

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355187945>

Contemporary Vietnamese Cuisine (In, Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam, 2022)

Chapter · August 2022

CITATIONS

0

READS

1,348

2 authors:



Christopher M. Annear

Hobart and William Smith Colleges

20 PUBLICATIONS 37 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Jack Harris

Hobart and William Smith Colleges

4 PUBLICATIONS 2 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



China in Zambia: Impacts on Food Systems, Cuisine & Democracy [View project](#)



Community Development in Geneva NY USA [View project](#)

Contemporary Vietnamese Cuisine¹

Christopher Annear and Jack Harris
Hobart and William Smith Colleges

“In food, as in death, we feel the essential brotherhood of man.”
Vietnamese Proverb

Abstract

This chapter explores contemporary Vietnamese cuisines, particularly, whether or not there is an identifiably Vietnamese national cuisine, one in which the ingredients, recipes, and/or dishes socially, culturally, and politically unite Vietnamese people. We argue that contemporary Vietnamese cuisine is not the food of the nation, however much it might be represented as such. It is the culinary work of the people who constitute the country of Vietnam—their lands, migrations, histories, and politics. This chapter examines how cookbook authors have generally sought to represent Vietnamese dishes as national, but that there is a strong argument against the claim of a Vietnamese national cuisine. In the case of Vietnamese food, the critical details of ingredients, preparation, and consumption both reveal and conceal truths about the Vietnamese people. Furthermore, we contend that Vietnam, with its long history of foreign invaders, its own appropriation of the middle and southern regions, and its varied regional geographies, provides a critical example for Food Studies of the need to interrogate the idea of a national cuisine and to differentiate it from regional and local cuisines.

Keywords: Food Studies, Vietnam, cuisine, cookbooks, history, anthropology, sociology

The notion that there is a specific and identifiably Vietnamese *national cuisine* is both widespread and problematic. Books, online materials, and other modes of representation highlight recognizable dishes and ingredients that are common to Vietnamese cuisine. But the frequency and methods with which dishes are prepared and consumed, and the availability of and manner in which ingredients are used, has varied considerably, reflecting regional variation in social conditions, climate, external influences, and tastes. An array of Vietnamese political institutions propagate the notion of a national cultural consensus around cuisine. But even these efforts admit the country's considerable subnational diversity. Viewed broadly, Vietnamese cuisine can be said to reflect a distinctive and recognizable multiplex of social and cultural expressions, combining Kinh, Chinese, Cambodian, Cham, and other local and regional influences, as well as French and American influences, and elements from other cultures, and has often adopted from these language, social norms, and culinary products. Yet the manner in which these influences have combined has itself varied within Vietnam across time and place. In what sense, then, can we speak of a recognizably national Vietnamese cuisine?

In this chapter, we work through some of the tensions regarding the notion of a Vietnamese "national" cuisine. We consider whether and to what extent cuisine culturally unites Vietnam, despite the historical, regional, and political tensions that make unification challenging. We suggest that Vietnam provides a critical example of the need to interrogate the idea of a national cuisine and to differentiate it from regional and local cuisines. We observe that, in practice, contemporary Vietnamese cuisine reflects varied regional histories, diversity in socioeconomic conditions, differences in patterns of rural and urban life, continuity and change in processes of education and socialization, and diverse cultural and ethnic identities and institutions. We argue that contemporary Vietnamese cuisine is not the food of the nation,

however much it might be represented as such. It is the culinary work of the people who constitute the country of Vietnam—their lands, migrations, histories, and politics. To entertain the notion of a recognizably Vietnamese national cuisine is to embrace Vietnam’s diversity and varied foreign influences as essential attributes.

A Political Culinary History

Despite the emerging acceptance of food as a legitimate interdisciplinary lens for academic study over the past two decades, its capacity to reveal ways of knowing, sensing, and tasting the world continues to surprise (Belasco 2008; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Pilcher 2016a; Pilcher 2016b; Pottier 1999; Sutton 2010; Swift and Wilk 2015). Insights from interdisciplinary studies of food and food systems assists an appreciation of how historical conditions, ideas, events, and contestations have shaped Vietnamese cuisine over time, while also shedding light on efforts to promote the notion of a national Vietnamese cuisine.

Food in Vietnam is deeply rooted in its regions. Until the 1400s, Vietnam (Nam Việt) was bounded by a geography, ecology, and political organization that constitutes what we know as northern Vietnam today, dominated by Hà Nội. Its climate and geography, especially its proximity to China, affected its cuisine. In the 1400s the Việt/Kinh ethnic group expanded southward into what is known as Central Vietnam. In this region, we find rather different ingredients and recipes represented by the foods of Hội An and Đà Nẵng, and also the “Imperial Cuisine” of Huế developed in the 1800s. Completing the march south in the 1600s, this region developed the southern cuisines of Sài Gòn and the Mekong Delta, the latter’s food influenced by the Cambodian ethnic groups who lived there and by French colonialism.

