



Vietnam Dining

“The Vietnamese are a skinny people obsessed with food” claims Anthony Bourdain. Indeed, people tend to know two things about Vietnam: that it endured a long and painful war, and that it has one of the richest, most delicious, fresh, and varied cuisines in the world.

You're about to embark upon an intimate journey through one of the world's most widely recognized and appreciated cuisines. Our obsession is giving you the information you'll need to intelligently eat and drink your way through Vietnam on an unforgettable culinary adventure from fine dining to local street eats. This list is only one part of that goal, on the ground your guide, local tour manager, and people you meet will provide other suggestions. In addition, don't underestimate your hotel's restaurants and cafes, some have fabulous food, in some places ranking better to what you may find outside in smaller towns.

If cooking were painting, Vietnam would have one of the world's most colorful palettes. The great diversity of its climate and terrain can produce almost anything which can be eaten. The Vietnamese themselves have no culinary inhibitions and are always willing to try something new. When you combine the two, nothing is ruled out.

The famous dishes such as *pho* and fresh spring rolls are but the tip of a gastronomic iceberg. In addition to a myriad of foods and preparations, there is a staggering number of sauces and dips limited only by the imagination of each cook. The picture of Vietnamese cuisine is vast and varied, always subject to innovation, and always vibrantly colorful.

You'll encounter the wonderful and the strange, the sacred and the profane. You'll find spices that sing in your mouth, smells that trigger emotions, dishes that amaze by their cleverness and beguile by their sensuousness, drinks that surprise, fruits that will shock and creatures that will make you shriek. Above all, you'll find the people that make up Vietnam's food culture who will charm, frustrate and intrigue you.

You are about to consume a culture. A culture that is still relatively poor in goods but rich in history, art, literature, music and pride. A culture that will reveal itself to you through the medium of its cuisine. Vietnam lays itself bare in the kitchen and at the table. Its history, its legends and its lore are all reflected in its food and drink. As you navigate these pages, we wish you a good journey and a good appetite.

Historians like to say that geography is fate. Geography is also cuisine, for it determines what foods and what people may shape it. The topography of Vietnam presents virtually every climate and microclimate capable of yielding a crop or animal, whether tropical or temperate, from fish, rice and tea to beef, coffee and cream. Look at the map of Vietnam. As the Vietnamese are eager to point out, it resembles a *don ganh* (a yoke), a bamboo pole with a basket of rice slung from each end. The baskets represent the main rice-growing regions of the Red River Delta in the north, and the Mekong Delta in the south. The other thing to notice on this highly symbolic map of Vietnam is its waters, its 2,400km of coastline and its innumerable kilometers of rivers and streams.

Rice cultivation and the harvesting of the water world provide the cuisine of Vietnam with its two most potent symbols and substances: rice and *nuoc mam* (fermented fish sauce). This pair makes up the *sine qua non* of Vietnamese food. With them, Vietnamese cooks can go anywhere and still prepare something at least close to their native fare. Without them, they are bereft.

In keeping with its geography, Vietnamese cooking is heavily influenced by China, especially in methods of preparation and kitchen equipment. They share the concept of `the five flavors, a balance of salty, sweet, sour, bitter and hot (spicy). A dish may be dominated by one or two of the five, but the others will usually play a pleasing harmony in the culinary tune. Stir fry is a common method of preparation but the Vietnamese generally use very little oil, displaying a lighter hand than the Chinese. The frying is more of a gentle simmering in the expressed juices of the food. Lightness and freshness are the goals.

As in China, vegetables play a central role in cuisine, but in Vietnam they are raw as often as cooked. Vietnam's fish and seafood are plentiful, and of great variety. Fish are generally alive at the time of sale to the consumer, and deftly killed and cleaned by the merchant upon selection. Vietnamese cooks rightly point out that fish are more flavorful if they are not deboned before cooking. This can be a problem for the uninitiated, as so many of the fish have numerous small bones. Vietnamese grow up practiced in the art of removing them while eating, but foreigners may find the process tiring and frustrating.

