

48 hours in Saigon

"You're looking for what?" the concierge at the five-star hotel asks incredulously. "Goat's nipples," I repeat. "I understand there is a street here that specializes in goat. You know, goat meat, goat testicles, goat nipples..." The concierge turns to his assistant, as if to confirm that my request was not a trick of his imagination. The young man shrugs then mumbles a few words in Vietnamese. The concierge considers me again, then, after a moment's hesitation, leans forward conspiratorially. "Will you be going alone?" he almost whispers. "Why?" I murmur back, my intrigue deepening. "Is it *dangerous*?"

Goat's nipples (grilled to crispiness and served with a spicy dip), are a beer snack in Ho Chi Minh City, not unlike pretzels and peanuts in the west. Beer is imbibed pretty much exclusively by men, often until the late hours when their raucous laughter finally drowns out the incessant honking of diesel-fueled motorbikes and cars. The habitual consumption of mammary parts apparently does little to soften these testosterone-infused gatherings and in a society where gender equality is at best embryonic, women rarely indulge in this caprine delicacy on their own.

That goat's nipples could be considered a delicacy at all says much about this country's tumultuous culinary history. Revered now for its rich and varied cuisine, Vietnam not that long ago flirted with famine, thanks to the government's misguided attempt in the 1980s to merge the country's small farms into giant collectives. The Vietnamese were thus forced to eat whatever they could get their hands on, including birds, dogs, cats, snakes, rats and....weasel excrement.

Weasel excrement coffee (ask for *chon* at any of the city's ubiquitous cafes) is a favourite among the city's many coffee connoisseurs. I discover it by chance one morning at Trung Nguyen, a coffee shop chain. Seeking a rousing jolt of caffeine, I ask the waiter for the best coffee on offer. He returns with a drinking glass topped by a small, aluminium pot. A tarry, hot liquid drips from this curious chamber, drop by placid drop to slowly form a steaming puddle at the bottom of the glass. Several long minutes pass before the pot releases its final drop. I remove it from above the glass then take my first tentative sip. Instantly, my senses scream awake. Syrup thick, buttery, and mildly salty, this bitter and potent brew is so strong, espresso by comparison seems weak as water.

With morbid curiosity, I take several more oily sips - hands growing shakier by the second. Then I beckon the waiter to return. "What is this?" I ask. He points to the menu, index finger hovering over "weasel coffee." Weasel coffee??? In broken English he attempts to explain but fails to break my bewilderment. Finally, exasperated, he takes a pen and, using the side of his hand as a notepad, writes out in block letters, "EXCREMENT."

Later, I get the low-down: A long time ago, according to local lore, rogue weasels consumed the harvest of a poor coffee farmer who later finds in the animals' excrement his stolen beans. In desperation, he keeps what he can salvage and, like so many stories of disguised blessings, discovers a better tasting coffee.

Weasel coffee at Trung Nguyen is *not* made with weasel excrement; the beans are just roasted in such a way to recreate that unique flavour. No one seems to know whether any of the city's *chon* is really brewed from weasel waste. Then again, fewer Vietnamese these days need to resort to such desperate measures.

Following market reforms that began in the early 1990s, peasants were granted the freedom to sell their crops for a profit. Other forms of private enterprise eventually flourished, resulting in a revolution that was not just economic, but gastronomic. Today, throughout the country, particularly in the commercial capital of Ho Chi Minh City, people are learning to enjoy their food again. Restaurants here now embrace atmosphere, conspicuous luxury, innovative cuisine, as well as time-honoured recipes - a far cry from the days when Vietnam's communist regime decried dining out as a bourgeois indulgence.

Temple Club, in the heart of the city, exemplifies the mood of the new Saigon. This upmarket restaurant, bar and lounge, housed in a red-brick colonial building that was once an office for the Hindu temple across the street, offers fine, authentic Vietnamese food in a refined setting. Customers can savour delectable spring rolls, papaya salads and grilled fish, accompanied by sips of chardonnay and the salubrious notes of a live jazz pianist in the salon next door.

Luc Lejeune, a French expatriate who has lived in Vietnam since 1991, opened Temple Club just over two years ago. He says this type of establishment could never have worked any earlier.

"Back then, the Vietnamese were struggling. They had a different mindset. At that time, all they wanted to do was forget the past and embrace the future. Now, people are more relaxed. They've made money, they're more comfortable and optimistic and they have more time. They are learning to be proud of their past."

Nostalgic customers with money to spare can recreate the club's genteel atmosphere at home. The handsome Indochinese antique furniture and curios, art deco pieces and convincing reproductions that fill this lofty space are not just there to be admired and coveted... but also, to be purchased. Almost everything in the restaurant is for sale.