Vietnam's history of ethnic diversity, regional and foreign influences, and the relative recent timing of its independence and unification are often suppressed in historical and political narratives that promote the notion of a national cuisine. The majority ethnic group, the Kinh, embrace the historic "March to the South" that celebrates the Vietnamese as conquerors of the Cham and (later) Khmer societies. Dominant representations of this history present several unifying aspects of Vietnamese identity and culture, including Confucian values, beliefs, and customs, even while assiduously denying or limiting emphasis on Chinese cultural appropriations (Jamieson 1995).

While modern popular narratives declare a longstanding independence and nationhood, the fact is that Vietnam has a very short history of independence and unification. The first time Vietnam was unified in its current territorial form was in 1802 under emperor Gia Long. From 1851 to 1954 Vietnam, partitioned into three entities, the colony of Cochin China, and the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, further strained the idea of a socially and culturally unified state. The division of the territory in 1954 into the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the southern Republic of Vietnam exacerbated new political, social, and cultural divisions. The territory was finally reunified in 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The development of Vietnamese cuisine has thus been set against a backdrop of regional diversity and political fragmentation.

Despite the great variety that constitutes a nation of rich cultural identities and variations (especially as a country home to 54 different ethnic groups), political institutions have worked to create a fictive social and cultural consensus, actively promoting "Vietnamization," adopting the majority Kinh² cultural patterns, and asserting a northern hegemony in language, the arts, music, national costumes, and behavioral norms and customs,

thereby creating a supposedly national “Vietnameseness.” And yet, as Erica J. Peters (2012) observes, failed attempts to unify disparate cooking knowledge, ingredients, and practices into a Vietnamese national cuisine – such as those of Emperor Minh Mạng’s in the 1830s – have provided proof for Vietnam’s recalcitrant localism. Historically and up until the present, Vietnamese national cuisine reflects regional and urban variations in food preparation, cultural expression, and consumption (Avieli 2012; Vu 2016). To understand these variations is to comprehend the actual cooking and consumption of Vietnamese foods.

Representations of Food: What Cookbooks Say About “Vietnamese” Cuisine

How, then, to examine the cuisine found in Vietnam—its dishes, its preparation, its ingredients, its sources, and its taste? There are few texts that explore these aspects of cuisine in Vietnam better than cookbooks. Cookbooks are promotional, positioning themselves as representational, advocating for the flavors and tastes of the cuisine that they promulgate. They indulge us in ingredients, careful measurements, strict preparations, and suggest that consumption will result in delight. Moreover, cookbooks, Appadurai aptly notes, “tell unusual cultural tales” (2008, 289). They are the compositions and products of reflections at certain moments in social time. As among Appadurai’s Indian texts, the proliferation of Vietnam modern cookbooks in the 1990s and 2000s coincided with widespread literacy, especially in the diaspora, and a desire in and outside the country to highlight cuisine, while also standardizing culinary practice (Appadurai; Goody 1996). Additionally, the rise in such cookbooks coincided with the prodigious population of Việt kiều expatriates living in the diaspora, while the country was undergoing dramatic economic transformations following the imposition of Đổi Mới reforms in 1986.

Vietnamese food historian, Hong Lien Vu, argues that “there are hardly any Vietnamese documents or any other type of record” of Vietnamese dishes that we know today. Says Vu,

General illiteracy among the population until the early twentieth century made it difficult for cooks to write down their recipes, while the literati believed that writing about food was beneath them.... Another reason for this vagueness is that food preparation was traditionally a family secret, taught by a mother to her daughter or by a mother-in-law to her sons’ new bride. Each family had a different way of preparing certain dishes, and that was a secret to be guarded. Restaurant or street food secrets were guarded even more closely (2016, 162).

Most cookbooks on the food of Vietnam were written and published in Vietnam after 1989, although there are a few from the early post-American War period. Andrea Nguyen (2013) writes one authoritative website, in which she lists twenty-eight Vietnamese cookbooks.³ The earliest, and quite rare, is *Vietnamese Cookery* (1968) by Jill Nhu Huong Miller. Nguyen (2013) says of this book that it has “a certain Hawaiian touch.” The next book is *Vietnamese Dishes* (1973) by Duong Thi Thanh Lien. Her writing, says Nguyen, “offers insights into how people cooked and ate in the pre-1975 era of Vietnam.” The cookbooks produced from 1975 to 1989 reflect the waves of Vietnamese refugees coming to the United States and Australia. In what follows, we briefly review this history, then sample more popular cookbooks that were written since 1989.