Also like with Chinese cuisine, varying textures such as crunch and chewiness are prized at the Vietnamese table. Indispensable as a seasoning is *nuoc mam* (they seldom use soy); like a judicious splash of Worcestershire sauce, when cooked into a dish it buries itself in the flavors of the food and gives it greater dimension without altering its basic character. Also important are the fire spices, chili and black pepper. Normally they are not cooked into the food but served as condiments, and are used as commonly as salt. Sweet spices such as star anise and cinnamon, and pungent ginger are common. Vinegar is not widely used - acidity is provided by tamarind and lime.

The Vietnamese have three styles or manners of cooking and eating: comprehensive eating, or eating through the five senses; scientific eating, which observes the dualistic principles of yin & yang; and democratic eating, or the freedom to eat as you like.

In comprehensive eating, the most common form, you eat with your eyes first. Dishes must be attractively presented with a diversity of forms and colors. Then the nose follows: the Vietnamese penchant for aroma is brought to the fore, and each dish must offer pleasant odors of meat, Fish or vegetables and a sauce. When chewing, take care to feel the softness of noodles, the texture of the meat, and listen to the crackling sound of rice crackers or the crunchiness of roasted peanuts. And then you taste. The cook must see to it that each dish prepared has its own distinct flavor, and you, the diner, should take note of the differences. A dish might have all the five flavors, but none should predominate.

Scientific eating concentrates on the dualistic philosophy of yin & yang, in this case a balance between hot and cold. For instance, a fish stew would be seasoned with salty fish sauce which is yang, but balanced by the yin of sugar. Green mangoes (yin) should be taken with salt and hot chilis (yang); grilled catfish or duck (yin) must be eaten with ginger (yang). This kind of eating is said to contribute to the good health of both mind and body. Democratic eating is when you eat for the sake of eating. Everybody does it, but no one wants to make a habit of it. --Richard Sterling, *World Food, Vietnam*

Online

Luke Nguyen and Anthony Bourdain have many entertaining pieces from travel in Vietnam, focused on cuisine, on YouTube. Bourdain also has a book with sections on Vietnam: *Chefs Tour*. The rare *World Food Vietnam* by Lonely Planet is no longer published and if you find a rare copy, it's a great resource on Vietnam, regardless of focus on cuisine.

For blogs, we like the Hanoi-based Sticky Rice: <http://stickyrice.typepad.com>

HANOI

What's unique? Hanoi has the finest *pho* in the country. Also unique to the city, is *bia hoi* – happy hour, bun cha (meat balls), and street stall grilled meats with eggs.

SPICES (METROPOLE)

Tempted by Vietnamese street food but want a convenient and more luxurious setting? Look no further than The Spices with a variety of favorites. Conversely, if you want an authentic street food experience, don't miss *bia hoi* (happy hour) and ask your guide for his favorite *pho* (soup) café.

QUAN AN NGON 18 Phan Boi Chau str., Hoan Kiem dist. – (04) 3942 8162 – Reserve for private table.

One of our favorites. Lively, loud, informal. Perhaps Hanoi's busiest restaurant with locals and expats. Set in a restored villa with food stalls where you may watch cooking live. A must visit for lunch or dinner.

CAU GO Vietnamese restaurant 73 Cầu Gỗ Street – (04) 3926 0801. Reservations recommended

On Hoan Kiem lake with the finest views in the city. Classy dining and adjacent cafe, but also splendid for drinks alone, simply to admire the 6th floor views over the Old Quarter and lake. 7:00 am to 11 pm. Our culinary expert, Diep To, is an advisor to the owner.

DON'S Bistro 16 Quang An Road, Tay Ho – (04) 3719 2828. (<http://dons-bistro.com>)

Multi-concept bistro, it serves classic and innovative international cuisine with a menu that covers practically all the gastronomic bases, from pasta and risotto to steaks and chops, soups and salads to Vietnamese and Asian favorites. Elegant spaces with stunning art, beautifully designed with stain glassed windows and dark wood furniture. Cigar Lounge and an open-air Oyster bar at rooftop. Reservations recommended.

GOURMET CORNER Rooftop, 32 Lo Su str., Hoan Kiem District - (04) 3935 1632.

