



THIS PHOTO:



WHERE ON EARTH

VIETNAM

Central

Vietnam

Revisited

by **NATHAN FONG**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHEL CHICOINE

Some 13 years ago I stepped on the expansive, sandy beach of My Khe, otherwise known as China Beach to the thousands of American and Australian soldiers who were stationed in Da Nang during the Vietnam War. In the years that have passed since that controversial conflict, this elongated Southeast Asian country has grown with a vengeance. With its expanding economy and strong increase in culinary and cultural travel, Vietnam has blossomed much like the beloved lotus flower that welcomes visitors.»



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE
FROM FAR LEFT Fruit
market vendor in Hue;
Banh mi sandwich;
Freshly cracked coconuts.



«It was my young brother's posting with the Canadian government that initially brought me to this historic country. After visits to the French-inspired capital of Hanoi in the north, with its famed opera house and Gothic cathedral, and to the American-influenced southern city of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh) with its frantic and noisy motor-scooter traffic, not to mention girly bars left over from the war, I was finally venturing to the Central Coast to experience the refined, Imperial cuisine of Hue and the Cham-influenced cooking of Hoi An.

En route to the coast, I encounter the hectic pace of Ho Chi Minh. Still fondly called Saigon by the locals, this city of nine million is the largest in Vietnam. It's been several years since I last visited and now, like many Asian cities, this once 'innocent and idyllic' part of the country has been infiltrated by the commercialism of the Western world. The scooter-filled streets, once congested with fruit vendors and 'pop-up' pho and satay stands, are slowly being taken over by the 'chicness' of Starbucks, KFC and upscale malls filled with ubiquitous luxury brands.

Saigon has a vibrant restaurant scene, including the popular Cuc Gach Quan, which features classic Vietnamese comfort food set in a renovated colonial villa. Luminaries such as Brad and Angelina dine at this beautiful architect-owned eatery, but the real stars are the dishes themselves. A fresh clam soup is refreshing with a generous lacing of chopped dill, while a brilliant dish of fried fish is tossed with passionfruit sauce.

The historic war-time Caravelle and Rex Hotels, located in the central district across from the city's beloved Opera House and facing the busy Lam Son Square, are still popular, despite the new international chains that have moved into the area.

These are the two famed hotels, each with a rooftop bar, where foreign correspondents worked, socialized and drank while the Saigon night blazed with shell attacks during the tumultuous war.

The Caravelle, with its landmark neon-topped tower and modern, comforting rooms, is attached to the original French-designed building that houses the rooftop Saigon Saigon bar with its panoramic city views, and the signature Reflections Restaurant overlooking the Opera House. This elegant dining room features a Michelin-inspired menu reflecting classic French elegance at its best. A delicate mussel risotto comes garnished with lobster and shellfish mousse, tempura is graced with an aromatic anise-saffron reduction and an entrée of *sous vide* butter-poached lamb loin comes with smoked gnocchi, fava beans and olives.

A few blocks away the newly renovated and contemporary Renaissance Saigon Riverside soars up from the banks of the Saigon River, where I am told the city's new business district will evolve in the next few years. Walking through District One, which comprises most of downtown, I see the elegant colonial buildings filled with tailors' shops and restaurants are slowly being razed to make way for sleek glass atrium malls and towers. Here's hoping development doesn't take over too much of this engaging metropolis.

After a couple of days delay by the destructive typhoon Haiyan that tore through The Philippines but left the central coast of Vietnam touched only by minor flooding, I finally arrive in the UNESCO World Heritage city of Hue and the spectacular Accor Hotel La Residence, the whitewashed former residence of the French Colonial governor. Splendid

with its bowed facade and symmetrical Art Deco lines, the house, like the city of Hue, is steeped in history, from the days of the Imperial Court to those of the Vietnam War.

Situated on the former border of North and South Vietnam, Hue served as Vietnam's capital under the Nguyen Dynasty emperors from 1802 to 1945, and fell victim to much damage and battle scars during the Vietnam war. Close to 90 percent of the palace's important historical buildings and walls were destroyed during the war but because of recent government policy changes and international sponsorship, much restoration and renovation are under way. The last ten major buildings are due to be finished this year, to coincide with the 70th anniversary of Vietnam's regime.

Renting a cyclo for the day, I am taken across the Perfume River towards the ancient citadel and to one of the many feng shui gates of the former palace. The symmetrically designed Purple Forbidden City is similar to Beijing's Forbidden City but on a much smaller scale.