Vietnamese people more generally have had a lack of food throughout much of their modern history. Hunger was a fact of life through the French colonial period, as well as the period of Japanese (Vichy French) occupation, during which over two million Vietnamese died of starvation. The Communist period, in the north from 1945-1975, and in the south 1975 to around the year 2000, was very bleak, and culinary practice was no different. State restaurant menus reflected this.⁴ Moreover, if there was a coordinated “cuisine” in Vietnam before 1945 it

was likely practiced by the French, along with Vietnamese Imperial cuisine. It may have taken time for Vietnamese chefs, especially in the north, to relearn culinary skills and launch restaurants. However, echoing Vu (2016), it is more likely that the preponderance of Vietnamese food preparation was a family-centered activity and that there really was not a national Vietnamese cuisine to remember.⁵

Early cookbooks on Vietnamese cuisine from the 1990s on are mainly in English, and while some acknowledge the great historical influences on foods in Vietnam, they typically neither identify nor distinguish recipes and dishes by region or locale. One of the earliest cookbooks available in English, published in 1989, is Nicole Routhier's *Foods of Vietnam*. Routhier situates Vietnamese cuisine amongst its neighbors, placing Vietnam "at one of the crossroads of the Asian world," strongly influenced by China (chopsticks, noodles, woks, stir frying), vegetarian Buddhist traditions, Mongolian beef in northern specialties, and food traditions from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and India. Moreover, there have also been strong European influences, especially the French. While it is clear that tastes and textures have their sources elsewhere, "it is apparent from the first bite that the Vietnamese have developed a novel cuisine with a unique delicacy and subtlety of taste" (Routhier 1989, 9). In addition, Routhier says, "The one most characteristic element in virtually every Vietnamese dish is *nước mắm*" and its transformation into the table sauce, *nước chấm* (9).⁶ Finally, Routhier asserts that "The Vietnamese are quick to point out that their cuisine, like their country, is divided into three regions, each with a distinct culinary tradition. However, regional differences are less pronounced than in Chinese cooking...." (11). As a result, Routhier rarely identifies the region in the recipes themselves so it is difficult to actually recognize specific regional variations.

The cookbook *Vietnamese Cuisine* (1999) points out that many varieties of Vietnamese cuisine are reflected in the ways in which meals are served. The common Chinese meal comprises three or four dishes, accompanied by soup, whereas the Vietnamese one-dish meal of fried rice or stir-fried noodles can incorporate various types of noodles and of noodle soups. The author observes that Vietnamese Western-style meals include one-dish meals served with bread, and the Vietnamese sandwich *bánh mì* is derived from the French version. Traditional dipping sauces and meats to mix and match flavors are wrapped with rice paper or lettuce or mixed with rice noodles.

Mai Pham, author of *Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table* (2001) agrees that Vietnam is at a major Asian crossroads, and has borrowed generously from many other cultures. However, she insists that Vietnam:

Has always managed to retain its unique character...What really sets it apart boils down to three main factors: the extensive use of *nước mắm* to season almost every dish, the high consumption of *rau thom* (aromatic herbs) and the distinctive style of eating small pieces of meat or seafood wrapped in lettuce or rice paper and dipped in sauce. These characteristics apply to all three culinary regions of Vietnam, although each has a slightly different approach to cooking (9).

In *Secrets of the Red Lantern* (2008), Pauline Nguyễn further reflects upon on the question of what defines Vietnamese food:

[A] distinction is that ovens don't exist in Vietnam: we prefer to watch our food being cooked—deep fried, steamed, slow braised, grilled, barbecued, or tossed in a flaming wok... What most distinguishes Vietnamese food, however, is its emphasis on freshness. We do not use fresh herbs sparingly to flavor or garnish a dish—instead, they play a major role in the food... Wrapping savory dishes at the table in lettuce or rice paper with an abundance of the freshest uncooked herbs is very much the signature of Vietnamese cuisine...This combines the raw with the cooked, the cold with the hot, and the soft with the crisp. The Vietnamese have a distinct preoccupation with crunch and contrast. Flavors and textures are juxtaposed for dramatic effect. In Vietnamese cuisine balance is always at play (14).

Trinh Diem Vy, a noted restaurateur in Hội An, unabashedly identifies her cookbook as local and regional in its focus and it is wonderfully autobiographical. *Taste Vietnam: The Morning Glory Cookbook* (2011) was the first commercial cookbook from this region, and it celebrates the uniqueness of Quảng Trị generally, and Hội An specifically. Despite these nods to local and regional specificity, Vy also makes a claim about the national character of Vietnamese cuisine:

Vietnamese cuisine can be described as three countries in one bowl: the North, Centre and South, each of which has its own distinctive style. What binds our food culture together is the country's stable carbohydrate—rice—and the fresh ingredients, particularly herbs, which are an essential part of every Vietnamese dish....The other vital component of a Vietnamese meal is the mắm—a by-product of fermented river fish and seafood....Vietnamese people know which dishes are special according to the area where they come from and as such we will seek out the specialties when visiting a place outside our home. Alternatively, when friends or relatives visit, they will always bring special hometown foods as gifts. Just as each meal must have certain harmonizing elements to make it complete, each region in Vietnam complements the other, like a member of the family (7).