In a colorful, busy neighborhood atop a boutique hotel. Serving authentic Vietnamese and Western selections, exceptional and original tastes, plus a perfect selection of wine to pair with. Come to watch twilight from spacious balcony at rooftop floor. Vegetarian set menu offered.

VERTICALE 19 Ngo Van So St., Hanoi Tel.: (04) 3944 6317 (www.verticale-hanoi.com). "Le Chef" long-time Metropole chef Didier Corlou serves up fine French-Vietnamese but with a flair for Vietnamese spices which line the walls. His signature venue but Also consider Didi's other restaurants, Madame Hien & Porte d'Annam.

PORTE d'ANNAM 48 Hang Be (Old Quarter)

Pleasant setting nestled behind a quiet courtyard in the Old Quarter, Green Tangerine restaurant spices up European cuisine with Vietnamese flavors. Inventive and varied menu, although spotty service. Dinner.

CHA CÁ ANH VU 120 Giang Vo Str., Ba Dinh dist.

Serving the famous cha cá, or fish fried (right at your table) with cilantro and served with rice noodles, chilies, and peanuts. In keeping with the simplicity of the menu, this popular, second-floor dining room is starkly furnished, with plastic chairs.

Chocolate Buffet (METROPOLE Hotel)

For chocolaholics, the Metropole hosts between 3:00 and 6:00 pm, an irresistible chocolate buffet opens in the Club Bar. Praline, ganache, éclairs, mille-feuille pastries, chocolate fountain, a selection of every imaginable kind of French pâtisseries and delectable chocolate in every shape and form.

PHO 10 LY QUOC SU. Famed rice noodle soup with beef. Great for a light, quick lunch.

BUN BO NAM BO 67 Hang Dieu Street- (04) 3923 0701. Cash only

Here the environment and atmosphere are typical of an authentic local restaurant, selling Bun bo Nam bo

(Southern beef noodle) which is a quintessentially street food. A bowl of noodles is full of flavors from noodles, topped with sliced beef, peanuts, dried onions, bean sprouts, green papaya, coriander and basil leaves - all drenched in sweet savory fish sauce that will make each mouthful complex and intriguing.

BUN RIEU THANH HONG 42 Hoa Ma Street, Hai Ba Trung dist. *Cash only*

Another place for noodle lovers. Local street restaurant which has been famous for its rice paddy noodle soup. Fried shallot, tofu, tomato wedges and the secret crab base all combined in a bowl with noodle and broth that you would not never forget after try it once. Perfect for Lunch time.

Bia Hoi is Hanoi's happy hour. After work, many cafes serve up frothy draft beer (*bia*) along with snacks.

HOI AN

Great local cuisine and markets. Not listed here, but try Miss Ly's for the traditional dish of the town, *cau lau*, and the Cargo Club or Morning Glory for informal and delicious dining.

CITRONELLA Nguyen Thi Minh Khai street – (0510) 2241 491

Alluring location on the Thu Bon River is one of best features of this restaurant along with the traditional Chinese and Japanese decoration. Diverse, tasty dishes from specialty Vietnamese and International.

GODA 308 Cua Dai road– (0510) 3923 644. Reservation recommended

Fine dining, including Vietnamese , Japanese, French and International with extensive wine list

DAO TIEN 19/4 Phan Boi Chau street – (0510) 3914 996

Al fresco dining on river serving authentic Hoi An specialties including white rose, pan seared duck and chicken rice. The pleasant grounds are lush with foliage and outdoor setting is unbeatable.

BANH MY PHUONG 2B Phan Chau Trinh – (0510) 3864 773

The best Hoi An baguette. Should never miss if you ever travel to this ancient town. Crispy, tasty and yummy with Ms Phuong's special chili sauce and marinated pork.

RED BRIDGE Thon 4, Cam Thanh – (0510) 3933 222

Pleasant 25 minutes by boat from the central dock in Hoi An (closer to beach resorts by car), this scenic and architecturally tasteful riverfront restaurant serves high end Vietnamese. Full bar with selection of wines. Have your escort hire a boat and pick you up afterwards by car. Also midday cooking class. Request a more private patio table.