Not so at Au Manoir de Khai, a swanky French restaurant where even an *amuse-bouche* is beyond the reach of most Vietnamese. Opened last year by 39-year old Hoang Khai, a flamboyant local businessman who prospered from a silk textiles business among other ventures, Au Manoir is Ho Chi Minh City's most opulent and costly dining experience. Concealed behind a perimeter of high concrete walls, this very exclusive establishment - housed in a stunningly restored French colonial villa framed by manicured gardens and a reflecting pool - epitomizes the aspirations of the newly rich.

"Every night we are fully booked," Khai says, offering me an iced margarita garnished with a fresh Thai orchid. "We only seat thirty clients a night. So if you want to come, you have to reserve days in advance."

I did not, and thus missed out on the foie gras, roast rack of lamb and soufflé that Khai says are the restaurant's specialties. But I was privileged enough to catch a glimpse of the silk and gilt coated interior of this two-storey manor - lovingly bedecked

by its Europhile owner. Zebra-striped fabrics draped 'just so' on Louis XV divans, ceilings shimmering with gold-leaf, and, as Khai gleefully showed me, flower petals floating in the bowl of the women's toilet - replaced after every flush.

"I like it when people come into my restaurant and say, 'WOW!'" he explains when I question the necessity for this ritual. "Some might call this, uh, nouveaux riche..." I suggest. But Khai takes no offense. "I love it! I love it!" he enthuses with a grin, punctuating his words with the flick of a Bulgari-bound wrist.

Not just people like Khai, but almost every other aspect of Vietnam's culture has been shaped, to some extent, by outside powers. The country's geography - with its lengthy borders and coastlines - opened it to foreign invaders, all of whom left their mark on Vietnam's religion, politics and of course, cooking.

The Chinese brought chopsticks, noodles, beancurd, and stir-fry techniques. Cambodia added Indian curries and spices, while Thailand and Laos tossed in shrimp paste, lemon grass, mint, and basil. The French, who colonized Vietnam in the 19th century, refined the mix with a new philosophy of food and eating, as well as an appreciation for baguettes, pate, beer, wine, ice cream and coffee.

Despite its varied influences though, Vietnamese cuisine has retained its distinctive character. Locals explain it by comparing their country to a house with four walls, each with an open window. Winds may blow in and rearrange the furniture, but they always blow out, leaving behind the same tables and chairs. Similarly, Vietnamese cooks delight in combining complementary ingredients to create new flavours, but the cuisine that results remains uniquely Vietnamese. Not for them the hodge-podge qualities often found in 'fusion' cooking.

Brad Turley, a Californian native transplanted to Vietnam via New York, however, is on a mission to change that. The 32-year old is head chef at Asian Reflections, Ho Chi Minh City's first genuine 'fusion' restaurant. From his kitchens in the renovated Caravelle Hotel - its panoramic rooftop bar, Saigon Saigon was where correspondents broadcast from during the Vietnam War - Turley creates dishes that have been electrifying local tastebuds since he started one year ago.

Roast duck breast in a red wine reduction spiced with star anise, lemongrass, and thai basil, enhanced by a mango, blackcurrant, raspberry vinegar and water chestnut chutney; slipper lobster and shrimp mousse steamed in Chinese cabbage and served on a bed of chunky Italian tomato sauce salinated with fish sauce or nuoc mam; deep-fried banana and ginger spring rolls juxtaposed against coconut ice cream.... flavours that were once novel in California, but still daring here in Vietnam.

"I've had to alter some of my dishes to suit local palates," Turley confesses. "But as soon as they start getting used to these flavours, I'm going to go back to my original recipes. I'm going to teach them new tastes...I'm on a mission!"

Turley, however, expects the Vietnamese to teach him just as much. Prior to arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, he had never stepped foot in Asia, despite having cooked with Asian ingredients for much of his career. "I am still impressed by how much people here value the freshness of ingredients," he says. "These people don't have a lot of money. But they will still throw away fruits and vegetables every day in order to use the freshest produce."

When not cooking, Turley spends his free time wandering the city's congested streets and markets, sampling the dizzying array of street foods, and seeking new ingredients to experiment with. Turley says he's looking forward to trying cobra heart - a local delicacy. Would he ever employ it in his own cooking? "Depends how it tastes," he says, only half-jokingly.

Despite the mushrooming of fine dining establishments, some of the best and most authentic local cuisine is still to be found in places accessible to all diners: the streets and markets. To truly experience the food culture of Vietnam, one must do more than eat: one must watch. In Ho Chi Minh City, culinary callisthenics are best viewed from the colourful arena of Ben Thanh market, a sprawling emporium that sells every ingredient needed for a mind-boggling Vietnamese feast, as well as many of the finished dishes.