An illustration of Vy's point about regionalization is the following evidence about one of Vietnam's most ubiquitous noodle dishes that turns out to have all sorts of distinctive regional variations. On this point, the prominent chef Bùi Thị Sương wrote a small book devoted to phở (2013). Sương is one of the founders of the Saigon Professional Chef's Association. She divided the book's recipes and dishes into the three recognizably distinct regions: Northern, Central, and Southern. Moreover, she identifies local variations, and seeks to identify cultural sources. In her introduction Sương notes that:

Nevertheless, not everyone is aware of the diversity and uniqueness featured in the Vietnamese cuisine. Take for instance the salad; regions vary greatly in their preparation styles. Or with regards to bún (fresh noodles) [and] phở, each region shows distinctive creativity in just cooking the broth (3).

Suong claims that “phở originated in Nam Dinh” province in Vietnam, “but Hanoi was where the recipe for phở was cultivated and refined” (14). She identifies *phở* as “a typical dish that proudly represents Vietnamese cuisine in the world” (ibid).

Under this rubric Suong includes a wide variety of noodle soups. From the central region she includes *bún bò Huế*, the fish-based *bún cá Đa Năng*, Hội An-based *cao lầu*, and Quảng Nam’s *mì Quảng* noodles. Quoting Nguyễn Tuan, Suong says “Cao Lau is an original dish which is unique to Hoi An,” (48) a claim that may belie the significant relationship of this region with the Fukien Chinese and the Japanese of long ago. Presenting noodle dishes from the south, Suong indicates that the southern style includes additional herbs, vegetables, and spices, especially star anise that gives a more intense flavor (61). Additional soups, mainly from the Mekong Delta region, include another version of *bún cá* from the Province of Kien Giang, *bún nước lèo*, originating from the Kinh, Chinese, and Khmer ethnic groups living in Tra Vinh, *bún Campuchia* credited to the Cambodians living on the border, and *hủ tiếu* (from Mỹ Tho, and Nam Vang), credited to the Chinese living in Cambodia (69-77).

In all of these examples, we can see the absorptive power of Vietnamese cuisine to adapt recipes from elsewhere as their own. With a wonderful complexity, cookbook authors claim a distinctive Vietnamese cuisine while acknowledging the multiple cultural sources and great regional and local variations and unique products. The most recent books emphasize regionalization and the local. The twenty-six cooking schools that have sprouted throughout Vietnam reflect this tension—several schools identify the dishes they teach as regional and local, especially in Hội An, but most are more generic. This is not surprising, as they catered initially and still mostly to non-Vietnamese tourists and, more often than not, make the claim of providing an “authentic” Vietnamese cooking experience with authoritative recipes and cuisine.

However, Vietnamese cooking classes are increasingly attended by middle-class Vietnamese housewives, and television shows, such as Master Chef and Iron Chef, reinforce the notion of an expert Vietnamese cuisine that requires specific ingredients, measurements, and procedures, over and above the eyeball cooking and tasting of conventional family practice. Such shows have also created Vietnamese chef celebrities. In this way, Vietnamese “cuisine” is being publicized, marketed, learned, and professionalized.

Since the forced unification of Vietnam in 1975, national identity has remained contentious, both within the boundaries of the country itself and for its overseas (now called “heritage”) Vietnamese, the *Việt kiều*. However, the rising tourist industry and the internationalization of “Vietnamese cuisine” have resulted in framing several Vietnamese dishes, most notably *phở*, as originally and distinctly (if perhaps falsely) Vietnamese. Such identification is, no doubt, useful to government rhetoric about a unified and distinctive Vietnamese culture, at least where the Kinh ethnic group is concerned. This is reminiscent of Emperor Minh Mạng’s efforts to define a singular Vietnamese cuisine.