BROTHER'S CAFE, 27 Pham Boi Chau – (0510) 3914 150

Fine Vietnamese in a colonial-era, lush garden setting by the river. Great cuisine, atmosphere and service.

THE NAM HAI Resort

Formal dining at "The Restaurant" as well as informal beachfront BBQ.

HUE

In Hue, a university city, cuisine has never been a highlight, like Hoi An, a mere 82 miles south. We will arrange a perhaps more touristy dinner of "royal cuisine," but enjoy the architecture and your gracious hosts.

ROYAL Park 38 Nguyen Sinh Sac street, Vi Da – (054) 3897 202 / (054) 3812 761.

Located next to Thon Vy, the homeland of many famous poets and artists, not too far away from the city center. Surrounded by trees and bonsai garden, the setting is quiet, cool airy and relaxed.

ANCIENT HUE 104/47 Kim Long – (054) 3590 902

Located in lush garden houses near the Citadel, Ancient Hue is a high ranking restaurant where visitors can experience fine food and Hue's cultural heritage in a beautiful ambience. Offering refined takes on local specialties, the scrumptious dishes are presented with traditional royal decorations passed through generations

of Hue culinary artists.

TROPICAL GARDEN 27 Chu Van An street, South Bank – (054) 3847 143

This place has tables set under thatched shelters in a pretty, fecund tropical garden. The garden setting and villa are pleasing and the food is good. There is a performance of Hue music at night.

PHUOC THANH Garden 30 Pham Ngu Lao street, Phu Hoi ward – (054) 3830 989

A popular locals place. There are options for hygienic versions of local specialties such as Bun bo Hue (local noodle soup), Nem ran (fresh spring rolls) or Banh khoai (pancakes). Perfect choice for lunch time.

SAIGON

Street food in Saigon is excellent, the best in the country (as are its restaurants). Ask your guide to take you to one of the “soup alleys,” featuring dozens of carts serving a variety of dishes on outdoor tables.

PHO HOA Pasteur Street

Although pho is available everywhere from street stalls to fine restaurants, the most well regarded is busy Pho Hoa on Pasteur Street.

SQUARE ONE Park Hyatt Hotel, 2 Lam Son square, District 1 – (08) 3824 1234

Asian/Pacific Rim cooked up in kitchens behind glass walls. Western and Vietnamese, fresh and tasty seafood. Live music after 9:00pm from the lounge. Request a table facing the kitchens.

XU 75 Hai Ba Trung Street, District 1 - (08) 3824 8468. www.xusaigon.com

One of the city’s finest restaurants Saigon has on offer. Traditional and fusion. Trendy lounge for pre- and post-dinner drinks.

Vegetarian “...HUM” 32 Vo Van Tan Str, Dist 3 – (08) 3930 3819

This chic restaurant offers contemporary local vegan. Well decorated with Zen style. The best place is the first floor by the little lotus pond. You want to dine here even if you are not a vegetarian.

BARBECUE GARDEN 135A Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, Dist 1 - (08) 3823 3340 www.barbecuegarden.com

Large outdoor patio in central location, lively setting popular with expats, travelers, and locals. Table grills and cold draft beers. Come here for the outdoor atmosphere, not the food which is simply grilled offerings. Informal lunch and dinner outside dining.

CUC GACH QUAN 10 Dang Tat Street, Dist 1 - (08) 3848 0144

A space of charming and rustic designation. Menu provides Vietnam countryside dishes. Tofu and Soya sauce are house made.

HOA TUC 74 Hai Ba Trung Str, Dist 1 – (08) 3825 1676

Built on base of old opium produce factory of French during War period. A romantic and classic space. Diners may enjoy the mix of traditional and modern Vietnamese cuisine, combine with a selective wine list to bring a very sophisticated favor.

DECK Saigon Riverfront

Overlooking the river, with an airy, bright setting. Let us arrange your transfer by boat along the Saigon River for dining here. 14 different variety of martinis on the menu to continue your evening overlooking the pleasant scene. *We must book a few days in advance to secure a riverside table.*