Like its elegantly designed streets and Imperial architecture of pagodas and magnificent tombs, the cuisine of Hue is considered by many Vietnamese to be the most refined in the country. Hue was famous for flamboyant banquets, designed to please an emperor who decreed that Imperial cuisine should be innovative and set apart from the rest of the country. It was also decreed that no dishes should be repeated during the same year, thereby forcing royal chefs to be creative, devising a large assortment of small appetizer-sized dishes. From this, Hue cuisine evolved.

A popular variety of delicate banana-leaf parcels, almost like miniature Mexican tamales, are stuffed with an array of ingredients, from glutinous rice, meats and seafood to dainty flower-like dumplings and cakes called *banh beo*. Other Hue specialties include a spicy clam and rice dish (*com hen*), and delicate, crisp turmeric-hued rice flour crepes stuffed with bean spouts, shrimp and »



THIS PHOTO A selection of Imperial appetizers at La Residence Hotel & Spa, Hue.



SERVES 4-6 AS AN APPETIZER

Grilled Marinated Squid

Young Squid 2 lbs, cleaned, tentacles discarded

Sugar ½ tsp

Fish Sauce 1 ½ Tbs

Lime Juice 1 Tbs

Thai Chili 1, seeded, finely chopped

Canola Oil 2 Tbs

- 1 TO** prepare the squid tubes, lay flat on a cutting board. Holding down on the pointed end, use a sharp knife to make 3-4 cuts about ¾-inch long at the open end, creating a fringe. Alternatively if they are too large, they can be cut into 3-inch pieces, then scored in a crisscross pattern on both sides of the body, being careful not to cut through.
- 2 WHISK** together the marinade ingredients and add the prepared squid. Marinate for 15 minutes or until grill is ready.
- 3 PREPARE** a medium hot charcoal grill or preheat a gas grill to medium-high. Skewer the squid and grill for about 2 minutes each side. Serve with Nuoc Cham.

MAKES 1 ½ CUPS

Nuoc Cham

Fish Sauce ½ cup

Sugar ½ cup

Fresh Lime Juice ¼ cup

Garlic 2 cloves, minced

Thai Chilies 1-2, stemmed and minced

- 1 COMBINE** fish sauce, sugar and lime juice until sugar is dissolved.
- 2 ADD** the garlic and chili.
- 3 SERVE** immediately or refrigerate covered for up to a week.



LEFT Street market vendors selling fresh herbs and their daily catch, Hue; ABOVE Decorated West Gate Entrance to the Imperial Palace in Hue; BELOW RIGHT Infinity pool overlooking Ha My beach, Hoi An.

«aromatic herbs, called *banh khoai*. In southern Vietnam, these are made larger and are more commonly called *banh xeo*. For lunch one day, lounging by La Residence's infinity pool set on the banks of the Perfume River, I tuck into a stellar *bun bo Hue*, the city's signature noodle dish, and a hearty *banh mi*, Vietnam's inspired version of the French baguette sandwich. Like *pho*, *bun bo Hue* is based on a broth of long-simmered beef bones, but *bun bo Hue* is fiery, suffused with extra chilies, shrimp paste and lemongrass. The broth is ladled over a bowlful of paper-thin slices of beef, crab and pork meatballs, pig's trotters, and *huyet*, quivering cubes of congealed pig's blood, all set on a bed of spaghetti-like rice noodles.

For evening elegance, La Residence's talented executive chef La Thua An showcases his European training. A smoked duck breast comes adorned with a banana-blossom salad and graced with foie gras ice cream. A main of chicken stuffed in aromatic pandanus leaves is paired with sweet and sour fish sauce and coconut sticky rice. The breathtaking desserts include a spun-sugar nest enclosing a mousse-stuffed coconut, with a raspberry and passionfruit heart. Another surprise is a chocolate sphere filled with truffled ice cream and sautéed fruits with gold leaf. Imperial cuisine at its finest!

It's been close to a dozen years since I last visited the expansive, serene beaches of the south central coast and the ancient, UNESCO-protected port town of Hoi An. Originally influenced by the Khmer Empire, which began in the ninth century in today's Cambodia and extended through most of southern Vietnam, by the 18th century Hoi An had become a major spice and trading port. Besides the nearby Khmer-style Cham temples, Hoi An is full of beautiful, well-preserved architecture, much of it influenced by early Chinese, Japanese, Dutch and Indian settlers. Almost untouched by change compared to the

rest of Vietnam, Hoi An showcases some of the best Southeast Asian architecture of the period.