Several of the cookbooks conceal this tension of national and regional identities and subcultures. The few that recognize it use strategies not unlike those employed by Hồ Chí Minh to emphasize a fictive intertwining of the different ethnic groups, regions, and localities into a harmony of differences. In many ways, the idea of a Vietnamese national cuisine fails a culinary authenticity test (Johnston and Baumann 2010): while lots of dishes are made in Vietnam, the geographic specificity is really regional. Many of the dishes and their variations are not simple, not even a good *phở*. What personal connections and relationships to food there are, tend to be familial, local, and regional. The history and traditions of Vietnamese cuisine are located in these localities and regions, and are not ubiquitous. Finally, there is great ethnic

variation amongst the cuisines of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups. If one is seeking food with the claim, "authentic," it needs to be local and regional, and it may be at its best when eaten in a Vietnamese family's home. It may be that there is enough security in the Vietnamese national identity, through useful identification of common ingredients and methods that are bound to a larger geography, to begin to emphasize regional differences without threatening this unifying aspect of the culture. The national political rhetoric notwithstanding, Vietnam, like many other countries (such as Italy), has fierce local and regional cultural expressions that find their way, quite forcefully, in their ingredients, preparations, dishes, and tastes.

Gustemology of Vietnamese Food

David Sutton's (2010) concept of "gustemology" emphasizes sensory data, especially taste and smell, and place-making. Sutton notes:

In pursuing our interest in the sensual aspects of food, we should keep our multisensory apparatuses trained on what anthropology has in one way or another always been concerned with: everyday life and the multiple contexts in which the culturally shaped sensory properties and sensory experiences of food are invested with meaning, emotion, memory, and value (220).

Flavor and flavor borders thus can be recognized as carrying sociocultural and political meaning commensurate to other social institutions. Tastes and foods should be recognized as primary meaning-makers in human cultural worlds, no longer just analogs or conduits for learning about something seemingly more important, such as class or masculinity (Holtzman 2009).

In the case of Vietnamese cuisine, this invites the study of *nước mắm*, which is cited (above) by many cookbook authors to be a gastro-border and national unifier. Yet

by taking its flavor profile seriously, *nước mắm* may be contrasted against technique, ingredient, and taste variations among Vietnam's regions, thus engaging tensions between locality and nationhood. As with *bánh Tết*—a New Year specialty comprised of rice, pork, and banana leaves—a single dish can even symbolize the nation itself. Yet, as anthropologist, Nir Avieli, well notes, the production of the dish—including the anxiety over the rice harvest, gendered labor investment, and regional modifications—ground it in lived daily life. *Bánh Tết* thus is both the imagined taste of the nation and its gustative constituent parts (Avieli 2005).

Distinguishing rural and urban cuisines adds further texture and tastes to questions of regional and national culinary systems. As *bánh Tết* symbolically represents the nation, it is also an economic product of peri-urban villages such as Tranh Khúc outside of Hà Nội. In Tranh Khúc, *bánh Tết* is both the purported taste of Vietnam—a bundle of sticky rice that melts together with fatty pork in this savory concoction—and a rectangular commodity that produces identity and income for its residents. In similar ways, home-cooked meals, such as Hoianese *cánh chua* (sour soup), are both symbolically the universe in a bowl (Avieli 2012) and a light lunch sold to visiting tourists.

Class and Labor in the Production of Street Foods

Street foods are products of urban industrialized economies. Sometimes heralded as “authentic” or “real” Vietnamese cuisine (cf. Vandenberghe and Thys 2010), street foods are accessible. They provide a window into an emergent urban cuisine that contrasts in notable ways from foods of nostalgia, which are typically associated with rural spaces (M. Pham 2001; A. Pham 2009). Urban street food as a category consists of atomized

dish construction (i.e., each quán [bistro] sells just one dish) and the economic structures that keep it cheap. Roving street vendors are known as “basket women” for the food-laden woven platters they balance on both ends of a flat bamboo pole over a shoulder. Usually women, these illegal food purveyors are still common, although decreasingly so as Vietnam’s cities expand at breakneck pace (Jensen et. al. 2013). For now, basket women along with the industrial, mass production of noodles and other constituent products, keep street food cheap—thus making it available and popular as “domestic” Vietnamese food (cf. Yasmeen 2007; Jensen et. al. 2013).

Vietnamese cuisine is characterized by geographic region and class distinctions. Cuisines classify food and foods act as symbolic indicators, linking producers and consumers to social categories—thereby classifying people. Street food production is largely women’s work. Together, such food and labor combine to create low-class cookery. In terms of social perception, the public nature of street food and the gendered work that creates it, are mutually demeaning. Women’s food labor is marginalized. This contrasts with the privileged status of male work.

Following Sutton’s (2010) concept of gustemology, the social positioning of food is intimately engaged with its taste on the tongue and the space where it is consumed. Moreover, the production of street food bears a loneliness that comes with leaving children and spouses in villages in order to earn urban money that allowed them to maintain these rural lives (Jensen et al. 2013). Vending petty food items in a city contrasts with disappointed hopes for some that Vietnam’s rapid economic development since Đổi Mới reforms in the late 1980s would improve formal employment opportunities for all Vietnamese.

