanation for dog meat popularity in the north, Chinese influence and its political impact are an important factor. In southern Việt Nam, Catholic immigrants from the north are the main consumers of dog meat. Paradoxically, then, Christianity, imported from the West, is related to the consumption of dog meat. However, it is mainly popular because of its nourishing, warming, and libido-enhancing qualities.

It is important to note that jungle meat and dog meat are relatively rare and usually quite expensive. Insects, though cheap and abundant, are rarely eaten in Việt Nam. Therefore, they are never offered to uninterested or oblivious guests but rather are only served to those who actively ask for them and are ready to pay their high price.

Foreign Influence

Like all cuisines, Vietnamese cuisine was deeply shaped by contact with external cultures. Most prominent were China and France—and to a lesser extent India, and recently, contemporary global cuisine appeared. Yet foreign influence was always adjusted to the local ecological conditions, nutritional demands, cultural norms, and local tastes. Some foreign culinary aspects are evident in Vietnamese food, while others are deeply transformed and hard to observe.

China ruled Việt Nam for over a millennium and has always exerted political and cultural influence. Its culinary legacy in Việt Nam is therefore substantial. The Chinese cosmological theories of yin and yang and the five elements directly affect Vietnamese cooking and eating. Noodles, a Chinese invention, are probably the most popular food in the country, with many other dishes and cooking techniques adopted into the culinary framework. Rice was domesticated in Southeast Asia and later introduced to China, but the culinary influence was never unilateral.

A more recent and direct Chinese culinary effect is the outcome of repeated waves of Chinese immigrants who, in the last few centuries, settled in each and every urban trade center in the country, introducing their respective southeast Chinese cuisines or fusing them with the local foodways into unique local cuisines.

It should be noted, however, that Vietnamese cuisine had an impact on Chinese foodways as well. Rice was probably domesticated in Việt Nam and incorporated into the Chinese cuisine only after their conquest of north Việt Nam during the first century BCE. Seafood sauces from the southern part of Việt Nam are another culinary contribution to southern Chinese cuisines, especially Cantonese and Fujienese.

Indian culinary influence arrived in Việt Nam infused with Malay, Khmer, and Thai cooking, which had absorbed Indian spices such as cumin, coriander, ginger, and turmeric; in ingredients such as coconut milk; in cooking methods such as spice-pastes; and in dishes such as *cary*, the Vietnamese version of Indian curry.

Western merchants, notably the Portuguese, Dutch, and French, introduced staples such as maize and sweet potatoes, as well as European vegetables and herbs such as carrots, cauliflower, onions, potatoes, string beans, and dill. The French left a powerful culinary legacy. Baguettes with pork pate, yogurt,

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This photo is from a slide show of Pho 24 restaurants in Hó Chí Minh city. Source: <http://tiny.cc/ntnf2>.

ice cream, and coffee are essential elements of contemporary Vietnamese cuisine. Formal dining, including wedding and death anniversary banquets, follow French structure and etiquette and include some French dishes, such as *lagu* or *ragu*, the Vietnamese version of beef-onion-carrot-potato ragout, served with a sliced baguette. This, however, is a great example of the deep culinary modification of foreign dishes. It is cooked in a wok and seasoned with fish sauce, coconut milk, turmeric, and coriander, which creates a distinct taste and aroma very different from the French original, itself a modification of the original Irish stew. Here again, Vietnamese culinary elements were incorporated into French cuisine and especially into the “nouvelle cuisine,” which emphasizes aromatic herbs, freshly cooked ingredients, and light cooking processes.

Finally, “world cuisine” or, more accurately, Western dishes and foodways, have made headway into the country with pasta, pizza, salads, and steaks featured in expensive restaurants catering mostly to tourists and local elites. Global chains such as KFC and local McDonalized food venues such as *Pho 24*, a noodle franchise, attract the newly emerging Vietnamese middle class. Here again, local cultural norms, cooking techniques, and culinary preferences shape these imported dishes and foodways to such an extent that they hardly resemble the foreign originals.

Conclusion: Vietnamese Food as a Healthy, “Green” Option

While my categories are intended to make sense of Vietnamese food by exposing its nutritional and cultural logic, they also emphasize its positive qualities as healthy and green. In a world that is increasingly alarmed by the hazards of modern nutrition and the negative effects of industrialized, meat-oriented agriculture, Vietnamese food is an appealing option that can successfully compete with the currently popular “Mediterranean diet.”

Vietnamese cuisine is based on fresh ingredients, minimal cooking, lots of leafy greens and fish, very limited amounts of animal protein and fat, and moderate use of sugar. Moreover, consuming less meat means that farming systems oriented toward the Vietnamese culinary system would put less pressure on dwindling ecological resources and result in less pollution. It costs the same to produce one meat calorie as it does to produce seven to ten vegetal calories. Presenting Vietnamese cuisine in particular, and Asian cuisines in general, to our students as a viable tool in our arsenal of “green cuisines,” may increase their appeal. ■

NOTES

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Websites about Vietnamese Food and Culture

- Vietnamese cuisine, traditions, and etiquette: <http://tiny.cc/18wrf>
 Vietnam-culture.com: <http://tiny.cc/a0fxb>
 Asiarecipe.com: <http://tiny.cc/1rytp>
 Food in Every Country: Vietnam: <http://tiny.cc/tmgox>
 VietVentures: <http://tiny.cc/zdu1f>
 Activetravel—Vietnam: <http://tiny.cc/giuz6>
 Vietnam-Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette: <http://tiny.cc/mrelp>
 Wikipedia: Culture of Vietnam: <http://tiny.cc/txcz>

General Vietnamese Recipes

- Food.com: <http://tiny.cc/bg6rb>
 RasaMalaysia Easy Asian Recipes: <http://tiny.cc/8dgtv>
 Vietnamese Recipes & Cuisines: <http://tiny.cc/ufdik>
 allrecipes.com: <http://tiny.cc/eocs6>
 All-fish-seafood-recipes.com (Grouper recipe): <http://tiny.cc/aadck>
 Marc Matsumoto’s blog: <http://tiny.cc/78ugs>

Recipes from the Viet World Kitchen

- Spicy Asian Chicken Wings Recipe: <http://tiny.cc/e5plh>
 Chicken Pho Noodle Soup Recipe: <http://tiny.cc/9p731>
 Beef Pho Noodle Soup Recipe: <http://tiny.cc/d3xzw>
 Trout: <http://tiny.cc/56byk>
 Barbecued Baby Back Pork Ribs: <http://tiny.cc/lcedo>
 Hainan Chicken and Rice Recipe: <http://tiny.cc/dj92q>

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