Reflecting the serenity and simplicity of the area is the luxurious Nam Hai Resort. Set upon a seemingly infinite stretch of beach, the visually stunning Nam Hai marries contemporary ideas with traditional Vietnamese home designs. Inspired by ancient feng shui philosophy, spacious villas with luscious landscaping are built around tranquil infinity pools overlooking the Hoi An coastline. Richard Wilson, the resort's delightful and talented executive chef from New Zealand, is well versed in Vietnamese cuisine and introduces me to the area's signature *mi quang* noodle dish. Thick golden-hued noodles laced with turmeric sit nestled in a deep broth in a large bowl and are topped with a myriad of ingredients, from shrimp and pork, hard-boiled eggs, crushed peanuts, shallots and garlic to heady, aromatic herbs of water mint, Vietnamese coriander and shredded banana flowers, all garnished with




Vancouver born **NATHAN FONG** segued from cooking and catering to a brilliant career as a food and props stylist for culinary print and film advertising, with a distinguished international client list. He is celebrating his 23rd year as television host for his food and travel segments on GlobalTV and a columnist for *The Vancouver Sun* and writes his popular blogs at www.vancouver.sun.com and www.fongonfood.com 

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...The cuisine of Hue is considered by many to be the *most refined* in the country...

toasted sesame crackers called *banh trang*. And there's *cao lau*, a delectable five-spice-infused pork broth with udon-like noodles (made importantly with the local well water), slabs of tender pork, bean sprouts, fresh herbs and crispy pork crackling. The distinctive *banh vac* ('white rose' dumplings) are delicate, steamed wontons made with rice flour and stuffed with shrimp, topped with fried shallots. But it's in Chef Wilson's open kitchen that I learn about the simplicity of grilling tender squid, licked with a marinade of lime, fish sauce and chilies.

Vietnam, with some 2,150 miles of coastline, has certainly some of the best Asian cuisine in the world. Influenced by China in the north, and Cambodia and Laos to the west, the palate constantly changes as you venture from north to south. Discovering the Imperial cuisine and vibrant flavours of the country's central coast was a tasting sensation for me and I long for my next venture, hopefully not before too long! 



The Renaissance Riverside Hotel Saigon
www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/sgnbr-renaissance-riverside-hotel-saigon

The Caravelle Hotel/Reflections
www.caravellehotel.com

The Rex Hotel
www.rexhotelvietnam.com

The Nam Hai
www.thenamhai.com

La Residence/ Le Parfum
www.la-residence-hue.com

Cuc Gach Quan
 9-10 Dang Tat, Ward Tan Dinh, District 1, Ho Chi Minh



SERVES 4

Mi Quang

Vietnamese Turmeric Noodles

THE BROTH

Pork Spare Ribs 2 lbs, cut into 2" pieces

Shallots 2-3, peeled

Dried Shrimp 4 medium

Salt and Sugar to taste

1 ADD the spare ribs to a stockpot with enough cold water to cover. Bring to boiling point, skimming all the excess protein that rises to the surface. Add the shallots and dried shrimp. Lower the heat and simmer for 2 hours. Strain through a fine sieve and season the broth with sugar and salt, to taste. The spare ribs can be served with the noodles as well.

PORK AND SHRIMP

Annatto Oil¹ 2 Tbs

Garlic minced, 1 Tbs

Shallots minced, 1 Tbs

Lean Pork Belly ½ lb, thinly sliced

Paprika 1 Tbs

Medium Shrimp ½ lb, shelled, deveined

Fish Sauce 3 Tbs

Salt and Pepper to taste

1 HEAT a wok over medium-high heat. Add the annatto oil. When hot, add the garlic, shallots and pork and stir-fry until the pork is translucent. Add the shrimp and stir-fry until cooked. Season and set aside, covered.

¹ *To make annatto seed oil, heat ¼ cup of canola oil in a small saucepan over medium heat and add 3 Tbs annatto seeds. Stir until the oil becomes dark reddish yellow. Strain, discarding seeds, and allow to cool before using. Keep covered in a cool dark area.*

TO FINISH THE DISH

Wide Rice Noodles 1 package

Canola Oil 2 Tbs

Turmeric ground, 1 Tbs

GARNISHES

Bean Sprouts, Mint Leaves, Lime Wedges, Cilantro, Green Onions, Roasted Peanuts, Black Sesame Crackers

- 1 BRING** a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the noodles and stir to soften. After 3 to 4 minutes, add the oil and turmeric and stir well. Cook until desired texture and drain well.
- 2 DIVIDE** the noodles between 4 large serving bowls. Add a portion of the sautéed pork and shrimp, add a ladle of the broth, then top with garnishes.