Street vendors are awake in the predawn hours of the morning in order to purchase fruit at a wholesale market for resale or to cook pastries to hawk on the street:

To make my *bánh rán* donuts, I am a part of a group of female donut sellers in Hà Nội who make them daily on our rented balcony. We rotate who buys the ingredients, who makes the donuts, who cooks the donuts, and who sells the donuts on the daily basis, so we are able to fairly split the labor between us. We get to keep the money we make for selling, but some of us are better at selling than others. I am a shy person, so selling is sometimes hard for me. I do what I can do (Interview, Sen, 10/14/16; Jensen et al 2013). Beginning sharply at 4 AM, we make the donuts by preparing the filling by soaking the mung beans in water for two hours. While those soak, we peel the potatoes and boil them till they are soft so we can puree them. Next, we mix glutinous rice flour, rice flour, and baking powder in a mixing bowl. Separately, we put water and sugar in a pan and boil it till it turns into a “thick syrup”.... We know the donuts are done when they float to the top of the pan (Thys and Vandenberghe 2012: 92-93; interview and compilation by Danielle C. Moyer).

Social life of food production involves rising from tight communal living quarters, collaborating to make the donuts, and then pooling together their meager resources to bail out a vendor unlucky enough to be snared in a police raid:

Women all around are ducking into alleyways. Police are coming. “Illegal occupants of the sidewalks, leave immediately.” The crowd fails to move and the street is jammed. “You!” echoes behind me as a hand juts full force behind my back. I stumble on the broken tiles beneath my feet that mock me as my basket full of pomegranates is loaded into the back of the truck, followed by my bike. “Please have mercy, lower the fine.” This is what the other women told me to say. The harsh scowl from the larger man tells me they are in a bad mood (Jensen et al 2013: 113; compiled by Sarah Kloos).

These stories show that basket women are integral to the food system, but nevertheless devalued by those around them. Theirs is difficult, marginal, and anxious work that is an integral, yet rarely recognized component of street food production.

Vu (2016) contends that Vietnamese cooks and consumers adapted to and adopted the wheat-based foods of the French (primarily the baguette and the *bánh mì*). This is an overestimation. French citizens impacted Vietnam's foodscape mainly through avoidance (Peters 2012). They typically chose canned French imports over fresh Vietnamese dishes, while creating an invented tradition (cf. Ranger 1983) of simplified rurally-founded Vietnamese cuisine that belied its dynamism and urban creativity. However, the French colonial government unintentionally altered the recipe for the fundamental *nước mắm* by restricting access to salt when it endeavored to monopolize the commodity (Peters 2012). By contrast, Chinese food knowledge simmered through the more intimate channels of migration, intermarriage, and shared ingredients. If France commandeered salt, it was Chinese businessmen who traded it. Regional differences are born of historical contingency and fed by Vietnam's remarkable diversity of ingredients. Each region thus constructs ways of producing and consuming food that unite through common knowledge, but remain distinguished by class.

One emerging mode of culinary nationalization is Vietnamese concern for food safety, which is routinely expressed as unease over Chinese imports. Vietnamese shoppers seek safe food, but the retail space where it is found exhibits generational divisions. Urban shoppers with means have articulated suspicion over cheap, aesthetically flawless fruits and vegetables, especially those sold in outdoor markets and street stalls. They say that only heavy insecticides can produce such uniformity at a low-cost. By using such language, these shoppers imply that such foods are Chinese grown products—and therefore should not be trusted. Meanwhile, members of older generations, especially women, seek out markets, inversely because they trust the interpersonal relationships they forge with vendors (Leshkovich 2011).

Despite blame cast northward, Vietnam struggles to regulate its own meat, vegetable, and fruit growers. Early governmental efforts to regulate clean food occurred in 1994 and 1998, but they were hampered by inconsistencies between policy and practice. In 2001, governmental campaigns switched terminology, from promoting “clean” to “safe” foods, in order to dispel the conflation of simple dirt removal with healthfulness. More recently, Denmark and Australia have fostered programs that certify produce as organic and Good Agricultural Practice (Viet GAP), respectively.⁷ In 2013, Holland partnered with the Vietnam Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to raise safety standards in pork production (Dwinger, et al 2018). While contributing to improved food safety, these efforts also accelerate trends toward supermarket consumption and away from outdoor markets, especially for younger shoppers with economic means. Food safety certification raises commodity prices, while it likely disenfranchises market buyers and sellers, most of whom are older and female (Leshkovich 2011; Gerber et al 2014).

“Three Countries in a Bowl”: Culinary Diversity at Risk

In this chapter we have explored the notion of Vietnamese cuisine and what it encompasses, while problematizing the notion of a national Vietnamese cuisine. To imagine a unified Vietnamese cuisine, one may settle on a few ingredients or dishes, such as rice, *nước mắm* and *phở bò*. Whereas in practice Vietnamese cuisine has a more varied and interesting character, reflecting not only regional variation, but also the social pressures, conflicts, and tensions that animate contemporary Vietnam, as the accounts of street food and food safety concerns developed in this chapter reflect. Overall, the account suggests that the notion of a national Vietnamese cuisine sheds little light on what makes it distinctive.