The market's cooked food area - cleaned up three years ago to meet international hygiene standards - is a rowdy jumble of independent stalls that produce individual specialties from rice cakes, noodles and dumplings to *che*, the rainbow-hued, condensed milk desserts that are so popular in Vietnam.

Kim Dung, a French-Vietnamese who returned to Vietnam four years ago, is my guide through this labyrinth of cookery. Kim's parents run a successful Vietnamese restaurant in Toulouse; her two brothers are chefs in Paris. Kim herself does not cook professionally, but she knows good food when she tastes it. Ben Thanh market, she says, is one of the best places in Ho Chi Minh City for authentic local fare.

I follow Kim to a stall selling rice flour rolls or *banh cuon*, a speciality of Hue in central Vietnam that Kim says the Saigonese have radically improved. Seated on plastic stools at the narrow counter, we watch an elderly woman prepare our lunch. First, she spoons a ladle of batter onto a hot, metal disk the size of a manhole. A burst of steam rises and she extracts the now translucent pastry with a long chopstick that she wields like a magic wand. The pastry is as thin and delicate as a contact lens, but just resilient enough to contain a textured stuffing of chopped black mushrooms, fava beans, and dried shrimp. Seconds later, chopped and topped with fresh mint and coriander, the dish is ready.

Kim gently picks up one supple roll and bites down. "The flour is better made, it is more elastic..." she begins, chewing thoughtfully between every pronouncement. "The pastry is very fine and the stuffing is well-seasoned..." "So it's good?" I interrupt. "It's superb," she says

If Ben Thanh is a microcosm of Vietnamese cuisine, then the eateries that ring it represent the elements contained within. Steps from the market, secreted at the end of a dark and narrow alley sandwiched between two sunglasses shops, Nam Jiao is the kind of place travellers hope to stumble upon serendipitously. Its unusual location, however, prevents discovery by all but the most intrepid or aimless of wanderers.

Like many of the city's privately-owned restaurants, Nam Jiao serves only a handful of dishes: in this case, crab paste noodle soup and rice flour rolls with various fillings. The food is good, and sinfully cheap, but it is the location that is most appealing. In a covert corner of the city, unseen by the flocks of tourists marching by, I feel I have discovered the secret heart and soul of Vietnamese cooking.

No other dish embodies the heart of Vietnam better than *pho* or beef noodle soup - the country's national dish. *Pho* is eaten at breakfast, lunch or dinner; sometimes at all three. This hearty brew of broth, beef, noodles and fresh herbs is more than just the country's most common dish, it is a nationwide obsession. Like so many foods that incite popular debate, *pho* is easy to make, but difficult to perfect.

Voughn Nguyen counts herself among the *pho*-natics. The marketing communications manager at the Caravelle Hotel spends her free evenings consorting with the city's itinerant drivers, who have amassed, in their travels, an invaluable directory of Ho Chi Minh City's best eateries. For *pho*, Voughn says they almost unanimously choose Pho Hien, a hole-in-the-wall located on an unassuming residential street far from the centre of town.

"Anyone can throw together beef and broth and onions. But not everyone knows how to taste," Voughn says, after ordering each of us a bowl. "The quality of the *pho* depends on the person tasting the broth while it's cooking. They have to know how to use the right ingredients and how long to simmer them for."

Voughn's mother - a restaurateur - has been cooking *pho* professionally for decades. But to this day, she refuses to reveal the complete recipe to her daughter, allowing only that her broth is simmered for twelve hours.

Tuan Vo, the venerated young alchemist who is responsible for the broth at Pho Hien, is also reluctant to disclose his ingredients. "This recipe has been in our family for three generations," he says, ladling broth into successive bowls which he then passes on to another to be filled with pre-cooked rice noodles. "My father learned it from his father, and my grandfather learned it from his father, who was lucky enough to apprentice with a very famous *pho* chef at the time."

Every *pho* chef in Vietnam has his or her secrets. But the base of their broths is always the same - beef bones and scraps of meat simmered for hours, then perfumed with herbs and spices including star anise, ginger and cinnamon.

Two large bowls of *pho*, smothered by generous slices of rare beef, materialize on the table before us. "Taste it now, while it's hot," Voughn urges me. "This is the best *pho* you'll ever have."

Even before I plunge in, I know she speaks the truth. Unlike the watery broths of lesser *phos*, this one is opaque with flavour. The first spoonful triggers an epiphany. Like a fine wine, this complex blend recalls a number of aromas and tastes, some, more pronounced than others, but all symbiotically united to create what is quite simply the most stunning beef broth I have ever encountered.