Vietnamese local and regional cuisines present a model for the power of food to negotiate political boundaries and culinary construction. This chapter applies Sutton's concept of gustemology to recognize the culinary work of Vietnamese women, to show, for example, how the invisible labor of basket women produces street food for the nation. Other forms of gendered labor include women buying and selling in outdoor markets. These important social and economic spaces are under threat by national food safety imperatives, as well as a generational shift toward supermarkets. Meanwhile, we highlight the culinary knowledge of a number of skilled female chefs through their cookbooks.

Looking forward, Vietnamese cuisine will further develop within the context of an increasingly internationalized Vietnam, where tourism makes the caricatured claims of a national Vietnamese cuisine good business and de-emphasizes diversity. Indeed, the economy of Vietnamese food is increasingly driven by the forces of globalization, capitalism, and the country's increasing economic prosperity. Whether the development of domestic Vietnamese "foodie" tourism that seeks out regional and local artisanal foods or longer-standing local food cultures can withstand these pressures remain to be seen. If not, the future of Vietnamese cuisines is in doubt. To the practiced eater of foods in Vietnam, it is actually diversity and variation that make's Vietnam's cuisine "Vietnamese." As Trinh Diem Vy suggested, Vietnamese cuisine is at least "three countries in one bowl" (Vy 2011, 7), and it is also so much more than that.

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Annear, C. and Harris, J., 2018. Cooking up the Culinary Nation or Savoring its Regions? Teaching Food Studies in Vietnam. *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts*, 25(1), pp.115–148.
DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/ane.266>

² The Kinh are 86% of the population and consider themselves the core Vietnamese ethnic group.

³ Andrea Nguyen (2013), <http://vietworldkitchen.com/blog/>.

⁴ In 2012 Food Shop No. 37 opened in Hà Nội, replicating state run restaurants of the post-1975 period of rationing. They serve meals that consist, for example, of fatty pork, greens stir-fried in lard, and cassava.

⁵ This last point is the keen observation of Professor Nguyen Khanh Linh, Coordinator of the Vietnamese Studies Program at California State University - Fullerton.

⁶ Fish sauce is explicitly noted as a central and delineating ingredient in Vietnamese cuisines by Choi and Issak 2005, Mai Pham 2001, Nguyen 2008, Hoyer 2009 and Vy 2011.

⁷ Personal correspondence with Nguyễn Thị Tân Lộc, October 19, 2018.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 2008. "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India." In, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Second Edition. C. M. Counihan and P. Van Esterik, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Avieli, Nir. 2012. *Rice Talks: Food and Community in a Vietnamese Town*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Avieli, Nir. 2005. "Vietnamese New Year Rice Cakes: Iconic Festive Dishes and Contested National Identity." *Ethnology* 44(2): 167-187.
- Belasco, Warren. 2008. *Food: The Key Concepts*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bell, David, and Gill Valentine. 1997. *Consuming Geographies: We Are What We Eat*. New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2013. "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste." In, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Third Edition. C.M. Counihan and P.v. Esterik, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Choi, Trieu Thi, and Marcel Isaak. 2005. *Authentic Recipes from Vietnam*. Singapore: Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd.
- Clair, Robin P., Holyoak, Isaac C., Hill, Theon E., Rajan, Prashant, Dillard, Syndey, Kumar, Rati, and Shaunak Sastry. 2011. "Engaging Cultural Narratives of the Ethnic Restaurant: Discursive Practices of Hybridity, Authenticity, and Commoditization." In, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Volume 37: Studies in Symbolic Interaction*. N.K. Denzin, ed. Pp. 135-161. Bingley, UK: Emerald Insight.