I look up in awe at Tuan Vo. "I never knew *pho* could taste this good," I say. He smiles without pleasure. "So many places fail to cook *pho* well," he says. "It really upsets me to see people eating in these places. It's a pity because they don't know what they're missing."

Diners at Quan Ngon though, are in no danger of missing out on the city's best culinary offerings. This recently-opened, atmospheric eatery, divided between large open spaces and intimate dining rooms, brings the best of Ho Chi Minh City's famously delicious street food under one roof. Its assembly of cooks - similar to their

counterparts on the streets - prepare only one or two dishes each; not in the veiled confines of a kitchen, but in the open air, in full view of diners.

Supervisor Dung Khoi says all the restaurant's chefs were hired from off the streets, after a lengthy talent search. "My boss literally ate at every street stall in Ho Chi Minh City in search of the best food," he says. "And whenever he found a particularly good one, he offered the cook a job here."

With more than twenty "hawker" stands installed around dining tables, Quan Ngon's lengthy menu nearly covers the gamut of Vietnamese cuisine. Lotus stem salads, cold spring rolls, shrimp and potato pancakes, rice noodles, steamed mussels, crispy squid, braised pork ribs... the list seemingly goes on forever.

"It's exactly the same food that you would get on the streets," says Khoi. But here, we guarantee hygiene and consistent quality and quantities."

Throw in prices just a little higher than those on the street and a convivial atmosphere warmed by tiki candles and you have what has become Ho Chi Minh City's most popular restaurant - one that caters to local palates *and* local wallets.

Quan Ngon's gentrified street food represents more than Vietnam's local cuisine, it represents the spirit of Ho Chi Minh City's current culture of consumption - increasingly sophisticated diners who expect not just quality food and service, but atmosphere as well. Economic reforms have widened the choice of restaurants, and improved their quality, reviving a great cuisine in this communist country. With an impressive range of good food that is also accessible to nearly everyone, eating out in Vietnam might well be the closest thing this country has to democracy.

RESTAURANT LISTINGS

Trung Nguyen

Various locations

One address and tel no. to come...

Temple Club

29-31 Ton That Thiep, District 1

Tel: 829-9244

Au Manoir de Khai

251 Dien Bien Phu, District 3

Tel: 930-3394

Asian Reflections

Caravelle Hotel, 19 Lam Son Square.

Tel: 823-4999

Saigon Saigon

Caravelle Hotel, 19 Lam Son Square.

Tel: 823-4999

Ben Thanh Market

Le Thanh Ton and Truong Hing, District 1

No phone number

Nam Jiao

Address to come...

Tel to come...

Pho Hien

Address to come...

Tel to come...

Quan An Ngon

138 Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, District 1

Tel: 829-9449

Trung Nguyen

Popular cafe chain selling several types of hot and iced coffee. There is also a food menu serving ordinary Vietnamese dishes.

Temple Club

Beautifully-designed restaurant, bar and lounge serving good, authentic Vietnamese food in a stylish, colonial-era setting. Almost all antique and reproduction furniture in the restaurant is available for purchase.

Au Manoir de Khai

Expensive French food served in impressively ornate and luxurious surroundings. Wine cellar contains a good selection of French vintages. Reservations essential.

Asian Reflections

The Caravelle Hotel's signature restaurant serving newfangled Californian-style fusion cuisine. Very popular with the city's business elite.

Ben Thanh Market

Massive indoor market's cooked food "hawker" area serves a huge variety of authentic Vietnamese food and drink at extremely low prices.

Nam Jiao

Tiny gem of a restaurant hidden down an alley near Ben Thanh market. Serves a limited selection of dishes typical of Hue in central Vietnam.

Pho Hien

Off the beaten track but worth the extra journey, widely considered among locals as Ho Chi Minh City's best place for pho, Vietnam's famous beef noodle soup.

Quon An Ngon

A bustling, two-storey restaurant serving a large variety of authentic Vietnamese 'street food.' Menu also boasts an impressive list of fresh fruit juices.

Caravelle Hotel

A Saigon institution, this is one of Ho Chi Minh City's most luxurious five-star hotels. Situated in an unbeatable location in the centre of town, it is steps away from the city's best shopping, restaurants and bars. Its open-air rooftop bar, Saigon Saigon, offers panoramic views of Ho Chi Minh City's vibrant street life. This popular bar - perfect for a sunset cocktail - was where television journalists broadcast from during the Vietnam War. The hotel, completely renovated in 1998, remains a favourite among business travellers and tourists.