- Dwinger, Ron, Ina Enting, and Gerard Wellenberg. 2018. "Value added International oriented Production chain for pork: Final report." Ministry of Economic Affairs in collaboration with GD Animal Health and Holland Pig.
- Fay, Kim. 2010. *Communion: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam*. San Francisco: ThingsAsian Press.
- Freidberg, Susanne. 2003. "Not All Sweetness and Light: New Cultural Geographies of Food." *Social & Cultural Geography* 4(1):3-6.
- Freidberg, Susanne. 2004. *French Beans and Food Scares: Culture and Commerce in an Anxious Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gerber, Jonathan, Sarah Turner, and B. Lynne Milgram. 2014. "Food Provisioning and Wholesale Agricultural Commodity Chains in Northern Vietnam," *Human Organization* 73(1):50-61.
- Goody, Jack. 1996. *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heldke, Lisa. 2005. "But is it Authentic? Culinary Travel and the Search for the 'Genuine Article'." In, *The Taste Culture Reader*. C. Korsmeyer, ed. Pp. 385-394. Oxford: Berg.
- Holtzman, Jon D. 2006. "Food and Memory." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35:361-378.
- Holtzman, Jon D. 2009. *Uncertain Tastes: Memory, Ambivalence, and the Politics of Eating in Samburu, Northern Kenya*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hoyer, Daniel. 2009. *Culinary Vietnam*. Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith.
- Inglis, David, and Debra Gimlin, eds. 2009. *The Globalization of Food*. New York: Berg.
- Jamieson, Neil L. 1995. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jensen, Rolf, Donald M. Jr. Peppard, and Vũ Thị Minh Thăng. 2013. *Women on the Move: Hanoi's Migrant Roving Street Vendors*. Hanoi: Women's Publishing House.

- Johnston, Josée, and Shyon Baumann. 2007. "Democracy versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing." *American Journal of Sociology* 113(1):165-204.
- Kurlansky, Mark. 2010. *The Food of a Younger Land: A Portrait of American Food Before the National Highway System, Before Chain Restaurants, and Before Frozen Food, When the Nation's Food Was Seasonal, Regional, and Traditional: From the Lost WPA Files*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Laongkote, Muoi Thai. 1999. *Vietnamese Cuisine*. Monterey Park, CA: Wei-Chuan Publishing.
- Leshkowich, Ann Marie. 2011. "Making Class and Gender: (Market) Socialist Enframing of Traders in Ho Chi Minh City," *American Anthropologist* 113(2):277-290.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 2013. "The Culinary Triangle." In, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Third Edition. C.M. Counihan and P.v. Esterik, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Lu, Shun, and Gary Alan Fine. 1995. "Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as Social Accomplishment." *The Sociological Quarterly* 36(3):535-553.
- Mannur, Anita. 2007. "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora." *MELUS* 32(4):11-31.
- Mintz, Sidney, and Christine M. Du Bois. 2002. "The Anthropology of Food and Eating." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31:99-119.
- Nguyen, Luke. 2013. *The Food of Vietnam*. Richmond, Australia: Hardie Grant Books.
- Nguyen, Pauline. 2008. *Secrets of the Red Lantern: Stories and Vietnamese Recipes from the Heart*. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing.
- Peters, Erica J. 2012. *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam: Food and Drink in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

- Peters, Erica J. 2010. "Defusing Phở: Soup Stories and Ethnic Erasures, 1919-2009."
Contemporary French and Francophone Studies 14(2):159-167.
- Pham, Andrew X. 2009. *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars*. New York: Broadway.
- Pham, Mai. 2001. *Pleasures from the Vietnamese Table*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Pilcher, Jeffrey. 2016a. "The Embodied Imagination in Recent Writings on Food History."
American Historical Review 121(3):861-888.
- Pilcher, Jeffrey. 2016b. "The Whole Enchilada: A Full Plate of Food History." *Journal of American History* 103(3):694-696.
- Pottier, Johan. 1999. *Anthropology of Food: The Social Dynamics of Food Security*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Ranger, Terence O. 1983. "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa." In, *The Invention of Tradition*. E. Hobsbawn and T.O. Ranger, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Routhier, Nicole. 1989. *The Foods of Vietnam*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang.
- Schulp, Jan Arend, and Ismail Tirali. 2008. "Studies in Immigrant Restaurants I: Culinary Concepts of Turkish Restaurants in the Netherlands." *Journal of Culinary Science & Technology* 6(2/3):119-150.
- Suong, Bùi Thị. 2013. *Authentic Vietnamese Wraps & Rolls: Cuốn Recipes from All over Vietnam*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Phu Nu Publishing.
- Suong, Bùi Thị. 2013. *Pho and Other Vietnamese Noodle Soups*. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Phu Nu Publishing House.
- Sutton, David. 2010. "Food and the Senses." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39:209-23.
- Swift, Candice. L. and Richard. R. Wilk, Eds. 2015. *Teaching Food and Culture*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Trinh Diem, Vy. 2011. *Taste Vietnam: The Morning Glory Cookbook*. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Phuong Dong Publishing House.

Vandenberghe, Tom and Thys, Luke. 2010. *Hanoi Street Food: Cooking and Traveling in Vietnam*. Belgium: Lannoo.

van den Berghe, Pierre L. 1984. "Ethnic Cuisine: Culture in Nature." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 7(3):387-97.

Vu, Hong Lien, 2016. *Rice and Baguette: A History of Food in Vietnam*. London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd.

Yasmeen, Gisèle. 2007. *Bangkok Foodscape: Public Eating, Gender Relations, and Urban Change*. Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Co Ltd.